

The Psychology of Personality: An Epistemological Inquiry. James T. Lamiell.
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As we read it, Lamiell tells us that the normal scientists of the psychology of personality have worked their discipline into a corner by attempting to define personhood in terms of an individual differences paradigm. The "... unwavering commitment to individual differences research constitutes the discipline's most fundamental problem" (p. 6). Something like the following took place. (In the next paragraphs we paraphrase—perhaps parody—Lamiell's text; hyperbolically using terms to which we will later return).

Members of human groups have persistently asked questions like, "How do we define Joe Ferro?"

At the turn of the 20th Century established scholars answered, "Joe has certain quantities of 'traits'—his person is constituted of things—platonic forms. For example, Ferro has within his person a certain amount of *kindness*, along with certain amounts of other things. We will continue to use the common term *traits* to name those things."

The audiences, including other scholars, sharing the same metaphysical orientation as the responding scholar and exercising their naive epistemological position, asked, "How do you know that you know that Ferro has a certain amount of kindness? Tell me how I, too, may know."

The personologists, knowing—naively or otherwise—the epistemic values which support the metaphysic of formism (Pepper, 1942) replied, "Well, if Ferro has a quantity of kindness, we can show you those things that 'go with'—correspond to—*kindness*. You will see the corresponding presence of other *ideal forms*, which are—in nature—associated with kindness. That demonstration will stand as our truth test."

"Observe Ferro. His pattern of actions obviously reflects the form of *kind* actions."

"Be cautious, we warn you, about believing that *kindness* causes kind actions. We should say, simply, that *kindness* is associated with such actions."

Thereupon everyone comfortably took the position that persons, as is all the world, are filled with forms—revealeable identities—which are immediately apprehended by the uncluttered psychic system of a "normal" person.

The personologists continue, "From this formist base we can investigate other forms by which to define Ferro—schizophrenia, intelligence, hostility, dependency, and so forth. Using generic forms, we may define any person."

Thence, a roster of able thinkers offered accessories to knowing a persons in terms of generic, person-defining forms, that is, *traits*. Number manipulators invented

measures of each form contributing to the constitution of persons. Thereupon, investigators could create numerical representations of the relationships among the putative traits.

The methods of quantifying traits depended upon the concepts of *mean* and *deviation* from the mean. Personologists could express "the amount" of kindness within a personality, for example, by calculating the extent to which that individual deviates—in terms of a calculated standard of deviation—from the average *kindness* score. The *z*-score could summarily index such deviation.

To gain intersubjectivity regarding definitions of personhood, scholars devised mathematical representations to back their claim that, "We can index the relationship between *kindness* and other traits or other behaviors. For example, we can calculate how accurately we would have predicted Ferro's *z*-score on a measure (observational count, strength index, etc.) of *kind* behaviors had we predicted that his *z*-score on that measure would be identical to his *z*-score on our alternative measure of *kindness* (e.g., a personality test). We can demonstrate the success (or failure) of a series of predictions by using a statistic which we will call 'the correlation coefficient.'"

Lamiell has prepared a detailed and very readable account of the ways in which scholars of the psychology of personality have built these basic concepts—normalization and correlation—into intricate validating methods. He provides excellent examples of how these methods were meant to provide assurances that one could develop "general laws" about the workings of the generic traits. Lamiell repeatedly reminds his readers that the ultimate goal remains that of answering the initial question, "How do we define Ferro?"

Lamiell also describes investigators' attempts to extend the system in the face of its failures. Obtained correlation coefficients, the cornerstone of the system, supported weakly the personality psychologists' claims of having shown correspondences between two forms; that is, a correlation between two traits. The variety of manipulations to demonstrate such correspondences, if nothing else, attests to the imaginativeness of the involved scholars.

Lamiell's lucid and careful account of these maneuvers, unlike many of the other accounts one could read, takes a reader through the logic of the conceptualizations and their mathematical representation toward the stark conclusion that the methodology *cannot* provide a basis for answering the prime question. By use of the most acceptable methodologies of demonstrating correspondences, one can never return to the individual person to make the claim that the putative forms appear concurrently.

Consider the extraordinary possibility that an investigator has extracted a correlation coefficient of $+0.80$ between measures of two separate forms—measures of *kindness* and measures of *kind* behaviors—within a group of 200 persons. This index tells us, in essence, that one could have profitably predicted, in terms of overall error, that a particular individual's scores on the measure of *kind* behavior would be equivalent to his/her score on the measure of the *kindness* trait. Nevertheless, having demonstrated this possibility of a significant reduction in overall error in predicting *kind* behaviors, *the obtained correlation gives no grounds to assert that a single individual will embody, correspondingly, the two measured forms.*

One cannot say, without returning to survey the original measurements, that Joe Ferro shows *kind* behaviors to the same level which he would show the *kindness* trait. In short, knowledge about the extent of the spread of scores on the measure of *kind* behaviors for those people having a particular score on the *kindness* trait cannot be treated as knowledge about whether or not a *single individual* will manifest simultaneously both the trait and the behaviors. The correlation "coefficients generated merely constitute evidence of consistency in the *positioning of individuals relative to*

their group mean, because that is the meaning of the normatively defined measurements on which correlations are based" (p. 102, italics in the original).

This conclusion takes on particularly powerful significance when embedded in Lamiell's incessant and close-grained analysis of the normative process—an analysis which cannot be appreciated by any effort to duplicate it in this small space.

Lamiell's analysis includes not only the analysis paraphrased above, but also (1) his report and analysis of other existing demonstrations of the shortcomings of traditional methods of showing how to know about the things of which a personality is constituted; and (2) his annihilation of attempts to "correct the system" (e.g., Bem and Allen, 1974; Endler and Magnusson, 1976, Epstein, 1979). The text easily leads readers to conclude that scholars of *the psychology of personality* must reconsider their directions.

As a personality psychologist who has reached this point, of course, Lamiell cannot turn off his word processor. He discusses "an approach whereby the substantive individuality of personal knowledge (about personality) is respected without negating the possibility of extracting nomothetic principles. The latter would be sought through studies of the process by which personal knowledge is framed within the mind and extended into behavior" (p. 21).

The following picture resulted from framing Lamiell's text by our personal knowledge. To judge the quantity of a trait which is to be ascribed to a person (including the self), a person implicitly uses a series of two-poled judgment scales, each of which is anchored at one end by a term something like *The most of trait X a person can have* and at the other end by a term like *The least of trait X a person can have*. The judge locates a target person within that scale. A person accrues input—observes behavior, etc.—regarding the target person, Joe Ferro; and processes that input in terms of its representativeness (by assigning a weight to the attribute) as a feature of trait X.

We pointedly note an important step in the experimental method. Lamiell, Foss, Larsen, and Hempel (1983) assessed how their participants weighted the attributes (behaviors) which were used to determine whether or not a target person should be assigned to a trait category. The participants indicated how important each of the behaviors would be in assigning a person to the trait category. Resulting weights were then multiplied against observations of the target's behaviors to produce a model-based index of the trait ratings which would be obtained if the participants were using the kinds of judgment processes which Lamiell et al. had assumed that they were using—that is, an interactive model of attribute assignment. They then posted their relative success in using this approach to predict actual judge-assigned trait scores.

The judge proceeds, for example, in this way: "After having observed Joe Ferro, I have assigned him to the far left end of the feature-defining scale *always speaks softly—shouts frequently*, to the far right of the two scales *expresses disgust with boxing matches—enthusiastically attends boxing matches, has no special interest in gourmet cooking—insists on eating in only those restaurants noted for quality food*. In my system, the first two features have high weighting in locating a person on the scale *gentle—aggressive*, whereas the third feature has little weighting relative to that scale. Thus, I will judge that Joe must be located at the *gentle* end of the *gentle—aggressive* scale.

(Let us pointedly note that Lamiell does not speak of judging *features*. He speaks of a judge observing reports of a target's *behavior*. We assume that our translation of Lamiell's language into concept-labelling terms which we would use does little violence to Lamiell's conceptions.)

In our judgment, Lamiell confirms the following claims: (1) a personologist need not frame a person's behavior within the parameters of a normatively derived scale which assumes that individuals vary around a statistically defined "take-off point;"

(2) methods other than the normative methods of *the* psychology of personality can yield nomothetic principles regarding personal behavior; (3) such methods, nevertheless, can be carried out at the level of the individual, and by such tactics one may avoid the epistemological/methodological fallacies of normative methods; (4) this kind of normal science activity can demonstrate salient points about the process by which persons make judgments about self and others. In this case we have shown that persons, rather than using normative scale models to judge persons, use a weighted attribute judgment model—a model more like that described by the workers in the normal science of cognitive study who speak of prototype and fuzzy sets.

Lamiell, while adhering to the system of epistemic values by which personality psychologists are surrounded, has demonstrated the utility of the alternative approach he advocates. Nevertheless, we remain unsure about how he would answer some persisting questions about *the* psychology of personality. Does this approach abrogate the search for generic traits? Or, are we to conclude that *the* psychology of personality should take the road to understanding how persons “discover” extant traits and then proceed to use them? Is a person, then, after all, an amalgam of traits, and do individuals learn the interactive process of “identifying” the traits of which persons are constituted?

Constructivist personality psychologists, after studying the same texts which Lamiell cites to demonstrate the failures of *the* psychology of personality, concluded that the metaphysics underlying the trait concept are inappropriate to the study of persons. We can better achieve intersubjectivity, some constructivists would argue, by adopting a metaphysic from which we assume that our judgment processes never involve “things-out-there;” but involve, instead, neural transmutations of energy inputs which happen to strike sensory neuron endings.

These constructivists have approached *traits* as *personal constructs*—as two-poled judgment scales along which persons might range their selves and other persons. That is, (1) persons impose trait-named constructs on persons by judging a target person's proximity to one or the other end of the construct, and (2) persons show stability in their interactions with the world through the process of imposing “re-membered” (out of constructs) constructions (schemata) of events.

Having turned to this approach the constructivists have needed to invent their bag of techniques in order to demonstrate the validity of their knowledge. Within their psychology of personality they posed questions such as: Does a person, indeed, develop a system of constructs by which he/she defines each moment of a person's (including his/her self) ongoing behavior? How does a person invent personally useful trait constructs? In what way is the validity of a construct determined by the person who incorporates that construct into his/her system? Can we speak of networks of construct systems? Is it useful to speak of storing and retrieving constructs in order to build schemata?

Were Lamiell to describe his research as a demonstration of the ways in which persons make judgments using trait-defining constructs, we believe these constructivists would welcome a kindred spirit. Instead, these personologists, many of whom have attempted to work up from the foundation offered by George Kelly [1955] (Fransella and Bannister, 1977; Epting and Landfield, 1985; Shaw, 1980), are put on guard by Lamiell's charge that “Kelly's theory has been used by many investigators as little more than a convenient excuse for tracking the correlates of *individual differences* to personal constructs” (pp. 84–85, italics in the original).

The use of the language in this quote highlights the great flaw which we see in Lamiell's extremely worthy book. He has worked up a stupendous argument against *the* psychology of personality's approach to individual differences. Thereupon the black

beast becomes the search for *individual differences*. His blindness after the battle carried over even into his evaluation of his own investigations, of which he said, "Of particular relevance here is the fact that while that research most assuredly concerned the cognitions of the subjects, it had nothing whatsoever to do with assessing differences between the subjects" (p. 179).

Recall our earlier specification of the ways in which Lamiell et al. established the weights a person would assign to the trait-related attributes (behaviors). Clearly, Lamiell et al., by using the individually derived weights, incorporated assessments of individual differences into their study.

Additionally, the "traits" on which the targets were rated were obtained by asking participants "to select the three adjectives that best represented his/her own personality" (p. 155). Lamiell does not report whether or not the participants all chose the same three trait descriptors, but any seasoned constructivist will expect to observe very marked individual differences in rating the self-salience of trait descriptors.

In the end, a reader can ignore Lamiell's active willingness to overlook the contributions of personality psychologists whose work could enhance his position, particularly if his slight is based on his insistence that we dump out the baby—individual differences—along with the water which has been dirtied by the crude epistemology which guided the development of sophisticated measurement technologies—which were then ill-used by the normal scientists of the psychology of personality. Any reader can take this book to be a singularly significant contribution to the development of a psychology of personality.

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