

## G. W. ALLPORT AND THE DISTINCTION IDIOPHIC/NOMOTHETIC (I/N)

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### RESUMEN

Las bifurcaciones de Allport respecto a rasgos como único/universal, focalizado/generalizado, individual/común, morfogénico/dimensional y morfogénesis/dimensionalismo, reflejan la reformulación llevada a cabo por Stern de la distinción idiográfico/nomotético de Windelband.

### ABSTRACT

Allport's bifurcations in regard to traits like unique/universal, focalized/generalized, individual/common, morphogenic/dimensional and morphogenesis/dimensionalism reflect Stern's reformulation of Windelband's i/n distinction.

### INTRODUCTION

Presumably, there will be much consensus with Krasner & Ullman's statement that "the publication of Gordon Allport's *Personality* (1937) ...helped create a new field...by defining what it constituted" (Krasner & Ullman, 1973, p. 80). Although not many books may have exerted a disciplinary effect like this we will not look for the reasons of that. Neither for external ones in the scientific community nor for internal ones due to the book's innovative contents. We will not even try to reconstruct the latter. Rather we will consider, as it seems to be, one of the most relevant formal core elements of Allport's work. It is a bifurcation on which other important conceptions rest. It looks like a basic distinction which obviously Allport introduced in the twenties already and clung to it until the end of his scientific career.

In the following we shall try to reconstruct at first Allport's central bifurcation from the twenties up to what may be one of his latest papers in 1966. A second part will deal with its historical origin and lead us to New-Kantian philosophy close to the end of the last century and finally the transmission from philosophy to the psychology of personality will be considered.

The procedure of this study will consist of some kind of longitudinal time-sampling of sources. That means we will take into consideration sources from different points in time, namely 1929, 1937, 1962 and 1966 so that our respective results are basically open to addition and revision. Then we shall go back to the late nineties of the last century in order to reach finally the first third of this century again.

#### THE UNIQUE AND THE UNIVERSAL ASPECT OF TRAITS

As early as in 1929 Allport is wrestling with the problem of personality. At its heart "lies the puzzling problem of the nature of the unit or element which is the carrier of the distinctive behavior of man" (Allport, 1931, p. 368). A solution is envisaged by the concept of traits. However, it must be clarified. In Allport's words "the doctrine of traits" is to be formulated (*loc.cit.*). So, "criteria" for traits are given, in regard to ontological status, to empirical establishment, dynamic character, and relations to other units. The last but by no way least is stated the following way:

"A trait may be viewed either in the light of the personality which contains it, or in the light of its distribution in the population at large" (Allport, 1931, p. 372).

On these grounds, we further learn that "each trait has both its unique and its universal aspect". By the universal one "the trait is arbitrarily isolated" while under uniqueness "the trait takes its significance entirely from...the personality as a whole" (*loc. cit.*). So far the first specification.

Naturally, in Allport's 1937 book on personality the doctrine of traits plays an important role again. Here, traits are not only ordered to the broader conception of determining tendencies but also given a more specified definition. Traits exist really as:

- "neuropsychic system" (Allport, 1937, p. 295).
- initiating and guiding behavior.

Traits are specified as "generalized and focalized ...with the capacity to render...stimuli functionally equivalent" determining consistent behavior (*loc.cit.*).

The facets of this well known definition, which are still to be learned to day by students of personality, will not be our main concern. Our interest rather concentrates on Allport's classification of traits, namely his distinction of individual vs. common traits.

PSYCHOGRAPH OF

UNDERLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS						COMMON TRAITS OF PERSONALITY						
EXPRESSIVE			ATTITUDINAL			EXPRESSIVE			ATTITUDINAL			
INTELLIGENCE		TEMPERAMENT	TOWARD SELF		TOWARD OTHERS		TOWARD VALUES		EXPRESSIVE		ATTITUDINAL	
PHYSIQUE	ABSTRACT (VERBAL)	MCHANICAL (PRACTICAL)	ASSEMBLING	IMPULSIVE	REVERENT	UPWARD	DOWNWARD	INTELLECTUAL	ARTISTIC	CONSERVATIVE	RELIGIOUS	PHYSICAL
HEALTH	STRONG EMOTIONS	WEAK EMOTIONS	PERFECT	IMPERFECT	ACQUISITION	REJECTION	DETERMINED	UNDETERMINED	CONFORMING	NONCONFORMING	ETHICAL	UNETHICAL
ILL-HEALTH	WEAK EMOTIONS	STRONG EMOTIONS	IMPERFECT	PERFECT	REJECTION	ACQUISITION	UNDETERMINED	DETERMINED	NONCONFORMING	CONFORMING	UNETHICAL	ETHICAL
LOW VITALITY	LOW INTELLIGENCE	LOW MCHANICAL ABILITY	LOW ASSEMBLING ABILITY	LOW IMPULSIVE ABILITY	LOW REVERENT ABILITY	LOW UPWARD ABILITY	LOW DOWNWARD ABILITY	LOW INTELLECTUAL ABILITY	LOW ARTISTIC ABILITY	LOW CONSERVATIVE ABILITY	LOW RELIGIOUS ABILITY	LOW PHYSICAL ABILITY

An Illustrative Psychograph  
 (From Allport, G. W. (1937). Personality, p. 400)

This is indispensable, because "strictly speaking, no two persons ever have precisely the same trait" (Allport, 1937, p. 297).

In a strict sense, this substantial difference could prevent any comparison between people and stop any further scientific enterprise already here. But Allport acknowledges "a certain logic that justifies...search for comparable and measurable units" (*loc.cit.*). Common cultural factors influencing normal persons produce a limited number "of units which allow to postulate a common variable and therefore permit gradation and scaling. Hence, we have on one side so called "common traits" as those aspects of personality in respect to which most mature people within a given culture can be compared" (Allport, 1937, p. 300).

That can be carried out by 'psychography' (p. 400). (Fig. 1).

However, it should be kept in mind, that common traits neither are the only nor the true ones. Individual traits are the true traits. They reside within the individual as unique "dynamic dispositions" (Allport, 1937, p. 299).

Stepping down from theoretical conceptualization to the level of research, soon the question of method must be raised in regard to individual traits, because "the methods adapted to the study of common variables do not readily transfer to the study of individual traits" (Allport, 1937, p. 302). Nevertheless, more than 50 methods are offered for the study of personality but only the so called case-study or life-history paves the way to the ultimate goal, "the individuality and uniqueness of every personality" (p.390).

#### THE MORPHOGENIC AND THE DIMENSIONAL ASPECT OF TRAITS

25 years later, in 1962, Allport seems to be still engaged with the twofold perspective on traits. Again, the bifurcation manifests itself when "we are speaking of one and only one person" on the one hand. And on the other when we are speaking of "the problem of human personality...abstracting elusive properties" from many people. (Allport, 1962, p. 405).

No doubt, "The general and the unique in psychological science" is addressed. But "the issue before us is not new" (Allport, 1962, p. 407). Unfortunately, not much advance can be registered up to then. So progress seems to be urgent. In Allport's eyes a "rapid" one could be insured "best" by avoiding "traditional terms altogether" (Allport, 1962, p. 409). That's why the concepts "of 'dimensional' and 'morphogenic' procedures" are introduced now.

Dimensional is each approach in personality research, using identical elements, an identical conceptual frame across individuals, which is mainly of interest to the investigator. Horizontal commonalities, running through all individuals are basically assumed and the only subject matter under study.

The morphogenic approach on the other side discards universal building-blocks. The individual is seen "as a unique being-in-the-world whose system of meanings

and value-orientations are not precisely like anybody's else's" (Allport, 1962, p. 414). These components can be extracted by procedures which allow their unrestricted realization without prescriptions of contents by the investigator. For instance, a typical morphogenic example is the construction of an inventory for one person on the basis of an intensive depth-interview with repeated administration over time which may show continuity and change of that individual.

Morphogenic useful can be direct questioning of one person as well. For instance: "what experiences give you a feeling of completeness, of fully functioning, or of personal identity?" (Allport, 1962, p.417).

Last not least morphogeny on the lines of the so called "self-anchoring scale" should be mentioned. It offers the empty diagram of a ladder with 10 rungs to the subject. The top belongs to "the very best or ideal way of life" an individual does imagine for himself. The bottom represents "the 'worst possible way of life' for himself" (loc. cit.).

Morphogenic procedures guarantee greatest freedom to the subject in order to formulate those individual dimensions, which are of relevance for himself. The point is that the subject introduces his own personal dimensions, more precisely his constructs, into the analysis of his personality.

In comparison with the state of 1937 now relatively concrete assessment procedures for traits are proposed although basically the old problems were only wrapped in new terms.

#### MEANINGFUL DIMENSIONALISM, COVARIATION AND MORPHOGENESIS

In the last Allportian source (of the year 1966), the early doctrine of traits from 1929 is explicitly resumed and reexamined in the light of discussions ever since. Traits are claimed still as capacities or tendencies, acting from within the person. Again, they "may be studied at two levels...dimensionally...as an aspect of individual differences, and...individually, in terms of personal dispositions" (Allport, 1966, p. 3). As we know already, "it is the latter approach that brings us closest to the person..." (loc. cit.).

Now, they are embedded in the "epistemological position" of "heuristic realism", which basically stresses the existence of "generalized action tendencies", three illustrative studies are presented (Allport, 1966, p. 3). They clearly show us Allport's latest position on personality research.

I will shortly summarize them here, starting with the so called "meaningful dimensionalism" (Allport, 1966, p. 4). It consists of nothing else than searching for validated common dimensions, called here "generic evaluative tendencies" for grouping a bigger sample of people into subclasses.

"Meaningful covariation", the second of Allport's studies, convincingly demonstrates different correlations between facets of a seemingly general trait and behaviour. For instance, there is no simple relation between religious orientation and prejudice. It must be specified whether 'extrinsic' or 'intrinsic' religiosity prevails. Only after differentiating people in regard to facets of these traits groups with relatively strong different and understandable relations between religious orientation and prejudice emerge.

Allport's personality research must now take differences between people in regard to their organization of trait facets into account, belonging to some persons only.

From a methodical stance different quantitative relations for different groups defined by facets of one broad trait equals a demonstration of the well known moderator-variable-effect (Wiggins, 1973).

Allport's final exposition is called "meaningful morphogenesis". It realizes what we already know about the advantages of abstaining from common dimensions for interindividual comparison and from imposing dimensions upon single persons. In order to get in touch with the individual as it really is traits must be offered the opportunity to emerge from the personality structure without any constraints.

Summarizing we can now state a third terminological variation while the subject matter remains unchanged basically. Where does the bifurcation come from?

## HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Because of the historical emphasis of this paper we must now look for the origin, influences and connections of Allport's twofold approach in the psychological scientific community.

Taking Allport's 1937 book as starting point we soon are -not unsurprisingly- confronted with a bifurcation, namely the thesis "that the psychology of personality must be, both nomothetic and idiographic" (p. 396).

These terms were introduced in chapter 1 already (p.22) as one form of distinguishing "sharply between the study of general principles and the study of the individual case" as proposed by "the philosopher Windelband". Turning closer to his subject proper Allport says that "psychology of individuality would be essentially idiographic" (loc.cit.). In another passage he relates that "nomothetic units...stress what is universal in men" (Allport, 1937, p. 340).

That means: the bifurcation we followed with our time-sampling of sources from 1929 to 1966 roughly corresponds at least to the i/n distinction drawn by the philosopher Windelband - as reported by Allport.

Because of the crucial role of i/n in personality research we turn to the source Allport himself was referring to in order to detect what he may have transferred from philosophy into his psychology of personality.

Consulting the primary source on *i/n* mentioned by Allport himself we find this conceptual couple as artificial terms. They are explicitly created for the classification of empirical sciences. In his essay on "History and Natural Science" Windelband (1894) - a leading figure of New-Kantianism- was searching particularly for a solid criterion for separating scientific disciplines from another. This problem possessed high actuality because some new disciplinary developments had taken place in the 19th century. The criterion desired was found in formal features of epistemological aims -not in subject matter, method or both. For instance, a language can be treated -according to Windelband- in regard to its "laws of form" or as "a unique, passing appearance of human language-life in general" (Windelband, 1894, p. 13). That means that the same object can be handled *i* and *n* (Brauns, 1984).

What makes any further clarification of *i/n* a little bit complicated is that Windelband does not define his conceptual inventions explicitly. He lists about one dozen of features for both, illustrating *i* and *n* sciences respectively.

We can not discuss all them here. We only mention some of them with some bearing on the applications we know already. (Tables 1 and 2).

*Table 1.- Windelband's (1894) division of empirical sciences according to formal characteristics of their epistemical goals (selection in regard to the field of personality)*

<u>IDIOGRAPHIC</u>	<u>NOMOTHETIC</u>
Complete and exhaustive representation of one more or less extendend, time-limited unique event.	Searching for laws of events.
Searching for figures.	Searching for laws.
Searching for the individual in historically determined shape.	Searching for the general in the form of law of nature.
To revive to ideal presence anew a creature of the past in all its individual distinctness.	Consider a single object as a special case of a generic concept and reflect only features for lawful generality.

Tabla 2.- Windelband's (1894) division of empirical sciences according to formal characteristics of their epistemical goals (selection in regard to logical terms)

	<u>IDIOPHIC</u>	<u>NOMOTHETIC</u>
<b>Form of statement</b>	Sentence	Judgement
<b>Quantity</b>	Singular	General
<b>Modality</b>	Assertoric	Apodictic

Windelband further argues that i and n sciences can assist themselves and help mutually. General laws, for instance, won by a n-science can be used by i-science for explanation. N-sciences on the other hand must take singular facts into account when they intend to generalize. Perhaps the mutual relation between both classes of sciences can be summarized best as "reciprocal instrumentalism" (Brauns, 1992).

Given this philosophical background, how did Allport come in contact with Windelband's taxonomy of sciences? Did he transfer the i/n distinction directly from Windelband's essay to the field of personality?

There is a lot of evidence for the hypothesis that Allport's transfer of the i/n distinction to personality was mediated by W. Stern. He had opened already this psychological field to it.

In his autobiography Stern (1927, p. 16) points at the influence that Windelband and his pupils exerted upon him. Additionally, in the second edition of his "Differentielle Psychologie" (1911) he refers to the "work" of Windelband in order to substantiate "a psychology of the single individuality" (1911, p. 4).

However, "in the science of the psychic, which was too much one-sided nomothetic up to now, the idiographic approach is to be developed then....besides the psychology proper must step: description of single individualities..." (loc. cit.).

On these grounds Stern develops his four well known "methodologically separated part-disciplines: variation- and correlation research, the psychography and comparison-research" (p.16). He classifies the first pair as "standing closer" to n, the latter to i (p. 19).

Obviously the transfer of i/n to the field of personality was already carried out earlier by Stern. When Allport came to Europe to study with Stern in the early twenties he must have been become acquainted with Stern's two classes of "part-



disciplines" of Differential Psychology, one corresponding to Windelband's *i*, the other to his *n* distinction. That's the material which gave the reason for the life-long presence of the bifurcation we have followed above.

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