

Idiographic goals and methods in the study of lives

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The goal of psychology is "the development of generalizations of ever increasing scope, so that greater and greater varieties of phenomena may be explained by them, larger and larger numbers of questions answered by them, and broader and broader reaching predictions and decisions based upon them."

Leon Levy (1970, p. 5)

"To generalize is to be an idiot."

William Blake

Abstract

Learning what is true of persons-in-general and of groups of people often has severe limitations in enabling us to understand and predict the behavior of individuals. There are many important problems in describing, explaining, making predictions about, and intentionally changing the course of experience in individual lives that cannot be adequately addressed without the use of idiographic methods. The purposes of this paper are to contribute to a conceptual clarification of the idiographic approach and its place within psychology, to review and respond to a number of common criticisms of the idiographic approach, and finally, to update and extend Allport's survey of available idiographic methods.

Introduction

Many believe, and others probably hope, that the idiographic-nomothetic debate has been laid to rest, perhaps in a funeral dated near the death in 1967 of Gordon Allport, primary advocate of the idiographic approach. The idiographic-nomothetic debate was introduced into Anglo-American psychology by Allport (1937), who argued that psychology had been defining itself too exclusively as a nomothetic discipline, and not enough as an idiographic discipline, concerned with individuality, or with what is particular to the individual case. He believed that the psychology of personality needed to embrace both nomothetic and idiographic approaches.

The idiographic-nomothetic debate flourished from the 1950s through the early 1960s (e.g., Allport, 1942, 1946, 1961; Beck, 1953; Eysenck, 1954; Falk, 1956; Krech, 1955; Meehl, 1954; Rosenzweig, 1958; Seeman &

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Galanter, 1952; Skaggs, 1945), but seemed to subside as a topic of focal concern after Allport (1962) suggested that the word "idiographic" be replaced by the term "morphogenic," meaning accounting for pattern or structure within the individual, and Holt (1962) argued that the original dichotomy was "badly formulated and based on misconceptions" (Holt, 1962, p. 400) and had best be dropped from our scientific vocabularies. According to Holt (1962), the terms idiographic and nomothetic, "continue to appear in psychological writing but largely as pretentious jargon, mouth-filling polysyllables to awe the uninitiated, but never as essential concepts to make any scientifically vital point. Let us simply drop them from our vocabularies and let them die quietly" (p. 402).

The terms, however, linger on. There seems to be a persistent interest in the underlying issue of the indepth understanding of particular individuals, an interest shared by psychodynamic, phenomenological, and cognitive social learning theorists. An interest in idiographic approaches is also found in areas such as psychotherapeutic practice (Martin, 1978; Wolstein, 1975) and education (Baldwin, 1972; Kemmis, 1978; Rapp & Haggart, 1973). The terms "idiographic" and "nomothetic" are often briefly mentioned in textbooks and articles in personality and clinical psychology, yet in recent years, they have only rarely (e.g., Lamiell, 1981; Marceil, 1977; Pervin, in press; Tyler, 1978) received sustained analytic attention.

The purposes of this article are to contribute to a conceptual clarification of the idiographic approach and its place within psychology, to review and respond to a number of criticisms of the idiographic approach, and to update Allport's survey of the range of available idiographic methods. Regardless of whether the specific terms idiographic and nomothetic are retained or not, the question of the relation between the search for general laws and the understanding of individual cases seems to be an issue of enduring interest, and one that deserves renewed attention.

Issues of Conception and Definition

Gordon Allport believed that "the outstanding characteristic of man is his individuality" (Allport, 1937, p. 3). Borrowing from the German philosopher Windelband (1904) Allport used the word "nomothetic" to characterize the search for general laws, and "idiographic" to indicate a concern for what is particular to the individual case. He felt that psychology had been defining itself too exclusively as a nomothetic discipline, and that in order to redress this imbalance, there should be a greater emphasis upon individuality, the organization of variables and processes within the person, and the lawful regularities within single lives (Allport, 1937, 1961, 1962). "We recognize the single case as a useful source of hunches—and that is about all. We pursue our acquaintance with Bill long enough to derive

some hypothesis, and then spring like a gazelle into the realm of abstraction, drawing from Bill a 'testable proposition' but carrying with us no coordinated knowledge of him as a structural unit" (Allport, 1962, p. 406). "Instead of growing impatient with the single case and hastening on to generalization, why should we not grow impatient with our generalizations and hasten to the internal pattern?" (Allport, 1962, p. 407). The study of individuality required idiographic methods capable of revealing individual traits or variables and their patterned relations within the individual. Allport believed that the psychology of personality must employ both nomothetic and idiographic approaches, leading to an increased understanding of both persons-in-general and of particular individuals.

The idiographic approach does not apply to just a single issue, but rather to a set of related issues. The idiographic approach may be concerned with:

1. individualized traits or personal dispositions (Allport, 1961),
2. the identification of central themes within an individual life (Allport, 1965; Baldwin, 1942),
3. the ipsative ordering of responses within the individual (Alfert, 1967; Broverman, 1962),
4. the patterning or organization of variables within the single case (Allport, 1937, 1961), perhaps through factor analysis (Cattell, 1966; Luborsky & Mintz, 1972),
5. the correlation of variables within the single case (Chassan, 1979; Shapiro, 1966),
6. the selection of particular traits on which to assess individuals, in the belief that all individuals are not equally consistent across common trait dimensions (Bem & Allen, 1974; Kenrick & Stringfield, 1980),
7. the causal relation of variables within the single case (Chassan, 1979; Hersen & Barlow, 1976),
8. descriptive generalizations about the single case (Bromley, 1977),
9. the particular subjective meanings of events and circumstances to the individual, and
10. idiographic predictions based on trends or patterns in the data about a single case.

This list is not necessarily complete, but it should be sufficient to indicate a variety of possible uses of the term "idiographic," all unified by a concern with what is particular to the individual.

Three Levels of Generality in Personology

As a background for further discussion of the idiographic approach, it will be helpful to step back for a moment and discuss the overall goals of personality psychology. One widespread view is that the primary goal of personality psychology is "the development of generalizations of ever

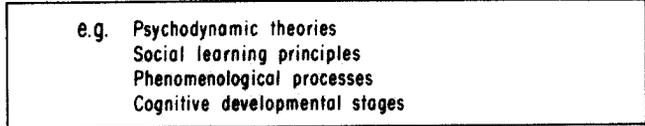
increasing scope, so that greater and greater varieties of phenomena may be explained by them, larger and larger numbers of questions answered by them, and broader and broader reaching predictions and decisions based upon them" (Levy, 1970, p. 5). According to this view, progress in the field of personality psychology should be sought through the development of generalizations as wide in scope as possible, and that these generalizations can then be applied in a nomological-deductive fashion (Hempel, 1965) to explain and predict particular behaviors.

I would like to suggest here an alternative picture of the internal structure or organization of the field of personality psychology, a picture based in part on Kluckhohn and Murray's classic dictum that "Every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man" (1953, p. 53). This statement suggests the ways in which persons are or are not similar to other persons. The structure of our knowledge about persons can be seen as occurring on three relatively distinctive levels or tiers.

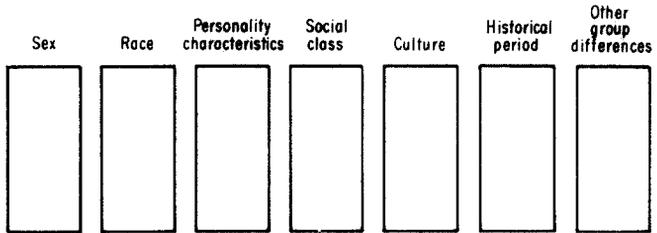
According to this view, the goals of personality psychology are three-fold. They are to discover:

1. what is true to all human beings,

1 True of all people
Universals



2. True of groups
Group differences



3. True of particular individuals

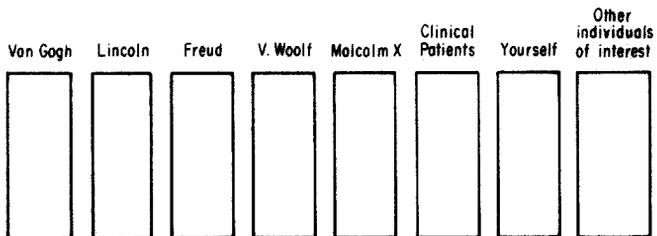


Figure 1. Levels of Generality in the Study of Lives

2. what is true of groups of human beings (distinguished by sex, race, personality characteristics, occupation, social class, culture, historical period, and combinations of these and other characteristics), and
3. what is true of individual human beings (such as particular public or historical figures, clinical patients, ourselves, or others of interest).

According to this view, there is order or regularity in the world at each of these three levels, and there is a need to develop universal generalizations, group-specific generalizations, and generalizations applying to specific individuals. The field of personology is concerned with making true descriptive, explanatory, and predictive statements at each of these three levels of analysis. In short, the field is concerned with the five tasks of describing, generalizing about, explaining, predicting, and intentionally changing behavior at each of the three levels of persons-in-general, groups of persons, and individual human beings.

There is substantial controversy about the regularities that may or may not be found within each of these levels, and on the relations between them (e.g., Cronbach, 1975; Dukes, 1965; Fales, 1980; Gergen, 1973, 1976; Manis, 1976; Schlenker, 1974). Those at the particularistic, idiographic end of the continuum argue that our resources are best devoted to the descriptive study of individuals in their particular social-historical context, while those at the nomothetic end of the continuum argue that "there still remains the possibility that at some more abstract level an unchanging general process underlies the variability that we observe" (Manis, 1976, p. 434). Advocates of each position can provide selected examples supporting their views, either that generalizations are more context-specific than previously recognized, or on the other side, that more general regularities can be found to explain apparent variability. The extent to which it is possible, either in practice or in principle, to deduce theories at the group and individual level from knowledge about universal processes, cannot and need not be resolved here. The more limited argument being made is that the goal of understanding individual persons is one of the important objectives of personality psychology, that universal and group knowledge are often insufficient in themselves for obtaining this goal, and that there is a need for developing idiographic methods of inquiry in order to attain an indepth understanding of individual lives. This position does not deny that universal laws are sometimes relevant to explaining or making predictions about individual lives, but argues that events in individual lives are often not fully explainable or predictable in terms of such general laws (cf. Fales, 1980, p. 261).

According to the classic nomothetic view, the search for broad generalizations about all human beings will enable us to adequately explain and predict behavior at the group and individual level. No doubt examples of

this process can be found, but in many other instances, explanation and prediction often depend crucially upon knowledge available only at that particular level of analysis. Anyone who attempts to interpret a life solely in terms of universal generalizations soon becomes aware of the limitations of this approach. Rather, explanation at the individual level often occurs, not through the deductive application of universal generalizations, but rather through processes such as searching for the individual's reasons for acting in a particular way, through collecting as much information as possible about the individual and looking for idiographic patterns within it, and through organizing information about the case into an intelligible narrative (Dray, 1971; Gallie, 1964; Sherwood, 1969).

The position being advocated here is that the three levels of inquiry are *semi-independent*. The solution of problems at one level of analysis will not necessarily solve problems at the other levels. It is widely recognized that generalizations about individuals cannot be assumed to be true at the group or individual level (e.g., Campbell & Stanley, 1966). Conversely, broad generalizations can be applied only with great caution to particular individuals (Chassan 1979), as nomothetically derived relations are sometimes different from, or even the opposite of, the relations between variables found within individual persons. Learning what is true about persons-in-general often has substantial limitations in enabling us to understand and predict the behavior of individuals (Runyan, 1978, 1982b).

Consider, for example, the relation between Milgram's research on obedience to authority and our understanding of the behavior of Adolf Eichmann in World War II. As head of the Jewish Department in the Reich's Main Security Office, Eichmann was involved in the execution of an estimated 6 million European Jews. At his trial for war crimes in 1961, Eichmann argued that he had never wished to harm a single Jew, but felt impelled to obey the orders of his superiors. "I was in the iron grip of orders," he argued, and personally, he considered "the whole solution by violence to be a dreadful thing" (Hausner, 1966, p. 366). Before being executed by hanging in 1962, Eichmann's last words were, "I had to obey the rules of war and my flag" (p. 446).

In a well-known program of experimental research on obedience to authority, Milgram (1974) found that more than 60% of normal subjects could be induced to administer what they believed to be extremely painful or even damaging shocks to innocent subjects in a learning experiment. What relation do these experiments have to our understanding of Eichmann's behavior? Is it fair to suggest that he was not an evil man, but that like the subjects in the experiments, he was coerced into performing destructive actions against his inner objections? Maybe this is an adequate explanation of his behavior, and maybe it is not, but how can we know?

The collection of detailed particularistic information about Eichmann through interviews, cross-examination, and the analysis of personal and

historical documents suggests a somewhat different picture from that of a man driven by authority to violate the dictates of his conscience. As for the view that he was just following orders, Eichmann said in 1957 in a tape-recorded talk to a Dutch Nazi journalist, "I could make it easy for myself. I could claim it was an order I had to carry out because of my oath of allegiance. But that would be just a cheap excuse, which I am not prepared to give" (Hausner, 1966, p. 11). Furthermore, Eichmann was selective in his following of orders, and attempted to sabotage or reverse requests for leniency in the treatment of Jews. As for his sympathy for the victims, Eichmann told Sassen, "To be frank with you, had we killed all of them, the 10.3 million, I would be happy and say, All right; we managed to destroy an enemy" (Hausner, 1966, p. 11).

These selected bits of evidence are, of course, not conclusive. Other interpretations drawing on other pieces of evidence can be, and have been offered (Arendt, 1964). The important issue here though, is, what is the relation between the general and individual levels of analysis? Eichmann's behavior might be explained by deducing it from a set of initial conditions (such as that he was embedded in an organizational hierarchy and that his superiors had ordered the destruction of Jews), plus the general experimental results showing that most people will harm others if ordered to do so by authorities. Or, an understanding of Eichmann's behavior could be pursued through collecting detailed information about what he said and did in many different situations, and trying to develop an idiographic interpretation based on the complete range of available facts about him. General theories can suggest hypotheses about the individual, but these explanatory hypotheses must then be tested through extensive research about the person in question (Runyan, 1981). Research at the group or universal level can contribute to the task, but is, in itself, often insufficient for understanding and predicting the behavior of individuals.

If progress within the universal, group, and individual levels of inquiry is partially independent of progress at the other levels, then it follows that our investigative resources should not be devoted solely to the search for universal generalizations, but allocated also to studies of group differences, and to the indepth study of particular individuals. There is, in short, an important place within psychology for both *idiographic goals*—of generalizing about, describing, explaining, predicting, and intentionally changing the behavior of particular individuals, and *idiographic methods*—or research methods capable of contributing to the attainment of each of these goals.

Criticisms of the Idiographic Approach

If the logic of the idiographic position is as clear as has been suggested here, why hasn't it been more widely accepted? Why are there so few

studies of individuals in personality psychology? Why are our journals filled with between-group experiments, tests of general hypotheses, and correlation matrices, and with so few studies of individual human beings (Carlson, 1971)? Part of the reason may be found in the criticisms of, and objections to, the idiographic approach, a number of which will be reviewed below. Some of the criticisms are based on misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the idiographic approach, while others identify exaggerated or indefensible claims made for the approach. An attempt will be made to determine which of these criticisms are or are not justified, and to see if consideration of these criticisms can lead to an improved formulation of the idiographic approach.

1. Perhaps the most widespread criticism of idiographic studies of particular lives is that it is difficult to generalize from them. Holt (1962), for example, argues that "If every personality structure were as much a law unto itself as Allport implies, it would be impossible to gain useful information in this field; there would be no transfer from one case study to another" (p. 398). A common reaction to the intensive study of individuals was expressed by a colleague of mine as: "So what? How can you generalize from that?" Allport's summary of these criticisms is that if a relation is found within a single case, "We'd have to generalize to other people or else we'd have nothing of any scientific value" (Allport, 1962, p. 406).

These criticisms seem to be based on the unwarranted assumption that the goal of personality psychology is solely to produce generalizations at the highest possible level of abstraction, preferably universal generalizations. As argued earlier, personality psychology needs to attend to goals on at least three different levels of abstraction, that of universals, groups, and individuals. Although there is some transfer between these three levels of abstraction, they are at least partially independent of each other. To the cry of, "How can you generalize from that idiographic study?", the equally appropriate response is, "How can you particularize from that group or population study?" Work on all three levels of analysis is necessary, and the fact that inquiry at one level does not automatically answer questions at the other two levels is not a telling criticism.

2. A second criticism is that there is no such thing as a unique trait or element. Emmerich (1968) says that, "Any unique attribute is also common, for the only way that the two might be distinguished is in terms of the nature of the distribution of individuals on the attribute" (p. 679), and suggests that the distinction between common and unique elements is not worth perpetuating.

This criticism is certainly technically correct, in that any trait or category, once formed, can then be applied to all other individuals. The idiographer's question, though, is whether the individual will be studied in enough detail to permit the *formulation* of idiographic traits and classes of behavior, or

whether the individual will be described solely in terms of a prior set of nomothetic categories.

Consider the case of Elizabeth Bathori, a Polish countess who was discovered in 1610 to have murdered 650 young girls, so that she might renew her own youth by bathing in their blood. The category of acts of "killing young girls in order to bathe in their blood" is one that can be meaningfully created and used for this individual. Once this category is formulated, it can then be applied to other persons, although it is likely to be relatively uninformative.

Creating concepts and categories that apply to specific individuals is certainly what Allport means by idiographic. Emmerich is correct in that any idiographic concept or category can, once formulated, be applied to other individuals. Over time, any new concept or category can become a nomothetic one, depending upon the range of individuals it is applied to. In sum, if a concept or category is created for the purpose of describing a specific individual, it seems appropriate to call this idiographic, with the recognition that if it becomes more widely used, it might then become a nomothetic concept.

3. Criticism: The study of individual cases is useful for generating hypotheses, but not for testing them. For example, "We can surmise (or, if you will, intuit) general laws from a single case in the hypothesis-forming phase of scientific endeavour, but we can verify them only by resorting to experimental or statistical inquiry or both. . . . As excellent a way as it is to make discoveries, the study of an individual cannot be used to establish laws" (Holt, 1962, pp. 396-397).

This criticism seems to be based on several misunderstandings. First, it assumes that there are only general laws, and not laws applying to particular cases (e.g., Herbst, 1970). Second, it seems to imply that experimental and statistical inquiry cannot be carried out at the level of the individual case. It is true that universal laws can usually not be established through the study of a particular individual, but laws of the individual can be formulated and tested through rigorous experimental and statistical methods at the level of the individual case (e.g., Chassan, 1967, 1979; Hersen & Barlow, 1976; Kratochwill, 1978). This criticism is clearly outdated in light of the extensive developments in single-case designs over the last two decades.

4. Criticism: It is not only impractical, but literally impossible to conduct an idiographic study of every individual. If individuals are as dissimilar as Allport suggests, then "Every sparrow would have to be separately identified, named and intuitively understood" (Murray, 1938, p. 715). If all individuals are unique, then it would be necessary to formulate "as many theories as there are persons in the universe" (Levy, 1970, p. 76).

This criticism raises an important question about the costs and benefits of detailed studies of individuals. Granted that there are not sufficient

resources for studying every individual in the universe, it is still entirely feasible to conduct detailed idiographic studies of individuals of particular interest to us, including historical figures such as Adolf Hitler, Sigmund Freud, Virginia Woolf, or Vincent Van Gogh; particular clinical patients; or other individuals of special theoretical, personal, or practical interest. We don't have the time and money to study all individuals, but neither do we have the resources to test all possible theories. It is necessary to be selective, both in theoretical inquiries, and in studies of specific individuals.

5. Criticism: There is nothing wrong with the idiographic study of individuals, but it is not science. Levy (1970), for example, argues that the meaning of data about individual cases "can only be found within the context of laws that hold for all individuals. . . It is not possible to go beyond this and remain within the confines of science" (p. 76). Nunnally (1978) states that "the idiographists may be entirely correct, but if they are, it is a sad day for psychology. Idiography is an antiscience point of view: It discourages the search for general laws and instead encourages the description of particular phenomena (people)" (p. 548).

Is there some conflict or contradiction between the study of individual persons and the scientific endeavor? Is the study of individual persons more properly the concern of the novelist, the biographer, the historian, or perhaps the clinician? It is undeniably true that historians and biographers are concerned with the description and interpretation of individual lives. There are, however, many tasks of generalizing about, systematically describing and measuring, explaining, predicting, and attempting to change the course of individual lives that seem properly to fall within the domain of the social and behavioral sciences.

If the thrust or intent of this criticism is that it is impossible to apply systematic, reliable, quantitative, or experimental methods to the study of individual cases, this criticism has been refuted by the proliferation of quantitative and experimental studies of the single case (e.g., Davidson & Costello, 1969; Hersen & Barlow, 1976; Kratochwill, 1978).

Finally, the suggestion that science as a whole is not concerned with the study of particulars is clearly untenable, as this criterion would rule out significant portions of geology, astronomy and cosmology, and evolutionary biology. These sciences are concerned not solely with general principles and processes but also with topics, respectively, such as the structure and evolution of this particular earth, the structure and origins of our solar system, and the particular sequence of species leading to the evolution of man.

6. Criticism: The abstract argument for an idiographic approach sounds appealing, but there aren't adequate methods for carrying it out. "The problem with concluding that an idiographic approach represents the path to truth, however, has always been that one is never sure what to do next"

(Bem & Allen, 1974, p. 511). Allport himself has been criticized on the grounds that, with several exceptions, such as *Letters from Jenny* (Allport, 1965), much of his own research has employed nomothetic rather than idiographic methods (Hall & Lindzey, 1978, p. 472).

If there are not adequate methods for carrying out idiographic research, this is a serious criticism. The following section attempts to demonstrate that this criticism is unjustified by outlining a substantial array of methods and techniques that may be used in the pursuit of idiographic objectives.

A Survey of Idiographic Methods

The thoughtful reader might get suspicious after reading the discussion of idiographic methods often found in textbooks in personality and clinical psychology. After a brief characterization of the idiographic approach, there is a discussion of the same limited and somewhat out-of-date set of examples, such as Allport and Vernon's matching studies of expressive behavior (1933), Baldwin's (1942) "personal structure analysis," Q-methodology (Stephenson, 1953), and Kelly's (1955) role construct repertory test. If the idiographic method is such a good idea, why aren't there more examples, and more up-to-date examples of it?

The aim of this section is to draw together a number of more recent lines of research that can be fairly characterized as idiographic. We shall start by briefly reviewing the list of idiographic (or "morphogenic") methods proposed by Allport, and then make additions to the list in light of recent methodological developments. (By 1962, Allport was referring to these methods as "morphogenic," meaning accounting for structured pattern. In spite of Allport's suggestion, the term "morphogenic" never caught on in psychology, and is rarely used today. Idiographic refers to idiosyncratic traits or elements, as well as to structured pattern within the individual case, and thus has a broader meaning than morphogenic. For these reasons, this discussion will refer to "idiographic" rather than to "morphogenic" methods.)

Allport's List of Idiographic Methods

1. The first method is that of matching, in which the investigator matches different records of personal expression with each other. For example, the task might consist of matching particular case records with test files for the same individual, or of determining which sample of handwriting goes along with which voice. "The method requires a judge to place together different records of *one* personality from an assortment of records taken from many personalities. The records may be of any type: life-histories, photographs, specimens of handwriting, scores on various tests, artistic productions, or anything else" (Allport, 1961, p. 387). Such methods are

employed in Allport and Vernon's (1933) studies of expressive behavior, and reviewed in Vernon (1936).

2. A second technique is that of "personal structure analysis," or content analysis, which examines the frequency with which ideas are associated in verbal material. Baldwin (1942), for example, applied this method to a collection of more than 100 letters written by an older lady, Jenny, in the last years of her life. If Jenny mentioned one subject, such as her son or money, what other topics did she tend to mention at the same time? Baldwin found that Jenny "was highly jealous of her son; she was paranoid concerning her relationships with women; she had a strong esthetic interest; and she was scrupulous in matters of money" (Allport, 1961, p. 369). More elaborate computerized analyses have been conducted with these same letters (Allport, 1965; Paige, 1966). A more recent example of content analysis was used to assess Theodore Dreiser's implicit theory of personality, as reflected in the frequency with which sets of attributes were attributed to the characters in his novels (Rosenberg & Jones, 1972).

3. On the basis of extensive interviewing with a single clinical patient, an individualized questionnaire or set of items can be constructed for this individual which may not directly apply to any other individuals, but which can be used for assessing this person's improvement or deterioration over time (Shapiro, 1961).

4. A fourth idiographic method is to search for the number and range of "essential characteristics" or "major structural foci" in a life. For example, Perry suggested that William James had eight dominant trends (1936, chapters 90-91), and Allport (1962) found that students could describe their friends with an average of 7.2 essential characteristics.

5. A fifth method is a Self-Anchoring Scale, devised by Kilpatrick and Cantril (1960). An individual is asked to imagine the very best or ideal state of affairs and then the very worst state of affairs in some domain. These conditions are placed on a ladder with the best scaled at 10, and the worst at the bottom. The subject is then asked where he/she perceives him-/herself in terms of this self-constructed scale—at present; five years ago; five years from now; and so on.

Allport (1962), also described what he characterizes as a set of "semi-morphogenic methods," which combine morphogenic and dimensional features, or, in our language, idiographic and nomothetic features. A number of these follow.

6. A sixth approach is to use a standard rating scale to assess only those characteristics perceived as of central importance in an individual's personality. In an early application of this approach, Conrad (1932) had teachers rate students on 231 common traits, in which the median reliability coefficient of the ratings was .48. When teachers rated only those traits they saw as centrally important in the child's personality, the reliability of their

ratings increased to .95. The approach of focusing only on those characteristics perceived as most consistent for the individual has since been pursued in greater depth (e.g., Bem & Allen, 1974; Kenrick & Stringfield, 1980), although the presumed superiority of this partially idiographic technique has recently been questioned on methodological grounds (Rushton, Jackson, & Paunonen, 1981), and then defended (Kenrick & Braver, 1982).

7. Another partially idiographic method is Kelly's Role Construct Repertory Test. Respondents are asked to identify how two individuals, such as mother and sister, are alike, and how they differ from a third individual, such as wife. This method is intended to reveal the constructs an individual commonly uses in perceptions of self and others. The study of constructs used in person perception has since been pursued more extensively by Rosenberg (1977) and others.

8. The ipsative method is another semi-idiographic approach, in which the individual's scores on a certain measure are considered in relation to his scores in other areas, rather than in relation to group scores or averages on this single test (Broverman, 1960, 1962). Questions of a "forced choice" format may indicate an individual's relative preferences among different items, but not reveal anything about their absolute strength.

9. The Allport-Vernon-Lindzey *Study of Values* (1960) is another example of an ipsative approach, which indicates the relative importance of six common values (e.g., economic, theoretic, religious) for an individual.

10. The Q-sort method (Stephenson, 1953) is a technique in which a standard set of propositions are arranged according to their relative salience for the individual subject. This method has been developed and extensively applied by Block (1961, 1971), and also utilized in the work of Bem and Funder (1978).

11. A final method listed by Allport is that of inverse factor analysis, illustrated in a study by Nunnally (1955) in which 60 statements selected for their particular relevance to a single woman were factor-analyzed, yielding three fairly independent factors within her self-concept.

Allport intended his list to be "illustrative rather than exhaustive" (1962, p. 415), and hoped that it would stimulate the invention of idiographic methods. He would not have been disappointed, as there has been an enormous outpouring of work since the early 1960s that can contribute to idiographic analysis, although the methods are not always presented under that label.

An Updated Survey of Idiographic Methods

The following survey is intended to illustrate the variety of methods that may be used in pursuit of the idiographic goal of understanding those elements, structures, and relations that are particular to the individual.

Some of the methods have quantitative or experimental features that make them fit easily within the boundaries of most conceptions of social-scientific methods. Not all of the methods, however, have equal degrees of rigor and control. Other methods, such as the case study method, might be seen as partially overlapping both the humanities and the social sciences. Regardless of their classification, all of these methods can, and should, be employed more rigorously than they often have been, and all can contribute to the idiographic goal of increasing our understanding of the particularities of individual lives.

1. The first additional class of idiographic methods is that of quantitative descriptive methods applied to the single case. These methods are idiographic in that data is collected only about the individual case at a number of points over time. Descriptive life history statistics could contain measures of the total occurrences, the frequency, or the duration of different kinds of behaviors, activities, and experiences. Such measures might be taken over a limited time period, such as a day or a week, or over the entire life span.

Examples of descriptive statistics about individuals are to be found in ecological psychology, which reports on the frequency of different kinds of behavior in different settings (Barker, 1968; Barker & Wright, 1951), in time-budget research, reporting the amount of time spent through the day in sleeping, working, eating, socialization, and other activities (Sorokin & Berger, 1939; Robinson, 1977), and in time-series research, which monitors the frequency or intensity of classes of behavior over time (Kratochwill, 1978).

2. A second type of idiographic method consists of intraindividual correlational methods, in which variables are correlated within the single individual. For example, Metcalfe (1956) analyzed the relations between a young woman's meetings with her mother and her asthma attacks. This patient was interviewed 66 times over an 85-day period, and each day was rated as to the presence or absence of asthmatic symptoms. To test the hypothesis that meetings with her mother were connected with her asthma attacks, "the 85 days were divided into those with asthma ... and those without asthma; the same days were separated into those during which the patient was within 24 hours of having seen her mother, and the remainder in which she had not been in contact with her mother for the preceding 24 hours. It was then found that of a total of 23 days in which the patient had been with her mother within 24 hours, nine (39%) were days with asthma in contrast to six asthma days out of a total of 62 days (9.7%) when she had not been in contact with her mother over the previous 24 hours. An application of the 2×2 chi-square test to these data yields a chi-square value of ten, which is significant beyond the .01 level" (Chassan, 1979, p. 393). More complex examples of intraindividual correlational analysis involve the *O*- and *P*-techniques of factor analysis outlined by Cattell (1946).

and illustrated by Cattell (1966), Bath, Daly, and Nesselroade (1976), and Luborsky and Mintz (1972).

3. Perhaps the most extensively developed mode of idiographic research since Allport's review is that of single-case experimental designs, in which variables are manipulated and causal relations investigated *within* single cases. This search for causal relations within the single case, which may or may not apply to any other individuals, is idiographic in the purest sense of the term, and corresponds to Allport's interest in the structural relation of variables within individuals.

The essential idea of single-case experimental designs is to establish a baseline for one or more classes of behavior, and then systematically to manipulate independent variables in ways that will enable one to draw relatively unambiguous inferences about the causal relation between the independent variables and target behaviors. The literature on single-case experimental designs is so extensive that it would be impossible to review it here, but useful reviews are provided by Chassan (1967/1979), Gambrill (1977), Hersen and Barlow (1976), Kazdin (1980), Kratochwill (1978), and Jayaratne and Levy (1979).

4. The case study method is another significant and widely used idiographic method. The case study may be based upon evidence obtained from interviews, projective or objective tests, observations in the natural environment, longitudinal studies, personal documents, public archives, the testimony of associates, experiments, or any other method capable of producing relevant information (Runyan, 1982a). A case study can be defined as "a *reconstruction* and *interpretation*, based on the best evidence available of part of the story of a person's life" (Bromley, 1977, p. 163). Case studies can effectively incorporate and organize a large amount of idiographic information about a particular person and his or her circumstances.

It is sometimes argued that the case study method is not "scientific" in some sense of the term. This has meant different things to different commentators, such as dependence on unreliable retrospective reports, or using qualitative rather than quantitative data, or, perhaps most fundamentally, that there is inadequate "control" and a limited ability to rule out competing causal interpretations of observed relations. To respond briefly to these criticisms, the case study *may* rely on retrospective reports, but need not do so, since case studies can be constructed with evidence collected through *any* method of data collection, such as direct observation in the natural environment, personal documents, archival material, or prospective longitudinal studies. Retrospective methods are only one of the techniques that may, but need not, be used in the construction of case studies.

Even though case studies may contain quantitative data, they also often rely on qualitative data presented in narrative form. For social scientific

purposes, such narrative methods have been criticized for their "lack of reliability" (Runyan, 1980). In fact, we would be suspicious if two individuals produced the same narrative account of a single individual. This lack of total reliability is, however, not the same as no reliability, in that through a process of critical examination, it is possible to assess rigorously the evidence, inferences, generalizations, interpretations, and conclusions of narrative accounts of persons. Although more flexible than standard scientific methods, narrative methods can be used with sufficient controls so that they are of considerable scientific value. The rational and social procedures through which case studies can be constructed, critically examined, and revised have been discussed by a number of authors, ranging from Murray's (1948) use of a diagnostic council, to Bromley's (1977) elaboration of a quasi-judicial method for the conduct of case studies, to Horowitz's (1979) discussion of sequential procedures for idiographic description and interpretation in configurational analysis.

It is sometimes claimed that the case study method simply allows the researcher to select out facts consistent with his or her theoretical biases. No doubt this happens at times, but *any* method can be poorly used. Although any interpretation of a case can be proposed, not all of them stand up under critical examination (Runyan, 1981). The adequacy of alternative interpretations can be assessed through an adversarial or quasi-judicial procedure in which experts with competing theoretical or practical interests critically examine the evidence, inferences, and arguments in alternative formulations of the case (Bromley, 1977; Campbell, 1975).

To address the third criticism, that case studies are not sufficiently controlled to rule out competing causal explanations, there is some merit to this charge, as naturalistic case studies are, compared to between-group experiments, relatively ineffective in ruling out competing causal explanation. Does this, however, mean that they are "not scientific?" It carries this implication only if one believes that developing causal generalizations is the sole or primary objective of scientific endeavor. If one believes that science is concerned with the full range of tasks of describing, explaining, predicting, and intentionally changing phenomena, as well as generalizing about them, then the case study method has considerable scientific value, as it is undoubtedly useful for describing the particulars of persons and their circumstances, for conveying explanations or interpretations of their experience, for presenting patterns and trends in the individual case useful for making predictions, and for providing information on the individual useful in guiding intervention efforts. Limitations of space prevent a full elaboration of these arguments here, but the debate over the strengths and limitations of the case study method in the scientific enterprise is examined in greater detail in Runyan (1982b).

5. Another recent contribution to idiographic methodology is a procedure

for personality measurement outlined by Lamiell (1981, in press). Lamiell proposes a strategy for idiographic personality measurement in which the meaning of a person's score on an attribute is not influenced by the scores of other individuals, but is directly dependent upon the range of alternative values that could be assigned to the person within the constraints of the situation and the measurement operation. Mary, for example, can be assessed on the attribute "compliant vs. rebellious" in relation to 11 possible activities over a one-week period. The perceived behavioral alternatives are (1) drinking beer or liquor, (2) engaging in premarital sex, (3) studying or reading, (4) participating in extracurricular activities, and so on. Her actual behavior for the week could include all rebellious acts or all compliant acts, and thus her behavior can be scored according to its place within this range of possibilities. Her idiographic score of .802 on the attribute "compliant vs. rebellious" is a product of her actions, the perceived relevance of each act to compliance or rebelliousness, and her score in relation to her range of possible scores, given this set of measurement procedures.

This idiographic measurement strategy is not dependent upon observations of any other individuals. "It is a rationale by which the measured status of an individual on a single attribute at a given point in time hinges entirely on information available for *that* individual at *that* point in time with respect to a set of empirical referents for *that* attribute" (Lamiell, 1981, p. 282). The essence of the strategy is to outline a range of possible actions and score values for an individual over a set of situations or occasions, and then to represent the individual's score in relation to the range of values seen as possible for that individual within that range of situations. Lamiell (1981) provides a mathematical formalization of this idiographic measurement strategy, and a discussion of its implications for personality psychology.

6. Another set of idiographic methods or procedures are those concerned with idiographic prediction. Idiographic prediction may be defined as prediction made about a case based on data from that particular case and no other cases. It is possible to identify four different predictive strategies, distinguished by the number of cases used as a data base. According to this classification, there are: (1) idiographic predictions, based on data from the case in question and no other cases; (2) comparative predictions, which draw upon data from several other comparable cases, cases judged to be similar on relevant dimensions; (3) statistical predictions, based on frequencies for a large number of similar cases; and (4) nomothetic predictions, based on general laws, which presumably are derived from, and apply to, a whole population of cases.

Idiographic prediction is related to, but also distinguishably different from, clinical prediction, as defined in the extensive clinical vs. statistical prediction controversy (e.g., Gough, 1962; Holt, 1978; Meehl, 1954, 1973; Sawyer, 1966; Wiggins, 1973). In this literature, clinical refers to the source

of data (clinical judgment rather than psychometric data) and method of data combination (clinical analysis rather than statistical combination). In idiographic prediction, I am referring to a strategy of prediction that relies on data about the single case, rather than to clinical or statistical methods for collecting or extrapolating from such data.

The relations between idiographic, comparative case, statistical, and nomothetic predictions are suggested in Figure 2.

The common objective of all four predictive strategies is to predict the contents of Cell 2, which is the future of the case or cases under study. To illustrate these four logics of prediction, they will be used to make predictions about a cold, unfeminine, severely disturbed woman (given the forbidding label of Mrs. X), who was being seen in therapy as part of a research project on prediction in psychotherapy. "The patient, a 41-year-old married woman and artist, was referred for psychiatric hospitalization because of panics, agitated depressive outbursts, and disturbed histrionic behavior bordering on the totally disorganized, which had risen to an intolerable crescendo during the several months of her return to live with her husband after a five-year separation" (Sargent, Horwitz, Wallerstein, & Applebaum, 1968, p. 71).

The logic of idiographic prediction is to make inferences about the content of Cell 2 on the basis of information in Cell 1. These inferences may be based upon the assumption of stability, the assumption of continuity in current trends, or upon the application of idiographic patterns derived from intensive study of Cell 1. In purely idiographic prediction, no explicit use is made of previously established laws or generalizations, or of knowledge of comparable cases (the information in Cells 3 to 8). For example, predictions about Mrs. X based on the assumption of stability would be that her interests in art, and her difficulties with a traditionally feminine role,

	Predictors	Outcomes
Individual Case	1	2
Comparable Examples	3	4
Statistical Correlations	5	6
Laws, Theories	7	8

Figure 2. Four Strategies of Prediction

will continue. A prediction based upon the stability of idiographic patterns and sequences would be that sexual relations will continue to lead to psychosomatic symptoms.

The logic of comparative case prediction is based upon the assumption that if Cell 1 is enough like the example(s) in Cell 3, then Cell 2 will resemble Cell 4. According to this predictive strategy, predictions would be made about Mrs. X based on knowledge of the experience of several women with similar characteristics in similar circumstances. The logic of statistical prediction is to assume that the relation between variables measured and correlated in Cells 5 and 6 can be used to make inferences from Cell 1 to variables of interest in Cell 2. As an example of a statistical prediction about Mrs. X, since she is a white 41-year-old female, it might be predicted that her likely life expectancy is something like 40 more years. Finally, the logic of nomothetic or theoretical prediction is to assume that the content of Cell 2 can be deduced from a knowledge of the conditions in Cell 1 in conjunction with a theoretical statement linking Cells 7 and 8. An example of a theory-based prediction about Mrs. X made from a psychoanalytic perspective is that, "If treated by supportive-expressive psychotherapy and if limited goals are fulfilled, then the patient will break off the present marital situation (because) the improvement of adaptive functioning resulting from supportive psychotherapy leads to a decrease in the patient's self-destructive behavior" (Sargent, et al., 1968, pp. 88-89). Regardless of the limitations of this particular example, there does seem to be a meaningful conceptual distinction between these four different strategies of prediction, with idiographic prediction being one of the four major strategies, and a strategy particularly useful for making predictions about individuals.

7. One final idiographic approach is that of "configurational analysis" (Horowitz, 1979), which is a strategy for recognizing patterns of stability and change in personality functioning. One aspect of configurational analysis is concerned with identifying a set of recurrent states within an individual, and the conditions leading to transitions between states. Each state is defined by a particular pattern of conscious experience and behavior, such as in an anxious state, an enraged state, or a depressed state.

States may be identified with general nomothetic terms, or they can also be identified by idiographic terms specific to the individual. For example, Janice, a 24-year-old college graduate, entered therapy shortly after her younger brother died, and complained of depressions, which were characterized by apathy, withdrawal with feelings of fogginess and unreality, and overeating. This might be described in a general way as "depressed mood," but it is also possible to use individualized state descriptions which go beyond generalities to individual nuances of experience and behavior. A more individualized description of Janice's state that she used in describing herself was "hurt and not working." "She could recognize herself as entering

and leaving this state. When it occurred, she felt dull and lonely, had bodily concerns, and tended to withdraw from social contacts and life tasks. When she entered this state during the treatment situation, she could be observed to mumble and trail off" (Horowitz, 1979, p. 36). Another of her states was dramatic animation, in which she pretended to be cheerful and lighthearted. This was identified, again in her own words, as her "tra-la-la" state. Other significant and identifiable states for Janice were "hurt but working," crying to elicit attention, competitiveness, acute self-disgust, and an ideal state of feeling competent and authentic.

After a set of recurrent states is identified, it is then possible to search for patterns of transition between states, or for those conditions leading to entry or exit from each state. In the case of Janice, if she was confronted in therapy with difficult material, she would often shift from her tra-la-la state to a hurt-but-working state. If the material was too difficult to handle or overwhelming, she could enter a state of acute self-disgust. On the other hand, if she coped well with it or defended successfully against it, she would return to the tra-la-la state. In outside life, if abandoned by someone she was attached to, she would shift from her tra-la-la state to a hurt-and-not-working state. If someone else was present, she might shift from hurt-and-not-working to a state of crying to elicit attention.

Horowitz outlines a system of states and state transitions for Janice, consisting of six distinguishable states, and the conditions leading to transition from each state to the others. This is an excellent example of idiographic analysis in that it is composed of idiographic states and an idiographic pattern of relations between the states, resulting in cycles or systems of state transitions for a particular individual. Through the use of videotapes of therapy sessions, these idiographic analyses can be critically assessed by having other observers see if they can reliably identify the emergence and disappearance of certain states and the conditions responsible for transitions between states.

The complete strategy of configurational analysis also includes attention to images of self and role relations, and processes of information control, as well as to recurrent states and patterns of state transition. Horowitz's book *States of Mind: Analysis of Change in Psychotherapy* (1979) is recommended as an illustration of the possibilities of complex and systematically evaluated idiographic analysis.

8. This is obviously not a complete inventory of idiographic methods. Additional methods that are idiographic, or that have idiographic aspects, would include psychoanalytic methods such as free association and dream interpretation for investigating the unconscious meanings of events and experiences for the particular individual; techniques of behavioral assessment; the analysis of personal documents, such as diaries, journals, and letters (Allport, 1942; Wrightsman, 1981); the analysis of "possibility-pro-

cessing structures" used by individuals in generating perceived possibilities and choosing among them (Tyler, 1978); and subspecies of the case study method such as assisted autobiography (De Waele, 1971; De Waele & Harré, 1979), and psychobiographical analysis (Anderson, 1981; Mack, 1971; Runyan, 1982b, 1982c). The reader may well be able to identify additional idiographic methods, and better yet, develop new and better ones.

This review has revealed a surprisingly extensive list of methods that can properly be described as idiographic. These are not isolated trends, as there seems to be a growing interest in idiographic goals and methods across a variety of theoretical orientations. We can find examples of phenomenological, trait, psychodynamic, behavioral, and cognitive theorists all attempting to develop methods and procedures capable of understanding the particularities of individuals and their circumstances. This widespread work on idiographic methods is an exciting development, as it provides a valuable complement to nomothetic work on understanding persons in general and the differential goal of understanding differences between groups of people by personality characteristics, sex, race, ethnicity, class and culture.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper began by discussing some of the conceptual and theoretical issues associated with the idiographic-nomothetic debate, and attempted to embed this debate within the larger issue of the three distinctive levels of analysis in the social sciences. The next section reviewed and responded to a number of prevalent criticisms of the idiographic approach. Finally, Allport's survey of idiographic methods was updated and extended.

No matter how much progress is made at the level of understanding universal processes, or at the level of understanding group differences, there is much that will remain unknown about particular individuals, since these three levels of analysis are at least partially independent. Universal and group generalizations, can, without doubt, illuminate some facets of individual lives, but there are many other problems in describing, understanding, making predictions about, and intentionally changing the course of individual lives that cannot be accomplished without the use of idiographic methods. If we aspire to develop a science of psychology capable of contributing to an understanding of individual persons, then, as a supplement to relatively well-established nomothetic and differential methods, greater attention must be paid to the development and utilization of idiographic research methods.

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