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The Rise, Fall, and Resurrection of the Study of Personality

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Any science may have a brief period of accelerated growth whenever it is blessed with the generation of a theory, the invention of a new method, or the discovery of a new phenomenon. But it flourishes most when there is that rarity, a conjunction of these three essential ingredients: first, the generation of a theory of sufficient economy, scope, and power to engage the energies of a generation of investigators; second, the invention of a set of methods sufficiently precise to enable the test of such theory; and third, examination of data of scope and depth sufficient to validate the theory, to enable continuing discovery, and at the same time to critically illuminate the original theory and thereby raise new problems radical enough to both require and suggest a theory of greater power and generality.

Darwin did this for biology, and Freud did it for the study of personality. Under the leadership of Henry A. Murray, a generation of American personologists explored, illuminated, and enriched Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality. From the Harvard Psychological Clinic, for a period of thirty years, there issued seminal innovations in theory, methodology and empirical investigation which deepened and extended the golden age of personality study initiated by Freud. At the theoretical level, Murray provided a highly differentiated set of variables for the description of personality. These included, in addition to motivational "needs" and "press," variables for the interpretation of abilities, as well as those complex social and political structures he called "sentiments." These variables provided what he called the scaffold for a general theory of personality. This rich taxonomy guided the analysis of

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data and provided the building blocks for a comprehensive theory—a theory which was to engage Murray for a lifetime, and on which he is still at work.

With respect to methodology, Murray's contributions were and remain extraordinary. The Thematic Apperception Test was one among many new and powerful methods he invented for illuminating with great economy what psychoanalysis required years of labor to unearth. Further, he pioneered in the scientific method for the study of the individual. He exposed each individual to the most intensive scrutiny of a team of investigators, each of whom saw and studied the individual in a different setting, using different methods to investigate different motives, different abilities, and different beliefs. When all of these varieties of information had been compared, the verification of hypotheses and the unification of the total data were undertaken in a heroic collective effort in which two teams of investigators who had previously worked independently, confronted each other and struggled to achieve the most parsimonious integration of their only partially overlapping information and interpretations. This process of integration was never-ending and was itself continually under retrospective scrutiny. Personality had never before, nor since been subjected to such intensive and extensive experimental scrutiny. It was experimental in the dual sense that it was a quest for discovery as well as a quest for verification.

The combined impetus of psychoanalytic theory and Murray's theoretical and methodological innovations powered an impressive output of empirical investigations recorded in Murray's and co-workers' (1938) *Explorations in Personality,* Murray and Morgan's (1945) *A Clinical Study of Sentiments,* R.W. White's (1952) *Lives in Progress,* Smith, Bruner, and White's (1956) *Opinions and Personality,* Nevitt Sanford's (1943) *Physique, Personality, and Scholarship,* and *The Study of Lives* edited by R.W. White (1963), a series of essays in honor of Henry A. Murray. That volume testified to the profound influence that Freud and Murray had exerted on a generation of American psychologists.

This influence was to continue for several more years. The sustained program of research in achievement, affiliation, and power motivation by McClelland (1953) and by Atkinson (1958) derived from the Thematic Apperception Test and Murray's theoretical variables. Personality assessment in the Murray tradition was carried on at Berkeley's IPAR under the leadership of Donald McKinnon (1975).

The influence of both Freud and Murray loomed large in the explosion of clinical training programs at the end of World War II. Personality assessment in the Freudian mode, employing a battery of the Rorschach,

the Thematic Apperception Test, and the Wechsler Intelligence Test under the creative leadership of David Rappaport (1945) supported the tradition pioneered by Murray. At Michigan, Lowell Kelly imported the Harvard methodology in his study of V.A. Clinical trainees (1951).

The influence of Freud continued to increase independent of its impact through Murray and the Harvard Clinic. It powered the emergence of socialization and growth studies. It influenced the Adorno, et al. study of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). Though barely acknowledged, it also influenced a generation of social psychologists under the leadership of Leon Festinger in the study of dissonance (1957), a derivative of Freud's theory of rationalization.

A seminal theory about the nature of human personality inevitably engaged a very large audience and psychoanalytic theory did create a ferment in theology, in philosophy, in the humanities, in history, and in anthropology and sociology. Indeed, *this* influence continues even to this day, spawning new fields, such as psychohistory.

But if psychoanalytic theory is still very much alive in the humanities, and especially in psychohistory, it, along with its derivative personality theories, no longer commands a position of leadership within American psychology.

At the end of half a century of exploration in personality by Freud and by Murray and his co-workers, we had reached a critical point where radical new theory was required. This is not to say that psychoanalytic theory had failed to fulfill its promise, but rather that any general theory has finite potentialities, and psychoanalysis was no exception to the rule. Theories and movements based on theories, rise on promise, and fall whenever that promise *either* fails or is fulfilled. Thus at the end of the 19th century, the president of the British Physical Society advised young physicists to look elsewhere for intellectual excitement since Newtonian physics had reached its culmination and there were no new problems to solve. This was on the eve of the revolutionary quantum theory and theory of relativity, which he could not have known just because of the real and great success of Newtonian theory.

But in the field of personality, no equivalent of Freud was forthcoming either from academic psychology or from the psychoanalytic institutes. As a consequence, the field of personality was fragmented and partitioned in several respects. Within the field of personality itself, the concern with the person as a whole was replaced by personality *variables,* such as the need for achievement, field dependence and independence, from which there was no royal road back to the person as a whole. The person was also decomposed into part functions, such as cognition and

affect. Productive as these developments have been, they do not yield a general theory of personality. Neither affect, cognition, nor behavior can carry the burden of explanation for the whole person. The field of personality was further diverted into the "third force," which united protest against such fragmentation and partitioning, with a social movement. This promised more than it was equipped to redeem. The field of personality not only suffered fragmentation within, but also suffered partitioning into the adjacent fields of developmental and social psychology. Social psychologists became much more interested in personal than in interpersonal and social dynamics. Developmental psychologists under the influence of Piaget became cognitive, but also retained a lively interest in the vicissitudes of socialization and personality development.

How, then, shall the corpus of personality be reclaimed and resurrected? The posing of such a question is a testament to both hubris and blind faith. But candor requires the confession of *chutzpah* over and above overweening pride if one is to suggest solutions to such a problem, as I will do.

Twenty years ago, in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* (Tomkins, 1962; 1963), I argued that American psychology had lost both its heart and its mind from a fear of methodological impurity, from excessive reliance on primary drives as motivators, and from attention to behavior rather than the complex transformations that make behavior possible. Against psychoanalysis, I argued for the primacy of affects over drives. Against psychoanalysis and behaviorism, I argued for the centrality of consciousness rather than the unconscious, and rather than behavior. Finally, I argued for the centrality of ideas, images, and the cognitive function. None of these positions are now seriously contested. Yet, as personality is studied today, the dominance of methodological constraints continues to limit, if not to impoverish, theoretical innovation.

In experimental social psychology, personality is reduced to whatever lends itself to ready experimental manipulation. In the field of personality proper, there is excessive reliance on mathematical techniques such as factor analysis and multidimensional scaling. Methodology cannot substitute for personality theory, but it can be made more appropriate for the study of personality, and I will address this question presently.

If, today, both personality and social psychology are in hot pursuit of affect and cognition, of imagery and consciousness, why then has the study of personality lost its vitality and why is there complaint of a crisis in social psychology?

In part this is because we have surrendered important parts of our mission to other disciplines. The study of personality is indeed in a state of

radical ferment in history, in philosophy, in the humanities and in the social sciences. They are acting on the assumption that the understanding of personality is too important to be left to psychologists. Nor is this new. From the beginning of time, human beings have necessarily had to try to understand themselves and others, forced to generate both implicit and explicit theories of personality. Such theories, powerfully amplified by terror and violence, became self-fulfilling when, for example, the other is believed to possess the evil eye, or to be possessed by the devil. We do not have the luxury of suspending belief about the nature of personality. Some theory of personality is central and urgent for all human beings, as well as for all the social sciences, the humanities, philosophy, and theology. If we do not provide such theory, others certainly will. And yet ours is a most burdensome responsibility because we are expected to speak truthfully, with the authority of science, about important matters of great scope. The historian, the artist, the philosopher do not so labor under the shadow of the exact sciences. More than one contemporary psychologist has urged us to surrender this hubris—that we never were nor ever will be an exact science. I will return to this question.

For now, let us address the fundamental questions: What *is* personality, and whatever the answer to that question, what should the science of personality be about? Anyone who is a person understands intuitively what it is to be a person rather than a rock or a pebble. People vary in height and skin color and sex and age, though most have one head and two legs. They act very differently, but they also share many communalities of motives and behaviors. Most wish to live, rather than to die, though some suicide or surrender their lives for reasons they feel imperative. Conjoint communalities and differences, however, do not render the identification of a person ambiguous.

But the moment one leaves this clear and comforting consensus, and turns to personality theory and science, one is in quicksand. The degrees of freedom for the personality theorist and investigator are very much greater than for everyone. Because science *never* remains for long at the level of the particular or at the level of the momentary, the scientist has to decide whether he/she is to focus on the microinfrastructure or the macrosuperstructure in which the particular is embedded, whether he/she is to focus on a short or a longer period of time, whether he/she is to stop at the present or extrapolate to the future. Further, he/she has the options of emphasizing stable, invariant structures or the unstable, changing features of one's domain, of events which happen once or which recur cyclically. Such options are in no way peculiar to the study of personality. Darwin's theory of evolution was magnificent, but

nonetheless lacked the genetic infrastructure supplied by Mendel, and lacked the helix model of Crick and Watson.

What shall we do to revitalize the study of personality? Should we look for the helix, or for the evolutionary sweep, or something in between? I would suggest that one vital clue to our problem is to be found in Freud. The importance of his theory was not, I think, in its particulars. Neither sexuality nor the unconscious were critical, in my view. What was radical was the conception of the human being as the tension-ridden intersect of an imperious set of biological imperatives at war with an equally imperious set of social imperatives. Personality became, in large part, a set of dependent variables struggling for independence. Out of this warfare there was generated a theory which addressed normal and abnormal development, dreams, humor, art, religion, and civilization and its discontents.

For us, there are two critical lessons here. First, is the creation of a biopsychosocial domain which relates spheres which appear to be independent of each other and brings them together under the skin of each and every individual. Second, is the construction of a model which uses a relatively small number or invariant biological and social forces to account for a relatively large number of personal and social phenomena, thus combining economy and power for great informational leverage.

The next step need not, and indeed must not, utilize Freud's variables, but it should settle for no less than a unitary field which relates the human being as a biological, psychological, and social entity in a model which approximates Freud's informational advantage of conjoint economy and power. This is not to say there is no purely psychological personality domain, but rather that if either its biological roots or its social embeddedness are disregarded, then such a theory must be seriously impoverished.

The capacity of the cognitive mechanisms to receive, transmit, coassemble, store and transform information is as innately endowed as is the capacity of the affect mechanisms to amplify information and make it urgent. Cognition without affect is weak; affect without cognition is blind. Together they enable a viable organism. Freud was surely mistaken in supposing they had evolved in serious mismatch with each other. It is also now clear that *both* the innately endowed cognitive and affective mechanisms have very great (if not unlimited) degrees of freedom built into their very structures, which make possible the extraordinary plasticity required for the varieties of social and cultural life which have occurred at different historical periods. Freud grossly underestimated the variety of social, cultural, and historical imperatives,

and so alas, has personality theory since then. But although he grossly underestimated the complexity and degrees of freedom of both the biological and social domains, Freud achieved a real conceptual integration. He avoided our contemporary strategies of posing such options in the adversary mode of an either-or, or in the eclectic mode of a polite but flaccid acknowledgement that the human being is both a biological animal and a social being, and then disregarding the consequences of such a dualism.

By taking the social nature of personality more seriously, we must confront another fundamental option for personality theory. Is the study of personality to be scientific in the a-historic, universalistic sense, or is it to surrender such pretensions and immerse itself in the particular, recognizing that real human beings live irreversible lives, in particular historical sequences, so that no two individuals are identical, no two cohorts are identical, no two civilizations are identical, and that time is real and the "laws" of personal, social, and historical development alike are apochryphal? The question has assumed critical importance in the last decade owing to the efforts of historians, economists, and philosophers who have revealed deep historic influences on changes in personality types, changes in the intensity of affective life, and changes in the locus of affect investment.

It now apears that when many social, economic, technological, and political forces converge massively to transform a society, such shifts in ways of life characteristically require shifts in personality types. Such changes have to be consciously elaborated as new ideologies, and fought for against older ideologies, before it is possible to displace older sociocultural imperatives. Such ideological controversy is partly effect and partly cause of social change, since it characteristically precedes, accompanies and follows such change, quickening as it deepens radical transformations.

Thus the philosopher Leites (1981), in a series of studies of English thought in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, has shown that the free expression of intense and labile affect in public, which had prevailed from the time of the middle ages, was subjected by Richard Steele and others to sustained and effective attack. In both public places and in the home, affect was to be positive and of intermediate intensity. One was to be of good humor to give a constant emotional tone to our lives and to avoid the unreliability and transience of emotional highs and lows. This norm still dominates our public life and we take it for granted; but it was not always so, nor need it always be so in the future, since the balance between affective stability and intensity is necessarily fragile and costly in

one direction or the other.

Quite independent of this line of inquiry, the economist Hirschman (1977) has shown that the ideological groundwork for capitalism revolved around the distinction between the passions and the interests. Ever since the end of the Middle Ages, the increasing frequency and severity of war and civil war prompted a search for a behavioral equivalent for religious precept, for rules that would impose much needed discipline and constraints on both rulers and ruled. The expansion of commerce and industry was thought to hold much promise in this regard. Reason had proven too weak, the passions too wild and labile. The projected solution was to substitute the cooler, more stable "interests"—and particularly self-interest—to render society more calculating and one-dimensional. By each person's pursuit of his own interest, society would be automatically stabilized and better served. In sum, capitalism was supposed to accomplish exactly what was soon to be denounced as its worst feature.

What Nietzsche was later to condemn as the "English grocer's mentality"—empty, boring and petty, lacking nobility, grandeur, mystery, and above all passion—had not been easily achieved. The apologists for civility and capitalism alike had converged successfully against passion.

But passion, displaced from the public scene, was soon to reappear in a new locus—at home, in the nuclear family. According to Stone (1979) "The four key features of the modern famly—intensified affective bonding of the nuclear core at the expense of neighbors and kin; a strong sense of individual autonomy and the right to personal freedom in the pursuit of happiness; a weakening of the association of sexual pleasure with sin and guilt; and a growing desire for physical privacy—were all well established by 1750 in the key middle and upper sectors of English society" (p. 22). Stone believes that this change from distance, deference, and patriarchy to affective individualism was "perhaps the most important change in *mentalité* to have occurred in the Early Modern period, indeed possibly in the last thousand years of Western history" (p. 22).

What are we to make of such massive shifts in the intensity, quality, and locus of affect? Surely what has shifted in this direction can shift again and indeed now appears to be shifting.

Any theory of personality which assumes the stability of the quality, intensity or locus of affect as Freud did, would appear to be at risk. Neither the nuclear family, nor the Freudian family romance, nor good humor and civility in social life, nor sustained, deep cool (or hot) economic self-interest are inherently human. They would appear to be important, but not inherently universal scripts. What appears to be in-

herently human, and possibly universal, is the ubiquitous tension between graded and intense affect, between the imperatives of social life and the imperatives of the biological substrate of affect, which together call for the modulation of affect at the same time that intense affect cries out for expression in just those loci where graded control is not imposed.

Shall we, then, opt for a purely historical description of personality, or shall we cling to an a-historic account? I would suggest that the appropriate strategy is not an either-or, nor an indecisive eclecticism. The affect mechanism is innate and universal, but its structure lends itself to differential weighting of one affect over another, and of one locus of investment over another, and of one intensity over another. It is social, historically conditioned forces which play a decisive role in such options. Personality, therefore, is at once a partially closed and partially open system. Affect is to history as grammar is to semantics and pragmatics. It has as one consequence that the personality theorist must be as much at home with neurophysiology as with the study of comparative civilizations. In contrast to the historian, however, the personality theorist has the additional burden of striving for the most economical formulation of laws consistent with the widest variety of historical variations in actual personality types. I have attempted such theoretical models in what I have called Script Theory (Tomkins, 1980), but that is another story.

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