

Oneself as Another: Hermeneutics and Personality Assessment

Marvin W. Acklin, Ph.D., ABPP, ABAP

Abstract

The scientific and philosophical background of personality assessment is examined, including review of hermeneutic methods in the human sciences. Following a keyword search and psychological test usage survey, it was concluded that the nomothetic scientific orientation predominates in forensic psychology. A topic debated since the middle 19th century, the triumph of the nomothetic has implications for personality assessment models, interpretive methods, and description of human lives. This paper contextualizes personality assessment in 19th and 20th century hermeneutical philosophy, including the status of the nomothetic/idiographic divide. Hermeneutic philosophy--represented in the work of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Ricoeur--offers rich and relevant foundations of the art and science of personality assessment. The paper advances a research program and integrative methodology for interpreting human lives. Accommodations for an interpretive personality assessment are proposed, utilizing traditional and innovative applications. Hermeneutic praxis informs personality assessment methods reflecting the dialogical and recursive process of interpretation, application of the hermeneutic circle to assessment data, and the self-understanding of the practitioner. Forensic personology fosters epistemological and methodological integration with a focus on the whole person in the legal context.

Introduction

This paper examines the scientific and philosophical background of personality assessment by examining the human science foundations and the idiographic/nomothetic divide in personality assessment science and practice. Accommodations of interpretive methods to forensic psychology will be discussed, with proposals for a research program of standard and innovative methods of representing and interpreting human lives.

The accompanying paper (Acklin, 2017) examined the background and orientation of traditional personality assessment represented in the Society for Personality Assessment and *Journal of Personality Assessment*. It is the official editorial policy of the *Journal of Personality Assessment* "to publish papers on the methods and processes related to the psychological assessment of personality... [with] the effective integration of nomothetic empirical findings

with the idiographic requirements of practice”... (<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/author>). Traditional, integrative personality assessment maintains commitments to the understanding of persons holistically conceived utilizing multi-source data to form integrated pictures of individual lives, with a focus on experiential and first-person perspectives. A keyword search survey of the forensic relevance of personality assessment paradigms (Wiggins, 2003) revealed the underrepresentation of the “personological” paradigm. This model, based on individual case histories and idiographic personality assessment methods, emphasizes holistic, phenomenological, and narrative conceptions of individuality and subjectivity.

A review of test usage surveys by forensic psychologists confirmed the decline of idiographically-based methods over the past 20 years, primarily out of psychologists’ concerns about their scientific and legal admissibility status. These findings expose epistemic and methodological rifts in assessment psychology based on the predominance of objectivist scientific models: the “triumph of the nomothetic.” The current paper examines the historical and philosophical context of personality assessment and advances some proposals to restore an integrative nomothetic-idiographic *forensic personology*.

Philosophical Foundations of the Human Sciences

Nineteenth and 20th century psychological science was dominated by objectivist natural science based on logical positivist foundations (Walsh, Teo, & Baydala, 2014). Columbia’s Robert S. Woodworth typified the stance of positivism in American psychology in 1949, asserting that psychologists “must follow the lead of physics, chemistry and physiology, and transform psychology into an experimental science” (Pandora, 1997, p. 48).

Concerns about the differentiation between the natural and human sciences--their objects of study, methods, and validity of knowledge--date to the middle of the 19th century reflecting efforts to achieve the correct self-understanding of the humanities in relation to the natural sciences (Grondin, 1995). In his commemorative speech of 1862, the celebrated scientist and philosopher Helmholtz described the methods and attitudes distinguishing the natural from the human sciences. Helmholtz distinguished between logical and artistic-instinctive induction (Gadamer, 1998) as respective foundations of the disciplines. Helmholtz found natural sciences “to be characterized by the practice of logical induction which leads to universal rules and laws. The humanities, on the other hand, achieve their knowledge more by means of a psychological feeling of tact” (German: *psychologische Taktgefühl*; Grondin, 1995, p. 87). Science based on logical positivism came to dominate American personality psychology (Pandora, 1997).

At the same time, critiques of positivism and scientism in psychology emerged in the late 19th century and entered mainstream American psychological literature (e.g., Mahoney, 1989; Packer, 1985), generating controversies in both philosophy and psychology (Bernstein, 1988; Fishman, 1999; Pandora, 1997). Critics of objectivist science, including Gordon Allport, argued that the search for universal laws and essences and application of natural science models to human experience and behavior introduced critical problems in both theory and practice. The following section will survey the background and foundations for the application of human science (interpretive, hermeneutic) approaches to personality assessment.

Hermeneutics: Methodology of the Human Sciences

Hermeneutics can loosely be defined as theory of the interpretation of meaning. Its modern origin is the early 19th century.

Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material. (Hermeneutics, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics>).

Hermeneutics is explicitly concerned with the meaning of human expressions. It concerns the methods which comprise the effort to understand.

The realization that human expressions contain a meaningful component, which has to be recognized as such by a subject and transposed into his or her own system of values and meanings, has given rise to the problem of hermeneutics: how this process is possible and how to render accounts of subjectively intended meaning objective in the face of the fact that they are mediated by the interpreter's own subjectivity. (Bleicher, 1980, p.1).

Hermeneutical theory focuses on the problem of a general theory of interpretation for the human sciences. *Hermeneutic philosophy* addresses the link between the subject and object and the interpreter's necessary preunderstanding in an ongoing dialogue between subject and object and past and present. *Critical hermeneutics* considers extra-linguistic factors which constitute the context of thought and action, especially those that involve social and historical structures of domination.

The interpretation of texts has been a preoccupation since classical antiquity. Emerging in the Protestant Reformation, hermeneutical developments endeavored to establish interpretive methods for Biblical texts. Textual hermeneutics (e.g., Schleiermacher and others) evolved into philosophical hermeneutics, e.g., in the work of Martin Heidegger (1962) and Hans Gadamer (1998). Departing from strictly textual interpretation, Dilthey decisively extended hermeneutics to understanding all human expressions (Gergen, 1988; Ricoeur, 1991). These approaches contested the application of natural science methods to the understanding of human life.

Schleiermacher. The preeminent theologian of the 19th century, F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) may be considered the father of "methodological hermeneutics." Schleiermacher established guidelines for the conduct of interpretation, developing a *Kunstlehre* ("the systematization of formal procedures to assist the art of understanding in its endeavor to arrive at certainty of knowledge," Bleicher, 1980, p. 10). Schleiermacher laid down some basic rules for the interpretation of texts; namely, the "grammatical" [understanding the author's cultural, linguistic, historical, and literary context] and the "technical" [the psychological effort to understand or "divine" the voice of the person in service of the person's individuality]. As a Romantic theologian and philosopher, Schleiermacher "insisted on the priority of feeling in understanding texts. For Schleiermacher, the receptivity and responsiveness of the imagination through their expressions is the medium of interpretation and understanding (Nelson, 2010). Bridging the particular with the general, Schleiermacher affirmed that "everyone carries a bit of everyone else within him; so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself...the individuality of the author can be directly grasped by, as it were, transforming oneself into the other" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 189). In short, the aim of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is how to access the mind of the author of a human expression ("the *mens auctoris*"—the author's communicative intent) through technical and psychological methods.

Schleiermacher broadened the scope of textual hermeneutics, asserting that hermeneutics

should not be limited to classical studies or sacred texts, but may be applied to the works of every author, through the application of general principles. Schleiermacher originated the concept of the “hermeneutic circle”: the dialectical process of interpretation in understanding the meanings and intentions of the author. “Because understanding inevitably involves reference to that which is already known, [in relation to the object of interpretation] it operates in a circular, dialectical fashion” (Woolfolk, Sasser, & Messer, 1988, p. 7). From a methodological point of view, the hermeneutic circle is “a polar dialectical description of hermeneutics” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 190) --referring to the idea that one's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts and one's understanding of each individual part by reference to the whole. Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutic_circle). The movement from textual interpretation to interpretation of all human expressions constituted the shift from “regional” to “universal” hermeneutics. Although criticized by his successors, Schleiermacher's attitudes and methods still maintain a significant following and have direct application to interpretation in personality assessment.

Dilthey: A powerful influence emerged in the hermeneutics of German philosopher and psychologist, Wilhelm Dilthey (1883-1911). Dilthey was Schleiermacher's biographer. Dilthey and his contemporaries (the Neo-Kantians Rickert and Windelbrand) attempted to develop a post-metaphysical epistemology, drawing a distinction between the natural sciences (German: *Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (German: *Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey focused his entire career in the effort to establish foundations of validity for the human sciences as rigorous and impartial as the hypothetical-deductive method in the *Naturwissenschaften* (Clancy, 1999).

Dilthey distinguished between two different types of psychology: descriptive (human scientific) and analytic (natural scientific). He argued that psychology's proper subject matter was human experience, requiring a methodology substantively different from the natural sciences. Dilthey introduced psychology to the problems of making intelligible the nature, development, and destiny of the individual life. In contrast to the natural sciences, whose goal is “explanation” (German: *Erklaren*), the goal of the human sciences is “understanding” (German: *Verstehen*), “describing and interpreting the meaning of human action” (Walsh, Teo, & Baydala, 2014, p. 27).

In contrast to the natural sciences, for Dilthey, like Schleiermacher, the human sciences presuppose “a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 49). For Dilthey, the understanding of human expressions aimed to reconstruct “the meaning of an action by placing oneself as fully in the position of the actor as possible” (<http://understandingsociety.blogspot.com/2011/07/dilthey-on-human-sciences.html>). The whole person is the focus of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. “Dilthey set as his goal the empathic understanding of the inner unity of the whole person” (McAdams, 1997, p. 5). The methodological distinction between the natural and human sciences was worked out fully by Dilthey, paralleling Windelband and other Neo-Kantian philosophers who coined the terms “nomothetic” for sciences which search for laws and “idiographic” for the descriptive study of individuality (von Wright, 1971, p. 5). This laid the foundation for a philosophical and methodological debate that continues until today.

Dilthey's hermeneutic process is “reproductive.” He recognized that understanding the composition and unity of a text cannot be solely based on a formal logical or stylistic analysis. He proposed that understanding must be based on

understanding the “inner form” of the human expression, which involves some kind of reproduction or reconstruction, based on a living relation to the production. “Understanding becomes ‘one’s own recreation of the living nexus of thoughts’” (Dilthey cited in Bultmann, 1950, p. 71), recognizing that the author and interpreter “do not stand over against each other as incomparable facts,” but “both have been formed on the basis of universal human nature, whereby the community of human beings with one another in speech and understanding is possible” (p. 71).

Dilthey’s hermeneutics (described as “the art of understanding”), takes over the presuppositions of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics. Dilthey was concerned “whether understanding the unique can be raised to the level of general validity” (Bultmann, 1991, p. 138). For Dilthey the human connection between the author and the interpreter forms the “preunderstanding” that makes interpretation possible.

Heidegger and Bultmann. In the twentieth century, the scope of hermeneutics was dramatically transformed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). Martin Heidegger’s transformation of methodological to ontological hermeneutics in his ontology of facticity and Part 1 of *Being and Time* (1927), rejected Schleiermacher and Dilthey’s romantic presuppositions. Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology shifts interpretation from texts to the explication of *Dasein*’s primordial self-understanding. While Schleiermacher and Dilthey grounded the possibility of textual understanding in the human affinity of the interpreter with the author, Rudolf Bultmann, a colleague of Heidegger’s at Marburg and preeminent New Testament scholar, grounds his hermeneutics on Heidegger’s “fore structures of understanding” (fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception), as preconditions for interpretation. Following Heidegger, Bultmann denied that “reflection of the individuality of the author and expositor, on their psychological processes and on the spiritual make-up or intellectual consanguinity of the expositor,” constitutes the presupposition of understanding (Bultmann, 1962, p. 239). Rather, Bultmann asserts “the presupposition for understanding is the interpreter’s relationship in his life to the subject which is directly or indirectly expressed in the text” (p. 241). The interpreter’s preunderstanding prompts the questioning of the text. The interpreter’s purpose motivates and shapes his inquiry and is “thus always guided by a prior understanding of the subject” (p. 239). The role of interpretation is to establish what the text meant to the author and to perform a mediating function of relating the meaning for whom the interpretation is made. Bultmann emphasizes the necessary attitude of receptivity as critical; the interpreter must “hear the claim...which confronts one in the work” (p. 253).

Gadamer. Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) also grounded his philosophical hermeneutics in the work of his teacher, Martin Heidegger. Gadamer has exercised such a pervasive influence that his name is synonymous with the term hermeneutics. Gadamer took over the ontological determination of understanding in the Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* (1927), transforming textual hermeneutics into hermeneutic phenomenology. Both Gadamer and Heidegger take hermeneutics to be a hermeneutics of existence, or, to be more precise, using Heidegger’s early language, a hermeneutics of facticity. In his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (1959), Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is both ontological and universal: “understanding is the primordial mode of being what we most essentially are” (Bernstein, 1983, p. 144). The interpreter’s capacity to understand is “the original characteristic of the being of human life itself” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 259). For Gadamer, human understanding is primordially rooted in human nature. “Understanding is...the original form of the realization of *Dasein*, which

is being-in-the world. Before any differentiation into the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is *Dasein's* mode of being..." (Gadamer, 1998, p. 259). Although contesting method as an exclusive source of truth, Gadamer makes it clear that *Truth and Method* also "addresses problems of a hermeneutics of the human sciences" (p. 259). For Gadamer, the interpreter's historical status inescapably embeds the interpreter in a tradition represented by a set of preunderstandings (Heidegger's "forestructures of understanding"). In Gadamer's terms, these prejudgments or prejudices "constitute our being... the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world" (Gadamer, 1966, p. 151-152).

Gadamer rejected Schleiermacher's idea that the goal of the interpreter is to understand the author better than the author understands himself. He rejects the assumption that the interpreter can "reconstruct" the author's intention. "Schleiermacher is wholly concerned to reconstruct the work...as originally constituted...[Schleiermacher's] hermeneutics endeavors to rediscover the nodal point in the artist's mind that will render the significance of his work fully intelligible" (Gadamer, 1998, p. 166). This point—the degree to which it is possible to enter the mind of the author-- is a dividing line of interpretive schools. Gadamer states, "Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being" (p. 167).

For Gadamer, reflecting the inescapable rootedness in culture, society, and history, "historically effected consciousness," (German: *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is the precondition of all hermeneutic activity (Gadamer, 1998, p. 340). Understanding, for Gadamer, is thus always an 'effect' of history, "while hermeneutical 'consciousness' is itself that mode of being that is conscious of its own historical status" (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/>). Awareness of the historically effected character of interpretive understanding is identical with an awareness of the hermeneutical situation. Gadamer's idea of the "horizon" refers to the situated and perspectival nature of knowing: understanding and interpretation thus always occurs from within a particular 'horizon' that is determined by the interpreter's historically-determined situatedness. "Just as the literal horizon delimits one's visual field, the epistemic horizon frames one's situation in terms of what lies behind (that is, tradition, history), around (that is, present culture and society), and before (that is, expectations directed at the future) one" (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/gadamer/>).

For Gadamer, conversation is the paradigm for interpretation: hermeneutic experience involves the primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer. Gadamer asserts that the interpreter must always adopt a posture of questioning. "A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text's alterity" (p. 269). All interpretation takes place with the respective horizons of the interpreter and the object of interest. Understanding as an aspect of hermeneutic experience is the result of the "fusion of horizons" between the subject and object, opening possibilities of understanding. "Meaning" emerges not as an object found in the text or in the interpreter but is rather an "event" that results from the interaction of the two. Understanding for Gadamer is transformative, based on but also challenging the already known.

Like Schleiermacher and Heidegger, Gadamer affirms the circular nature of understanding between the text and the interpreter's preunderstanding: "the understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of the [interpreter's] fore-understanding" (p. 293). For Gadamer, hermeneutics fuses understanding and application, based

on Aristotle's ideas of practice wisdom: "Understanding is a form of practical reason and practical knowledge—a form of *phronesis*" (from Aristotle, practical wisdom or know how: Bernstein, 1983, p. 174). As in legal hermeneutics, *phronesis* has particular application to personality assessment, with a focus on finding appropriate outcomes in specific, individualized contexts.

Gadamer's critics. The influences of Heidegger on Gadamer's hermeneutics, especially Heidegger's radical historicity and turn to ontological hermeneutics, have been the source of criticism and debate. The issue focuses on the validity of interpretation. Gadamer has been charged with relativism and weak foundation for the validity of interpretations. In critiques which have high relevance to personality assessment, these positions have been articulated by two prominent critics of Gadamer's philosophy, Betti and Hirsch. In his 1962 *Hermeneutics as a General Method in the Human Sciences*, Betti deplored Gadamer's shift to ontological hermeneutics (Palmer, 1969, p. 59). Betti's critique of Gadamer's hermeneutics returns to the aims of Dilthey. Following Dilthey's quest for a foundational discipline for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, Betti objects that Gadamer's work does not serve as a methodology for the human studies and jeopardizes the objectivity of interpretation. Like Dilthey, Betti "wished to differentiate among various modes of interpretation in the human disciplines with which to interpret human actions and objects" (Palmer, 1969, p. 56). Betti "looks for what is practical and useful for the interpreter" (Palmer, 1969, p. 59).

In Hirsch's critique, (*Validity in Interpretation*, 1967), he views the chief drawback of Gadamer's hermeneutics as a failure to deal with validity and objectivity of interpretation. Hirsch defends "objectivist hermeneutics." In the face of relativism, Hirsch asserts the necessity of objective interpretation. Hirsch defines hermeneutics as "the philological discipline which sets forth rules by which valid determinations of the verbal meaning of a passage may be achieved" (Palmer, 1969, p. 61). "The critic must first accurately interpret the text...textual meaning is the verbal intention of the author, and this argues implicitly that hermeneutics must stress the reconstruction of the author's aim and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of the text." For Hirsch, hermeneutics is "the modest, and in the old-fashioned sense, philological effort to find out what the author meant" (Hirsch, 1967, p. 57). Thus, Hirsch followed Dilthey's and Schleiermacher's emphasis on recreating the intention of the author as the method and goal of interpretation. The difference between Dilthey and Gadamer's hermeneutic theory has implications for personality assessment. Dilthey thought that the "original or definite meaning contained in an expression of life guarantees the possibility of the human sciences as sciences" (Nelson, 1995, p. 54). In contrast, Gadamer stresses that meaning is mutable, not once and for all fixed, but involving the horizon of both the author and interpreter.

Gadamer replied to his critics, stating "... the purpose of my investigation is not to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods (which Emilio Betti has done so well) but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding..." (Gadamer, 1998, p. xxxi). Phenomenologists of the event of understanding, Heidegger and Gadamer established the ontological foundations of understanding; Schleiermacher, Betti, and Hirsch offer more specific, practical methodologies for the interpretation of texts and human action. Hermeneutical philosophy runs against the tide of empiricism, especially in light of the fact that "the hermeneutical philosophers most commonly employed in psychological literatures are Heidegger and Gadamer," both of whom "resisted natural science approaches to knowing in the

human sciences and deemphasized methods for validating competing interpretations” (Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, & Reimer, 2008. p. 349).

Ricoeur. The work of Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) provides a hermeneutics that is highly compatible for integrative human and natural science personality assessment. Ricoeur developed a dialectical hermeneutic philosophy that combines existential phenomenology with the more objective, exegetical, or empirical disciplines of structural linguistics (Sandage, Cook, Hill, Strawn, & Reimer, 2008). Ricoeur reconciled understanding and explanation through his dialectical approach to hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1981). Ricoeur embraced Gadamer’s awareness of historical embeddedness, but deplored Gadamer’s untenable antinomy between truth and method. For Ricoeur, truth and method--or better, participation and distanciation--are dialectical moments in the process of interpretation (Smith, 1987). Ricoeur affirmed the value of preunderstandings and effective history with critical moments of *distanciation* in the process of interpretation. Distanciation is not complete objectivity, but it does involve a reflective ability both to be aware of one's historical horizon and to partially detach or distance oneself from it. For Ricoeur, “distanciation is the counterpart to belonging” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 16). Ricoeur distinguished between speaking and writing: written texts are already somewhat distant from the author's subjective mind. In this way, texts help constitute distance and necessitate structured methods of linguistic interpretation as a moment of validation in an overall process that moves from preunderstanding to explanation to understanding (Sandage, Cook, Hill, & Reimer, 2008).

For Ricoeur, the practice of interpretation is transformative for the interpreter. The hermeneutical process does not end with explanation but opens into emergent meaning of the whole and self-understanding. Ricoeur asserted that “self-understanding is always in play in interpretation” (Grondin, 2014, p. 9). Ricoeur agreed that interpretation culminates--the end point of the hermeneutic arc--in practical appropriation or “making one's own” what was formerly alien or unknown (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 185). Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity has significant implications for personality assessment. Ricoeur (1981) compared human action to a text that requires interpretation, linking narrative and selfhood. “Human action possesses an internal structure as well as projecting a possible world, a potential mode of human existence which can be unfolded through the process of interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 16). Reflecting his dialectical effort to overcome Cartesian dualism, Ricoeur offered a challenge to quantitative researchers to recognize their effective history and subjectivity in interpretation and to qualitative researchers to consider the benefit of partial objectivity through structured methods of interpretation.

In contrast to natural science methods, hermeneutic modes of inquiry assume a fundamentally different relation between interpreter and the object of interest. In Ricoeur’s formulation contrasting the natural from the human sciences, “The knowledge of things runs up against an unknown, the thing itself, whereas in the case of the mind there is no thing-in-itself: we ourselves are what the other is. Knowledge of mind therefore has an undeniable advantage over knowledge of nature” (1981, p. 55). Influenced by Dilthey and Stern during his European apprenticeship, Gordon Allport advocated for methods based on “sympathetic introception” where “the self does not seek to eliminate itself, but to identify itself with its object” (Murchison, 1930, p. 336). For Schleiermacher, interpretation is an art and not a mechanical process, where “feeling...an immediate, sympathetic, and congenial understanding, brings the work to completion like a work of art” (Gadamer, 1998, p. 191). The assessment psychologist, like the psychobiographer, must develop an empathic relationship with the subject, a relationship which aids in listening and understanding the subject from within his or her own frame of reference,

rather than as an external object subject to observation (Kovary, 2015).

In the 20th century, post-positivist scientific critiques (e.g., Hesse, 1980) proliferated:

bringing with them new methodologies such as hermeneutics (the study of interpretation from the perspective of the subject and the observer), social constructivism (the study of how people come to describe and account for the world, including themselves), and qualitative research “using thick descriptions of personal narratives, rather than thin descriptions of all objective facts.” (Slobogin, 2003, p. 278).

Geertz (1991) framed the debates in the most explicit terms: “The formulations have been various: “inside” vs. “outside,” or “first person” versus “third person” descriptions; “phenomenological” versus “objectivist,” or “cognitive versus “behavioral” theories; or, perhaps most commonly, “emic” versus “etic” analyses...” (Geertz, 1991, p. 28). Psychology is the not the only science where a “culture war” between the natural and human sciences has been fought (Fishman, 1999). Social sciences, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, and archaeology (Preston, 2014), and the humanities, including history and the study of religion, have witnessed acrimonious debates on foundational theories of knowledge, methods of investigation and validation, and ways of knowing. Hermeneutics has made some inroads into psychotherapy (e.g., Martin & Thompson, 2003; Chessick, 1990), but the debate of foundational issues and applications has not extended into the arena of personality assessment.

Bridging the idiographic-nomothetic divide: pragmatic psychology

Daniel Fishman (1999; Fishman & Goodman-Delahunty, 2010) proposed “pragmatic psychology” as an alternative and the proper methodology of applied forensic psychology, based in large part on Gadamer’s (1995/1960) “assertion that the kind of knowledge we have of ourselves and others is akin the Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*” (Martin & Thompson, 2003, p. 5). Aristotle’s *phronesis* “is not nomological scientific understanding, nor is it merely technical understanding...but involves grasping the particularities of a concrete, real world situation and ascertaining the means and ends appropriate to that situation” (Martin & Thompson, 2003, p. 6). Pragmatic psychology is based on philosophical pragmatism (William James, John Dewey, Stephen Toulmin, Richard Bernstein, and others) and “integrates selected elements from the two dialectically opposed epistemological paradigms that have dominated forensic psychology: positivism and hermeneutics” (Fishman, 1999, p. 95). Fishman and Goodman- Delahunty (2010) write that

A positivist forensic psychology identifies with the model of natural science. It strives to base every conclusion about a particular forensic issue on a “gold standard” of evidence: experimental or quasi-experimental group studies that quantitatively tests general, theoretical hypotheses through the use of sophisticated statistics. (p. 97).

They go on, in respect to forensic psychological assessment, “The quantitative, probabilistic, group-based, qualified and tentative conclusions of traditional psychological studies are typically ill-suited to the court’s needs for certain knowledge that is applicable to an individual case” (p. 97).

Psychological reports reflect a “clinical/hermeneutic model...They immerse themselves in the context and qualitative detail of individual cases... [in order to] write rich, accessible,

qualitative narrative in a matter that is consistent with clinical literature” (pp. 97-98). In contrast to the opposed natural and hermeneutic approaches, “pragmatic psychology proposes a third model that incorporates some of the strengths from each of the other two models” (p. 98). Pragmatic psychology integrates both positivist and hermeneutic traditions, reflecting actuarial and anamnestic approaches (Melton, 1997, p. 284).

Prospects for accommodation. Accommodation of alternative epistemic perspectives and methodologies in forensic personality assessment may take place at the level of 1) law, 2) methods, and 3) cases. These will be considered in turn.

Law. Slobogin (2003) noted Fishman’s efforts to “bridge the gap between a number of oppositions: the statistical and the clinical, the positivist and the constructivist, the objective and the subjective, nomothetic data and idiopathic ‘anecdota’” (p. 275). Slobogin endorses “a third approach which recognizes that both empirical procedures and interpretations of individual behavior can produce information that is useful to those who seek guidance from psychology” (pp. 275-276). Slobogin points out the “idiopathic, scientific resistant nature of much legal inquiry” (p. 289) should make the idiographic approach useful.

Nevertheless, Slobogin’s assessment of prospects for rapprochement is not encouraging. Those ensconced in academic psychology are not likely to respond enthusiastically to Fishman’s prescriptions noting that pragmatic psychology is only marginally positivist in orientation, and psychology today, despite the advent of social constructivism, still remains very much attached to that epistemology. (p. 282).

The role of scientism in forensic psychology may have been strengthened by the “positivist pretensions of Daubert” (p. 291). “Daubert held that expert testimony claiming to be scientific must be reliable, and defined reliability in seemingly positivistic terms” (p. 285).

Dowdle (2003) is less sanguine than Slobogin about the prospects for accommodation. He notes Fishman’s advocacy of a “postmodern-constructionist” vision which focuses on “qualitative description, analogical understanding, and narrative modes of exposition [and de-emphasizes] quantification and controlled experimentation” (p. 302). Dowdle suggests that “the courts will not be especially receptive to pragmatic psychology’s capacity to promote postmodernist, epistemological alternatives to the scientific paradigm” (p. 304). This resistance is rooted in the “Constitutional positivism” of the courts. “The courts constitutionally mandated institutional positivism functionally imposes on forensists epistemic limitations that parallel those imposed by scientific visions of psychology” (p. 314).

Methods. In modern personality psychology, the objectivist/hermeneutical split is revealed in the “idiographic/nomothetic divide” (Allport, 1937; Grice, 2004). These terms were coined by Wilhelm Windelbrand, a Neo-Kantian philosopher, in the late 1890s: “idiographic knowledge aims at describing and explaining particular phenomena; nomothetic knowledge has the aim of finding generalities common to a class of particulars and deriving theories and laws to account for these generalities” (Robinson, 2011, p. 32). These terms entered American psychology due to James Hayden Tufts, who was well-versed in Windelbrand’s philosophy. Later taken up by Muensterberg (Allport’s teacher at Harvard), and then by Allport himself (who significantly changed the meaning of the words), igniting a continuing scientific controversy.

In a view that came to dominate psychologists’ use of the terms, nomothetic knowledge and methods are proper to the natural sciences, the *Naturwissenschaften*, and idiographic knowledge is proper to the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Lamiell, 1998). Idiographic methods focus on the individuality of the person: a single individual’s biological heredity, development,

personality, life history, and mental and physical pathology, within the socio-cultural context of his or her time, in order to evaluate the impact of these factors upon decision-making, motivation, performance, and achievement. In the United States, idiographic approaches in personality research became widespread through the works of Allport and Murray. Allport and Murray emphasized the importance of interviews and personal documents as important sources of personalistic data. “For both Murray and Allport autobiographical material serve the same purpose” (Alexander, 1990, p. 5).

Allport advocated for the use of “life-histories, photographs, specimens of handwriting, scores on various tests, artistic productions, or anything else” (Allport, 1961, p. 387). Allport was one of the first personality psychologists to advocate for intensive case studies and computerized analysis of personal documents. “The case study method is another significant and widely used idiographic method. The case study may be based on 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, 1983, p. 427).

Hermeneutic/interpretive philosophy entered the domain of psychotherapy, especially psychoanalysis, in the form of existential psychotherapies, and theories of cure and psychopathology (Chessick, 1990; Martin & Thompson, 2003; Spence, 1982). Collaborative assessment -- based on a human rather than natural science foundation -- self-consciously grounds assessment procedures on epistemic assumptions fundamentally different from objectivist scientific approaches (Fischer, 1985). The “information gathering model” is historically identified with the “psychometric, clinical tradition, or diagnostic psychological testing” paradigm of assessment (Finn & Tonsager, 1997, footnote 3, p. 377). The Therapeutic Assessment model distinguishes itself from the “traditional information-gathering model” (Finn & Tonsager, 1997), emphasizing the collaborative relationship between clinician and client. This movement has not been without critics (e.g., Greenberg & Shuman, 1997), especially in forensic psychological assessments.

One potential explanation for the absence of idiographic methods in forensic psychology, is the fact that most forensic assessment work is undertaken under the strenuous exigencies of legal proceedings, demands of heavy caseloads, and time pressure. Idiographic study of the individual is impractical. Most idiographic personality measures require time; their use, for example, in the intensive case history, actually means getting to know the person. This criticism “raises an important question about the costs and benefits of detailed studies of individuals” (Runyan, 1983, p. 421). McAdams and McLean (2013) note the importance of listening in hearing life stories: “attentive and responsive listeners cause tellers to narrate more personally elaborated stories compared with distracted listeners” (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 236). For a variety of reasons, it is perhaps more expedient to treat the defendant as an object to be studied as expeditiously as possible.

A small number of studies have attempted to implement idiographic methods in personality assessment which may have direct applications in forensic personality assessment. McAdams revitalized narrative approaches to personology and idiographic assessment (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Nuclear episodes, imagoes, ideological setting, and generativity scripts, link to thematic lines and narrative complexity, and form a sensitive experience -- near understanding of an individual’s life. These issues link the poles of personality psychology, the scientific search for universal regularities --

the nomothetic emphasis -- and individual dynamics of the lived life. McAdams and McLean (2013) advocated for the importance of life stories in understanding individual motives, self-concept, and subjectivity. Narrative identity reflects how “people convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future” (p. 234). Constructs used in the study of narrative identity include agency, communion, redemption, contamination, meaning making, exploratory narrative processing, and coherent positive resolution” (p. 234). Although there is currently no life narrative studies of psychopathy, Adler, Chin, Kolisetty, and Oltmanns (2012) utilized the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 1993) in distinguishing characteristics of narrative identity in adults with borderline personality disorder. They found that narrative identity of people with BPD showed unique disruptions in the themes of agency, communion fulfillment, and overall narrative coherence. This approach may be particularly fruitful in the forensic study of psychopathic personalities.

Canter and Young (2012) advocated for the exploration of the forms of personal narrative in interviews with criminal offenders. Youngs and Canter’s (2012) application of particular narrative interpretations deriving from the work of McAdams to specific criminal action patterns. Four narrative themes have been derived from the detailed consideration of offense actions: adventure, irony, quest, and tragedy (p. 290). They were particularly interested in the role of narratives in understanding criminal behavior. Utilizing the Narrative Roles Questionnaire (NRQ), they were able to code a variety of identities in offender narratives: the professional, hero, victim, and revenger. The method permits the narrative integration of affective, cognitive, and defense-specific identity components of offending conduct.

Ovens (2003) proposed a hermeneutical approach to studying forensic document review, utilizing the Ricoeur’s narrative identity framework.

Ricoeur’s conception of narrative identity is applied to analyze and interpret the documentation... a hermeneutic approach to narrative identity assists to identify or frame the context and explore the relationship between the character of the individual, plot, and ethics... Documents are used to describe the path of her character, meaning that it maps events in her life and both her views and those in interactions with others. (p. 662).

Pollit (2013) described interpretive approaches to digital forensic evidence, in the tradition of Allport and Runyan, treating digital media that individuals collect and store on hard drives as indicative of their interests and preferences.

Petty (2014) examined the lived experience of individuals who score in the 36-40 range on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist Revised (PCL-R). Petty found that Cleckley’s 15 case studies in the *Mask of Sanity* (Cleckley, 1941) remains the largest case history collection involving psychopathic individuals. Petty examined the characteristics described in quantitative studies of psychopathy manifest in the lives of real people identified with “Extreme Psychopathy,” [PCL-R total score > 30] considering each case history as a critical test of Hare’s psychopathy construct. Thematic analysis explored similarities and differences within and across case histories. These case histories demonstrate the life course perspectives and individual permutations of the 20 items of the PCL-R, uniquely portraying individuals in the Extreme Psychopathy range.

Hancock, Woodworth, & Porter (2011) examined crime narratives of 14 psychopathic and 38 non-psychopathic homicide offenders, using the PCL-R and two linguistic analysis tools, to examine parts of narrative speech, semantic content, and emotional characteristics. They hypothesized that psychopathic speech would reflect an instrumental/predatory world view,

unique socioemotional needs, and a poverty of affect. They found that higher Factor 1 PCL-R scores were associated with reduced emotional valence in crime narratives.

Despite the low levels of reported use in forensic applications, the Thematic Apperception Test has demonstrated construct validity for the implicit motives—achievement, power, and intimacy/affiliation—in research studies conducted over four decades (Woike & McAdams, 2007). Nevertheless, the keyword search demonstrated only one rare TAT case study of a psychopathic serial sexual homicide perpetrator (Porcerelli, Abramsky, Hibbard, & Kamoo, 2001). Using the Social Cognition and Object Relations Scale (Westen, Lohr, Silk, & Kerber, 1989) and Cramer’s Defense Mechanism Manual (Cramer, 1991) the authors graphically elucidated the dynamics of the psychopath’s subjectivity.

New idiographic methodologies have emerged which have yet to be applied to forensic psychology. All are focused on individual experience, including experience sampling (diary methods, ecological momentary assessment, daily process research) and ambulatory assessment.

Common to all of these is that data are collected on the individual’s experiences in natural settings, close to the time when the person has these experiences, and on repeated occasions...multiple snapshots are obtained of people’s daily experiences, which makes it possible to identify patterns of experiences within the individual and to test hypotheses about a single person. (Lundh, 2015, p. 23).

Other available idiographic methods for the assessment of psychopathy include the McAdams Life Story Interview (2008), Bruhn’s Early Memory Procedure (1992), the Thematic Apperception Test using reliable coding schemes (e.g., SCORS-R, Stein, Slavin-Mulford, Siefert, Sinclair, Renna, Malone, Bello, & Blais, 2014), Blatt’s Object Relations Inventory (ORI; Blatt, 1992); and the Clinical Diagnostic Interview used with the SWAP 200 (Westen, 2002). Of greatest importance is the use of methods and an interpretive attitude “which go beyond generalities to individual nuances of experience and behavior” (Runyan, 1983, p. 431).

Case studies. A third approach to accommodation in the integration of interpretive methods is the individual “theory building case study... utilizing deduction (logical consistency and interconnection), induction (applying observations to theory), and abduction (creating, refining, and elaborating theory)” (Stiles, 2009). Goodman-Delahunty and Foote (2009), Fishman (1999, 2009), and Fishman and Goodman-Delahunty (2010) argue for the integration of actuarial and anamnestic data in individual case studies, noting that “a forensic evaluation is a case study conducted in a legal setting” (Goodman-Delahunty & Foote, 2009, p. 39).

Translated in forensic psychological assessment, Melton et al. (1997) “point out that pragmatic best practice would dictate using both actuarial data, for normatively contextualizing the particular case, and anamnestic data for behaviorally individualizing the case” (p. 100).

Heilbrun, DeMatteo, and Marczyk (2004) applied pragmatic psychology to forensic psychological evaluations using a principle-based method for measuring the quality of a single case report.

One way to accomplish each of Fishman’s goals is to use a core set of principles relevant to forensic mental health evaluations that transcend legal questions, forensic issues, and discipline. The use of such principles in a single forensic case will demonstrate how both idiographic (case-specific) and nomothetic (group-based) data can be used. (p. 32).

Accordingly, broad principles for forensic mental health assessments as indicia of report quality

include the utilization of both idiographic and nomothetic information. They describe obtaining information that is “specific to the circumstances of the case and present functioning of the individual and then make comparisons to that individual’s capacities and functioning at other times” (p. 38); and use nomothetic evidence in assessing clinical condition, functional abilities, and causal connections.

Bridging the nomothetic-idiographic divide: integrative personality assessment

As a relatively new discipline, forensic psychology has endeavored to prove its scientific *bona fides*, emulating the methods and rigor of the natural sciences in relation to the court’s institutional positivism. Faigman and Monahan (2002) proclaim the law, with forensic psychology as its handmaiden, is poised for “the scientific age.” In the absence of a robust personology, the differentiation of forensic psychology from criminology is difficult, given their overlapping subject matter and methods. This psychology of groups, rather than individuals, represents the “triumph of the aggregate” (Danziger, 1990). Much of what passes for forensic psychology is actually criminology, or “much less a psychology that a demography exploiting a psychological vocabulary” (Lamiell, 1998, p. 34).

Allport advocated for both idiographic and nomothetic perspectives in the psychology of personality. “The psychology of personality is not exclusively nomothetic, nor exclusively idiographic. It seeks equilibrium between the two extremes” (Allport, 1961, p. 2). Meyer and colleagues (2001) advocate for the integration of nomothetic and idiographic assessment data as a “pragmatic best practice [that] would dictate using both actuarial data, for normatively contextualizing the particular case, and anamnestic data for behaviorally individualizing the case” (p. 100). Nomothetic information can assist in a type of distancing in the interpretive process. Allport recommended a dialectical approach to understanding, reflecting the application of the hermeneutic circle, “We must be ready to shift our attention rapidly from the particular to the general, from the concrete person to the abstract person, and back again” (Allport, 1961, p. 1). Personality assessment is quintessentially a hermeneutic discipline and knowledge derived from assessment work emerges dialectically from the hermeneutic circle. “Interpretation involves the process where phenomena are projected upon an already existing framework of meaning, the assumption of which are at least partially brought into question, and by this action further reviewed and refined within the ongoing process of interpretation” (Crease, 1997, p. xx). The hermeneutic circle may be the best approach to integrating psychological evaluation data—including nomothetic and idiographic information—in a manner that which fulfills Kluckhohn and Murray’s dictum cited as the frontispiece of this paper.

How is hermeneutics relevant to personality assessment? Hermeneutics establishes a framework for interpreting human action. How do we know and understand the behavior of other people? through observation, engagement, visual and written description, self-report, reports of others, and artifacts. Classical hermeneutics in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey constitutes rules of interpretation, treating human expressions as texts. This tradition endeavors to understand the intent of the author, that is, the meaning of human action. The enduring influence of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics is that understanding is possible through the human affinity of the interpreter with the object. Ricoeur occupies an intermediate position between textual and phenomenological hermeneutics. According to Ricoeur, actions have both a locutionary and a propositional nature; an action may be “addressed to an indefinite range of possible ‘readers’” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 208). The meaning of an action detaches from the event and the mental intention of the actor. Language is the medium of interpretation. The

phenomenological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, focuses on “hermeneutic experience,” based on the interpreter’s forestructures of understanding and dialogue-based empathic engagement. This latter approach -- reflected in the clinical work of Racker, Tansey and Burke, and Sugarman — has made its way into psychotherapy and personality assessment as critical sources of data obtained through the assessment process. Addressing concerns about validity of interpretation, Ricoeur argues for the importance of “distanciation,” which allows the interpreter to stand back from the interpretive process. Nomothetic data allows for distanciation in the dialectical interpretive process—what Ricoeur calls the the hermeneutical arc--with the interpreter’s hermeneutic experience. The endpoint of interpretation is the interpreter’s “appropriation which takes the place of the answer in the dialogical situation” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 208).

Forensic personality assessment commonly occurs in exigent human situations requiring practical, consequential disposition for human lives. Gadamer and Ricoeur see that human understanding takes place in the context of a dialogue or conversation: a fusion between the interpreter’s historical, scientific, and practical questions and the needs and urgencies of the client in the assessment situation. Hermeneutic philosophy argues against the proposition that the evaluator can empty herself of assumptions of objectivity. Through distanciation and dialogue, the evaluator can achieve a valid and practical outcome (“workable approximations”; Browning 2003) for the exigent circumstances. Forensic personality assessment may benefit from a model of “hermeneutic or critical realism” -- an interpretive posture which understands that “dialogue, when done well, can increase a shared public sense of workable approximations to the descriptively true and normatively good, even though absolute objectivity on these matters is impossible” (Browning, 2003).

In the tradition of personality assessment represented by Klopfer, Allport, Murray, and the Menninger tradition, this article reasserts the preeminent place of personology in forensic psychology (“forensic personology”) with an emphasis on the whole person, focused on individual subjectivity, and methodologically integrative personality assessment methods and description. Integrative nomothetic and idiographic goals and methods in forensic psychology promise to broaden, deepen, and humanize forensic psychology in its efforts to understand human behavior and serve the courts, while maintaining a central commitment to both scientific and humanistic values.

About the Author

Marvin W. Acklin, Ph.D., ABPP, ABAP, is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii at Manoa. He is a licensed psychologist in full time independent practice of clinical, assessment, clinical, and forensic psychology in Honolulu. Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Marvin W. Acklin, PhD, 850 W. Hind Drive, Suite 203, Honolulu, Hawaii 96821, acklin@hawaii.edu.

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