

Personality Lectures

Week 1: Introduction to personality: Why, what and how.

Why?

- Common motives for studying psychology are the desire to:
 - Understand oneself
 - Understand other people.
 - Achieve “personal growth”
 - Foster the “personal growth” of other people.
- These are the very concerns that are central to the scientific study of personality

What?

- Kluckhohn and Murray (1953): every person is like all other persons, like some other persons, and like no other person.
- McAdams and Pals (2006): In order to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the whole person, personality psychology should provide frameworks for understanding:
 1. **Species-typical characteristics of human nature** (how the individual person is like all other persons); there are ways we are all the same
 2. **Individual differences in common characteristics** (how the individual person is like some other persons); (MIDPOINT)
 3. **The unique patterning of the individual life** (how the individual person is like no other person). No other person can have your life experiences. This is the EXTREME of the idiographic
- Thus, McAdams and Pals’ position regarding the “what” of personality is consistent with the position put forward in your textbook: Personality is the attempt to understand (i) what makes you similar to other people, and (ii) what makes you different from other people.

Attempt to understand self and others occurs at two levels:

- The descriptive level of analysis.
 - The dispositional approach
 - Trying to understand someone normally starts here
 - On the basis of observed regularities in behaviour, a set of adjectives are assigned to the person
 - On the basis of these adjectives (or the relations between them), the person may be classed as having certain personality traits, and/or as belonging to a certain personality type.
 - Eg she is kind, thoughtful
 - The explanatory level of analysis – explaining why someone is the way they are
 - Rather than being content with categorizing a person on the basis of the way he/she typically behaves, the scientific study of personality can attempt to identify the factors which cause a person to behave the way he/she typically does
 - It is at this explanatory level that personality theories have their key applied impact.
 - This is because the causes of behaviour identified by explanatory theories are the very factors targeted by

interventions designed to change behaviour and bring about personal “growth”.

- Definitions of personality typically allude to the causes of behaviour.
 - Allport (1971):
 - Personality is the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that **determine** his unique adjustments to his environment (p. 48, my emphasis)
 - He is alluding to causes
 - Hall and Lindzey(1970)
 - we are willing to accept any general theory of behaviour as a theory of personality (p. ix)
 - Granting that any general theory of behaviour can be accepted as a theory of personality, it is clear that personality theory looks at the big picture
 - However, personality theory does not yet provide an integrated big picture
 - Instead of an integrated big picture, there are many contradicting theories bringing us to the question of how

How is the study of personality to be approached?

- McAdams and Pals: personality psychology “continues to retreat from its unique historical mission... to provide an integrative framework for understanding the whole person.” (p. 204)
- They claim that the lack of an integrative framework is particularly evident in the 2 predominant forms of personality texts. Texts which they say typically come in two varieties:
 1. Presents the field of personality psychology as a parade of alternative grand theories, beginning with Freud and the psychoanalytic theories and running successively through humanistic/phenomenological, trait/type, social learning, and evolutionary/biological theories.
 2. Offers up a smorgasbord of research topics and issues.
- McAdams and Pals criticise both forms of personality textbooks. They claim that:
 - 2. Offers up a smorgasbord of research topics and issues
 - do a good job of covering contemporary research areas, but provide no overarching conception for making sense of it all, i.e., they fail to commit to an integrative point of view.
 - 1. Presents the field of personality psychology as a parade of alternative grand theories, beginning with Freud and the psychoanalytic theories and running successively through humanistic/phenomenological, trait/type, social learning, and evolutionary/biological theories.
 - Fail to commit to an integrative point of view, because the implicit message behind such textbooks “is that personality psychology offers a plethora of irreconcilable frameworks for making sense of persons, and the reader should pick his or her favorite.” (p. 205)
- They Put forward fundamental principles for an integrated science of personality which they claim suggested new ways to teach personality psychology as an integrated field

- McAdams and Pals are correct to claim that:
 - The “mission” of personality is to provide a comprehensive, integrative framework for understanding the whole person. As stated in the textbook – the formulation of a comprehensive integrated theory of personality is arguably the most important research task in personality today.
 - An approach to personality that offers nothing more than a “smorgasboard” of contemporary research topics is inadequate.
- But, they are incorrect to reject the “grand theory” approach to personality.
- Firstly, they say the grand theory approach offers a plethora of irreconcilable frameworks for making sense of persons and simply leaves the student to pick his or her favourite (p205)
 - Not accurate to say that the “grand theory” approach offers a plethora (i.e., over supply, or glut) of irreconcilable frameworks.
 - Rather, it is based on the realisation that there is a small set of fundamental perspectives on personality, and that all personality theories are either a derivative of one, or a combination of some of these fundamental perspectives.
 - The grand theory approach is not a big person account, it is concerned with the big theories
 - Close study of the grand theories helps one to contextualise contemporary research, e.g., it helps one to see that a large portion of contemporary research in personality is just old wine in new bottles.
 - The grand theory approach is not outdated. On the contrary, an understanding of the grand theories enables one to be ahead of the game by avoiding a myopic, decontextualised approach to contemporary research that limits the ability to effectively evaluate contemporary research.
- Secondly, and most importantly, McAdams and Pals are wrong to suggest that the “grand theory” approach does not provide scope for an “integrative point of view.”
 - It is true that the fundamental perspectives on personality theory are irreconcilable - as stated in the textbook, the fundamental perspectives possess incompatible foundational assumptions. For example:
 - They have incompatible assumptions regarding the causes of human behaviour
 - But it certainly does not follow that a student can do no more than “pick his or her favorite” theory.
 - Even though the fundamental perspective has incompatible, that is not all the student can do. To think this would be to neglect the role of conceptual analysis in science. That is, it would betray a narrow view of science
- The “broad science” way of formulating an integrated theory:
 - Broad view shows that grand theory is best way to provide comprehensive and integrated view of personality
- 1. Systematically apply the tools of critical evaluation to each of the “grand theories” so as to identify
 - (i) their strengths and weaknesses, and
 - (ii) the respects in which they are compatible and incompatible.