BEYOND CONSISTENCY IN THE DEFINITION OF PERSONALITY

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ABSTRACT

Historically, personality has been predicated on behavioral consistency. Assuming that a unique repertoire of characteristics is the minimum requirement for the existence of a personality, three methods were employed to demonstrate uniqueness. Twenty-three women recorded self-descriptive words at the end of each twenty-three days (Adjective Generation Technique or AGT). The words generated in daily self-description were assigned favorability values from the AGT norm list. Subjects varied day-to-day in favorability of self-description more than they differed from one another in over-all favorability of self-description, thereby showing little consistency. First, uniqueness was demonstrated because variability of favorability within lists of most used words was significantly less than variability between lists. Second, a determination was made as to whether subjects’ lists of most used words tended to be nonoverlapping, and were thereby unique. The observed overlap of at least one word among the subjects’ actual lists of most used words was 93, not significantly different from 88, the estimated chance probability of overlap. Third, raters’ Semantic Differential reactions to subjects’ lists indicated that they clearly saw the corresponding subjects to be unique. Results present a dilemma in that subjects’ uniqueness was reflected in their lists of most used words, but consistency was not great. Dramaturgical Quality and Value were offered as additional criteria for personality, beyond consistency.

Historically, personality has been largely predicated on behavioral consistency [1-17]. For example, Pervin writes that personality “... represents those characteristics of the person or of people generally that account for consistent patterns of response to situations” [16, p. 6]. Byrne and Kelly define personality “... as the sum total of all of the relatively enduring dimensions of individual differences [7, p. 33]. To Bronfenbrenner personality is “... a system of relatively enduring dispositions...” [6, p. 158].

Although “consistency” may have dominated definitions of personality, stability seems not to have been the minimum requirement for the existence of
a personality. Rather the presence of a unique repertoire of characteristics confirms its existence. The importance of “uniqueness,” above and beyond the emphasis on consistency, is at least implied by most definitions (see previous page), and is explicitly stated by some theorists [e.g., 12, 13, 18, 19]. For example, Guilford defines personality as “... a person’s unique pattern of traits” [18, p. 5]. That uniqueness can be shown even when consistency is low is the major hypothesis of this study.

The method used in this study is called the Adjective Generation Technique (AGT) [1]. The AGT involves having subjects record words to describe themselves each day for many days. The self-descriptive words subjects generate, mostly adjectives, amount to labels for behaviors they have performed. Based on previous studies employing the AGT, it is expected that subjects will tend to use different labels on different days, implying low behavioral consistency [16, 20, 21].

Informal examination of labels most often used by subjects in previous AGT studies reveals that lists of most used labels tend to be different for different subjects [1]. By means of extrapolation from these informal observations, uniqueness might be demonstrated in three different ways. First, uniqueness will be evidenced if there is less variation of labels within lists of most used labels than between lists. That is, each person’s list of most used labels is expected to be coherent, containing interrelated labels that are different from those found on other persons’ lists. Such coherence represents yet another emphasis by personality theorists, organization of personality components [22]. Second, it is expected that the lists of most used labels produced by different subjects will be so dissimilar, and thereby unique, that they will overlap no more than would be expected by chance. Third, uniqueness is expected to be apparent to the naked eye. Subjects’ lists of most used labels are expected to be so different that raters will easily be able to appreciate the differences among them.

METHOD

Subjects

Twenty-three women were recruited from two senior-level psychology classes during a summer school session (53% of the total enrollment in those classes). Only women were used because too few men were enrolled in the target classes to allow for a meaningful comparison of the sexes. Fortunately, men and women have tended not to differ in previous AGT research [1]. The women were asked to begin participation on July 13 and end on August 5. Since most participants were juniors, seniors, and graduate students they were older than subjects in typical psychological research. Each subject received points to be added to test scores, if she contributed data for the majority of the twenty-four days. The mean number of days during which subjects participated was 22.5.
Procedure

At the end of each day, subjects were to record as many words as they felt applied to themselves during the day. Next they were to write a sentence or two describing any significant events that occurred during the day. Finally subjects wrote a couple of sentences describing the behaviors they performed in response to the events that had occurred. Instructions for all three tasks were typed on masters, duplicated on single sheets and periodically distributed to subjects. Exact instructions are presented in the Appendix. It should be noted that Allen and Potkay report no effects of varying instructions across several studies [1]. Thus, reference to daily recordings or lack of the same does not set subjects to think that “mood” is or is not being measured [3].

Because classes were held five days a week, each subject could deposit her sheet with the data for the previous day in a special receptacle available in the classrooms. Data for the weekend were deposited on Monday. With this method of data collection, recordings from previous days were unlikely to influence recordings made on a given day.

Decoding Data

The AGT self-descriptive labels that subjects generated each day were referred to a list of 2200 words and accompanying favorability values (all 2200 words and values are contained in [1]). The mean of values thus assigned constituted the favorability score for that day. Most of the assignments were made by use of a microcomputer program that automatically assigns values from the list of 2200 words and calculates means per day, along with making several other calculations. Each day’s descriptions of behaviors, reported in sentence form, were typed on separate sheets and two copies were made of each (significant event data will not be discussed further in this article). Forty-six female raters, two for each subject, were recruited to provide a means of scoring the behavioral descriptions. The two raters were provided with a booklet containing behavioral descriptions for a given subject, arranged in random order, and were asked to bear the following instruction in mind when responding to each description: “read the entire description found on each sheet and then write down five words that you believe would accurately describe a person, yourself or someone else, who would behave in such a way.” The same procedure for scoring AGT records was used to score the words provided by raters.

RESULTS

The two behavioral values for each day provided by the two raters were averaged and the means correlated with favorability of AGT daily self-descriptions. The coefficient of .41 thus obtained provides some support for the
assumption that words used in AGT self-description amount to labels for behaviors that subjects have performed [1].

To determine the level of (in)consistency reflected in the daily AGT favorability scores, the ratio of day-to-day score variation within individual subjects (intraindividual variability) to differences between subjects in overall scores (interindividual variability) was computed [1, 20, 21]. The numerator of the ratio was the sum of the within subjects day-to-day variability in AGT favorability scores divided by $N$, the number of subjects ($N = 23$). The denominator was the variability of subjects’ overall AGT favorability of self-description (the mean of daily favorability scores) about the grand mean of subjects’ overall favorability values, divided by $N - 1$ ($N - 1 = 22$). The obtained $F = 7.19$ ($df = 494/22, p < .01$) indicated that subjects varied within themselves in day-to-day favorability of AGT self-description more than they differed from one another in overall favorability of AGT self-description (rationale and support for this procedure are found in Allen and Potkay [1, 23]. Thus, subjects tended to provide different descriptions of themselves on different days.

For each subject a list of labels recorded at least five times during the twenty-four days was compiled. ¹ This set of labels was designated “lists of most used words.” During this process, one subject’s data were eliminated, because she used no label as many as five times. However, the data of another subject were retained, although some of the labels she employed most often were not recorded on as many as five days. The twenty-two lists are depicted in Table 1. All analyses reported employed the twenty-two “lists of most frequently used words.”

In the course of initially examining the twenty-two lists, it was immediately obvious that situational effects were present. “Tired” was used by fifteen subjects, “happy” by nineteen subjects and “anxious” by ten subjects. Students at the university where the study was conducted tend to “party” late most nights of the week. The orientation to revelry is a part of the university’s history and has recently been a subject of debate, even well outside the area surrounding the institution (Peoria Journal Star, 3/3/84, p. B8). This typical life style ensured that subjects were “tired” when they made AGT self-descriptions, just before retiring. In terms of situational effects, nightly “partying” makes students “happy,” but also “anxious,” due to missed opportunities for study. Accordingly, it was assumed that situational effects common to most subjects were present in the form of “tired,” “happy,” and “anxious.” These effects were partialed out of the data by elimination of the three words. Of course, this method extracts the effects of situations in

¹A frequency of five was chosen because, empirically, few subjects repeated a word more often than five times. It was assumed that a word-label must appear with some frequency above zero, however small, if it is to be considered a part of any individual’s repertoire of characteristics.
### Table 1. Subjects' Lists of Most Used Behavioral Labels
(numbers after words are frequencies)

<table>
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<th>Subject</th>
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<td>satisfied</td>
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<td>lonely</td>
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<td>worried</td>
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<td>content</td>
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common to subjects, the major emphasis of "situationalists" and social psychologists. What is left are mainly situations that are unique to individuals, because many of these are chosen on an individual basis, in line with the tenets of "interactionism" [10].

First, a simple one-way analysis of variance (unweighted means) was performed to determine whether each subject's list is coherent, containing interrelated labels that are different from the sets of labels found on other subjects' lists. The effect of this analysis was to ascertain whether variation of favorability within the lists was smaller than variation between lists. As expected, results showed that differences between lists exceeded variation within lists \( F = 2.94, df = 21/76, p < .01 \). The same result was obtained with the inclusion of "tired," "happy," and "anxious" \( F = 2.03, df = 21/121, p < .01 \). Thus, there was coherence within lists of words most often used throughout the course of the study, and those lists differed one from the other.

To determine whether overlap was so small as to support uniqueness, it was necessary to estimate the amount of overlap displayed by lists of most used words that would be expected by chance alone. Such is the case, because any set of lists of any entities drawn from a limited population would show some overlap by chance. Uniqueness is shown if overlap is no more than that expected by chance.

The first step in that process was to enter all words most often used by the subjects into a microcomputer, word-processing file. The resultant file was next submitted to the Sensible Speller Program, which listed forty-nine words each of which had been used at least five times by one or more subjects. This list amounted to a frequency distribution with each of forty-nine words being often used by one or more subjects. In effect, the forty-nine words constituted a list from which subjects chose their most used self-descriptive labels, with some words being used at least five times by many subjects and others being often used by only one or a few subjects. Thus, the forty-nine words were considered to be the population from which subjects drew the labels they most often used in self-description.

Next, a microcomputer program was written to generate twenty-two sets of random numbers drawn from a population of forty-nine, each set exactly duplicating the length of a list actually produced by one of the twenty-two subjects (lists of labels most often employed by subjects varied in length from three to eight). The program was run ten times and, for each run, a count was made of the number of overlaps of at least one number that occurred among the twenty-two sets. The mean number of overlaps across the ten runs, eighty-eight out of 231 possible overlaps, was taken as the index of overlap by chance.

The actual number of overlaps of at least one label among the twenty-two lists of labels was ninety-three. The observed (93) versus chance (88) overlap was contrasted by reference to the normal approximation to the binomial [24]. The obtained \( Z \) of .68 indicated that the observed overlap did not exceed the
amount of overlap expected by chance \((p > .24)\). That is, subjects' lists were so different, that they exhibited no more overlap than would be expected by chance.

Finally, to show that the uniqueness of subjects is apparent to the naked eye, twenty students were recruited to rate the persons represented by the lists of labels. Each subject reacted to each of the twenty-two lists by use of Semantic Differential Scales (good-bad, wise-foolish, and successful-unnecessary) [25]. Results of a simple one-way analysis of variance (unweighted means) of Evaluative Scale responses showed that the students did see the twenty-two subjects as different from one another \((F = 44.30, df = 21/399, p < .001)\). Results were identical when “tired,” “happy,” and “anxious” were included \((F = 22.53, df = 21/525, p < .001)\).

**DISCUSSION**

**Uniqueness**

Two sources of evidence indicated that behavioral consistency was not great for the present subjects. First, intrasubject variability significantly exceeded interindividual variability. That is, variation day-to-day was greater than individual differences in overall favorability of self-description. Although this outcome is typical, it does not occur when demand character or instructions to subjects would logically dictate otherwise. In the constancy of a mental hospital setting [26] or when “true self” instructions are given [1] intrasubject variability (within subjects) does not exceed interindividual variability (between subjects). Second, examination of Table 1 indicates that, at most, behavioral labels were repeated sixteen times in an average of 22.5 days, implying little behavioral consistency. The mean repetition of labels was only 6.58.

Despite relative lack of behavioral consistency, there was clear evidence that subjects were unique in that they produced different sets of labels to describe themselves. First, subjects' lists of most used labels were coherent. The differences among words within subjects' lists were small relative to the differences among the lists as a whole. Second, a statistical comparison between actual overlap among the twenty-two lists of behavioral labels and overlap due to chance revealed that the observed number of overlaps did not depart from chance expectancy. Ninety-three overlaps were observed, and eighty-eight were expected by chance. This outcome was obtained in a rather uniform context, where subjects were faced with many of the same situations. To be sure, situational effects were present in the case of college students enrolled in the same kinds of courses during the same summer session, even beyond those represented by “happy,” “tired,” and “anxious.” In view of such strong situational pressures common to most subjects, it is particularly noteworthy that
subjects displayed uniqueness. Third, an analysis of raters’ Semantic Differential responses to the lists indicated that they clearly appreciated subjects’ uniqueness. One can confirm this outcome by application of the “eyeball test” to Table 1. It is evident that subjects really were behavioral different from one another, that is, unique. It is easy to see that these people are dissimilar from one another. There is not even an approximation to total overlap among lists of behavioral labels. Also, subjects L and V’s lists show no overlap with that of any other subjects.

**Possible Cognitive Processes Underlying Uniqueness: Attribution and Dramaturgical Quality/Value**

Attributional processes may partly underlie the uniqueness displayed by subjects. It is instructive to trace the process by which people may come to possess personality, even in the absence of high behavioral consistency. Hogan suggests that personality development and refinement might be viewed from the point of view of attribution theory [27]. Although it is an oversimplification his theory might be summed up in the statement, “You are your perceptions of how other people view you” [16]. From this perspective, how would persons acquire the components of their personalities that are represented by the labels they use in self-description? They would behave, be observed and receive feedback from observers in the form of personality attributions. Such attributions might sometimes be incorporated into their personalities, but when would that be? Certainly if a behavior is consistently performed, corresponding attributions would be persistent and would thereby register with the actor. The result might be incorporation of a new personality component, which would eventually show up as a new self-descriptive label.

However, attribution theory does not rely solely on behavioral consistency. For example, Kelley counts consistency as only one of three primary bases for attributions [28]. Hogan’s theory permits any number of sources of attributions [27]. All that is required is that attributions be directed to actors and somehow register with them.

Accordingly, Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value may also determine attributions that become components of personality, Coe and Sarbin suggested these terms [29, 30]. Dramaturgical Quality refers to the precision, clarity, and effectiveness with which a behavior is performed. If the Dramaturgical Quality of a person’s behavioral performance is high, other people will not only notice, but may also make attributions to the individual that correspond to his behavior. With high Dramaturgical Quality, attributions are likely to be clearly communicated, appreciated by the targets and incorporated into their personalities. For example, suppose that a large crowd gathers around a child who is crying uncontrollably and resisting efforts to provide comfort. Suppose further that a person makes his way through the crowd and manages to calm the child where all others have failed. Perhaps witnesses have
never seen the person perform such a behavior before, and in fact, he does not behave in that way very often. Nevertheless, onlookers are likely to attribute "nurturance" or its equivalent to the man and do so with openness that he cannot miss. The result might be incorporation of "nurturance" into the man's repertoire of personality characteristics. Allen has provided evidence for Dramaturgical Quality [31].

A behavioral performance has Dramaturgical Value to the extent that the behavior involved is uncommon and is directed to several targets. If a person performs an uncommon behavior and directs it to several targets, it is likely to stick in the minds of observers, so much so that attributions are made corresponding to the behavior. On the other hand, even if the behavior in question is uncommon, should it be directed to only one target, the target rather than the performer may be seen as the source of the behavior [cf. 28]. As an example, suppose that a meeting of disgruntled industrial employees is being held and management is again spouting platitudes about "employee-employer cooperation," while failing to address issues relating to employee discontent. Suppose that people who complain about such hypocrisy risk demotion and eventual dismissal. At first, workers sit in angry silence, as is usual for them. However, on this occasion, an employee suddenly rises out of the audience, boldly approaches the current speaker, lectures him, then turns on the vice presidents and finally the company president. Assume she has never done anything like this before, and that, being inarticulate, her performance lacks quality. She may still be attributed with "courage" by many bystanders. Such attributions are likely to be strong leading to an expansion of the worker's personality.

Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value can be used to understand the present results. The observation that subjects showed uniqueness in the absence of strong behavioral consistency implies that behavioral consistency was not the only means by which their personalities were constructed. Subjects may have displayed Dramaturgical Quality and Value in their behavioral performances thereby being recipients of strong attributions that were eventually incorporated into their personalities. In other words, part of what people become in terms of personality may be determined not so much by observations of their behavioral consistencies as by recognition that each of them does some things very well, if not very often, and that each of them performs some behaviors that are unusual, even though they may display these uncommon behaviors infrequently. Perhaps one is what one does well and what one does that is unusual, rather than just what one does consistently.

However, these data and arguments are not presented as "disconfirmation of behavioral consistency." Consistency has been vigorously defended elsewhere [11, 32]. To the contrary, consistency is assumed to be one source of attributions that contribute to personality, but not the only, or even necessarily the primary source. Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value are also
possible sources. The plea is for a broader approach to personality, not the elimination of traditional approaches.

Hogan’s Theory

Hogan’s view unites “attribution process” with familiar notions of “personality,” thereby promoting theoretical parsimony and amalgamating the somewhat estranged areas of social psychology and personality [27]. If attribution, a social psychological process, underlies the construction of personality, the two areas may once again be considered part and parcel of the same thing. If Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value help to explain how attribution contributes to personality, these notions aid in the pursuit of parsimony and the thorough reunion of personality and social psychology.

Of course, the simple summary of Hogan’s point of view given above does not do justice to the richness of his theory [27]. Besides attributional processes, Hogan includes biology and early experience as determinants of personality. Self-presentation is strongly emphasized. Thus, people are seen as working hard at self-presentation that will garner attributions capable of reinforcing already existing components of personality, rather than just passively receiving attributions that lead to new components. However, these additional characteristics of Hogan’s theory do no damage to Dramaturgical Quality and Value. The two concepts can just as readily be used to explain how existing components of personality are reinforced, as to explain how new components are acquired. High Dramaturgical Quality and high Dramaturgical Value manifested in behavioral performances can yield strong attributions that reinforce existing components of personality or lead to the installation of new components.

Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid

Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value may fit neatly into other theoretical frameworks. Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid elegantly demonstrated that stereotyping people may make them targets of highly salient behaviors [33]. Targets, in turn, respond with behaviors that confirm the stereotypes, leading to attributions that stimulate still more self-confirmatory behavior on the part of targets. Dramaturgical Quality and Dramaturgical Value can be used to explain the circumstances under which attributions are likely to be strongly communicated to targets, leading to behaviors that confirm stereotypes. The degree to which behaviors of targets are clearly, precisely and effectively performed and are uncommon may be the degree to which strong attributions are likely to be directed to targets, yielding self-confirmatory behaviors. Further, the two concepts offer an explanation concerning how stereotyped attributions may eventuate in permanent additions to targets’ personalities.Attributions based on clear, precise and effective performances of uncommon behaviors are
likely to be recognized by targets and incorporated into their personalities, rather than being only temporary stimuli for behavior.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks are due Linda Hanson and especially to Gale Johnson for their efforts in decoding the data, and to colleague Eugene Mathes for his helpful suggestions.

APPENDIX

Instructions Included on Subject’s Daily Record Sheets.

At the end of this day, reflect on yourself and write down as many or as few adjectives as are needed to accurately describe yourself, but be sure to record at least five adjectives.

Indicate what happened to you on this day, by briefly recording any events that occurred to you which you regard as significant.

Indicate how you reacted to what happened to you this day, by briefly recording the behavior you performed in response to the events that occurred to you.

REFERENCES


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