

Münsterberg in 1898, Not Allport in 1937, Introduced the Terms 'Idiographic' and 'Nomothetic' to American Psychology

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ABSTRACT. Psychologists use the term 'idiographic' to refer to the characteristics of unique individuals and 'nomothetic' to refer to universal characteristics. It is widely accepted that Gordon Allport borrowed those terms from the German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband and introduced the idiographic/nomothetic distinction to American psychology. However, in this paper we argue that the terms were made a part of American psychological discourse at least as early as 1898 by Hugo Münsterberg, two generations before Allport, and were incorporated by William Stern, who had a strong influence on Allport. Recognizing Münsterberg's and Stern's contribution assists in a more secure interpretation of Allport's understanding of the importance of a balance between idiographic and nomothetic approaches.

KEY WORDS: Allport, idiographic, Münsterberg, nomothetic, Stern, Windelband

It is common knowledge among psychologists that Gordon Allport initiated the idiographic/nomothetic debate within psychology in about 1937 with his publication of *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation*. Thus most commentators on idiographic/nomothetic issues begin with an introductory passage such as 'Gordon Allport (1937) introduced the word "nomothetic" into the psychological lexicon, borrowing the term from the philosopher Windelband' (Kenrick & Dantchik, 1983, p. 294).

However, the Allport-borrowing-from-Windelband version of the history of the terms 'idiographic' and 'nomothetic' is somewhat misleading. Allport (1937) did credit the German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) with coining the terms:

The proposal to distinguish sharply between the study of general principles and the study of the individual case has taken many ... forms. The

philosopher Windelband, for example, proposed to separate the *nomothetic* from the *idiographic* disciplines. The former, he held, seek only general laws and employ only those procedures admitted by the exact sciences. Psychology in the main has been striving to make of itself a completely nomothetic discipline. The idiographic sciences, such as history, biography, and literature, on the other hand, endeavor to understand some *particular* event in nature or in society. A psychology of individuality would be essentially idiographic (Allport, 1937, p. 22)

However, it is often overlooked that the terms ‘idiographic’ and ‘nomothetic’ were part of American psychological discourse at least as early as 1898, when Hugo Münsterberg used them in his presidential address at the American Psychological Association meeting. This address was published in *Psychological Review* a month later:

[It] is a well-known fact that this logical separation of history and psychology is, indeed, the demand of some of the best students of logic. They claim that the scientific interest in the facts can and must take two absolutely different directions: we are interested either in the single fact as such or in the laws under which it stands, and thus we have two groups of sciences which have nothing to do with each other, sciences which describe the isolated facts and sciences which seek their laws. A leading logician baptizes the first, therefore, idiographic sciences, the latter, nomothetic sciences; idiographic is history; nomothetic are physics and psychology. Psychology gives general facts which are always true, but concerning which it has not to ask whether they are realized anywhere or at any time; history refers to the special single fact only, without any relation to general facts. (Münsterberg 1899, p. 5; an edited version appears in 1899/1994, pp. 230–231)

The ‘leading logician’ Münsterberg referred to in this quotation seems certainly to be Wilhelm Windelband, who had used the terms in his May 1894 address given on assuming the position of Rector at the University of Strassburg (Windelband, 1894/1998; see also Lamiell, 1998). Windelband was a member of the Southwestern School of neo-Kantianism, a perspective that influenced Münsterberg in the mid- to late 1890s (Hale, 1980, p. 71). Münsterberg used the terms ‘idiographic’ and ‘nomothetic’ in the same context as did Windelband, namely to distinguish the ways in which the discipline of history (and related fields) differed from that of psychology (or other sciences).¹

Allport and Münsterberg had similar positions on the relationship between science and the individual, as demonstrated by the following two passages, the first from Münsterberg and the second from Allport:

Reality means to us here the immediate experience which we live through. This immediate truth of life may be transformed and remoulded in theories and sciences, and these remodelings of reality may be highly valuable for special purposes of life; we may even reach finally a point of reconstruction from which the subjective experience appears as an illusion and the

supplementation stands as the only truth. Yet the importance of such constructions must not make us forget that we have then left reality behind us. Our doubting and remoulding itself belongs to the reality for which its products can never be substituted. (Münsterberg, 1899, p. 12)

There is a typical procedure the scientist feels compelled by convention to follow. . . . First, he makes a critical discrimination of his subject matter, isolating from the individual who confronts him a chosen segment of behavior. This procedure is termed *abstraction*. He then observes the recurrence of this segment and its conditions in many members of a hypothetical class. Finding uniformity in the event and its attendant conditions, he makes a *generalization* or law, and then, if he is a thorough investigator, he will submit his law to repeated tests and so establish it securely by *empirical verification*. . . .

The piling of law upon law does not in the slightest degree account for the pattern of individuality which each human being enfolds. The *person* who is a unique and never-repeated phenomenon evades the traditional scientific approach at every step. (Allport, 1937, pp. 4–5)

It is uncertain whether Allport was introduced to Windelband's thinking directly by Münsterberg or by others. It is certainly possible that the Münsterberg influence was direct: Münsterberg was Allport's first teacher at Harvard. Allport had studied Münsterberg's (1914) textbook of psychology, which discusses at length the distinction between psychology and history (but does not use the terms 'idiographic' and 'nomothetic'); and Allport's brother Floyd was Münsterberg's assistant (Allport, 1967).

However, it is also possible that Münsterberg's distinctions were transmitted to Allport by others, perhaps most notably William Stern (1871–1938). Stern himself was greatly influenced by Münsterberg. In 1902 Stern had reviewed Münsterberg's *Grundzüge der Psychologie*, which engaged the issue of psychology in relation to universal versus particular knowledge (see Hale, 1980, p. 74). Stern himself included Münsterberg in his acknowledgment of the source of the idiographic and nomothetic distinction. Among the theorists who influenced him, Stern reports, was 'the Southwest-German school of philosophers (Windelband, Rickert, Münsterberg) with their distinction between idiography and nomothetics' (Stern, 1961, p. 352).

In turn, Stern had a great influence on Allport: Allport studied with Stern in Germany (1922–3), and in 1923 he published a brief summary of Stern's books (Allport, 1923). Allport (1967) reported in his autobiographical sketch that 'from Stern in particular I learned that a chasm exists between the common variety of differential psychology . . . and a truly personalistic psychology that focuses upon the organization, not the mere profiling of an individual's traits' (p. 10). Allport's biographer asserts that 'Stern . . . [was] the one who impressed' Allport, and 'in most of his [Allport's] general ideas, we can feel Stern's presence' (Ghougassian, 1972, p. 29).

Thus the idiographic/nomothetic distinction was a part of the psychological context prior to Allport's 1937 book. Allport's contribution is placing the idiographic/nomothetic distinction in the context of personality theory, in particular trait theory, and in substantially increasing the level of discourse about the distinction in general.

Recognizing Münsterberg's direct or indirect (through Stern) contribution can add to our understanding of the complex influences acting on Allport and can clarify Allport's position on idiographic/nomothetic issues. For example, it is often mistakenly believed that Allport favored the idiographic over the nomothetic; the passage quoted earlier (Allport, 1937, pp. 4–5) is often cited as evidence for that position. That mistaken belief polarized the issue: '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' (Nunnally, 1978, p. 548). However, that is an incorrect interpretation of Allport's position. First, it decontextualizes what Allport himself actually wrote:

The dichotomy [between nomothetic and idiographic], however, is too sharp: it requires a psychology divided against itself. . . . It is more helpful to regard the two methods as overlapping and as contributing to one another. In the field of medicine, diagnosis and therapy are idiographic procedures, but both rest intimately upon knowledge of the common factors in disease determined by the nomothetic sciences of bacteriology and biochemistry. Likewise, biography is clearly idiographic, and yet in the best biographies one finds an artful blend of generalization with individual portraiture. A complete study of the individual will embrace both approaches. (Allport, 1937, p. 22)

Münsterberg's (1899) view was similar:

I claim first that all natural sciences, of which psychology is one, do not seek laws only but set forth also judgments about the existence of objects. . . . When formal logic or mathematics deals with A and B and C, they state valid relations without asking whether A, B or C is given anywhere or at any time, even without excluding the possibility that their real existence may be impossible. The scientific judgments of physics and psychology, on the other hand, have lost all their meaning if we deprive them of the presupposition that objects which prove the validity of such laws have real existence in the world of experience. . . .

The separation of the single facts from the general facts is thus untenable, because the explanatory law includes the description; but we can also emphasize the other side of this mutual relation: every description includes explanation, every assertion of a special fact demands reference to the general facts. A description has a logical value only if it points towards a law. We describe a process by the help of conceptions which are worked up from the general facts, common to a group of objects, and these general conceptions are the more valuable for the purposes of description the more their content is a condensed representation of real objective connections.

... The history of science is the steady development of the means of description; there is no description which by its use of conceptions does not aim at working out the laws. Thus, far from the trivial belief that the law is merely a description of facts, we ought not to forget that the description of facts involves the laws and is only another form of their expression. (Münsterberg, 1899, pp. 7–9)

Hence, both Allport and Münsterberg argued *against* the strict separation of the nomothetic from the idiographic; psychology should include both perspectives, each one assumed by and included in the other.² Stern held the same position. However, by mid-century that ideal had been largely abandoned:

[The] two schools have spent much energy challenging one another, and the heat generated shows that they must express two contrasted types of human temperament each of which cannot help disliking the other, because the other school emphasizes what it lacks, or has inhibited, or has refused to recognize. Since real achievements sooner or later speak for themselves, the heat of this battle proves that unconscious prejudices are at work. . . . There seems to be an inherent lack of balance in human nature which makes the mind tend to incline either to one side or to the other and to display a prejudice . . . for *no Western thinker has yet displayed a balanced attitude*. (Whyte, 1954, as cited in Winthrop, 1956, pp. 183–184)

The incorrect view that Allport strongly favored the idiographic over the nomothetic persists despite repeated attempts by Lamiell (1987, pp. 12–13; 1997, p. 123; 2003, pp. 89–90) and others to correct it. This Note has sought to add to that corrective effort by observing (a) that Münsterberg was apparently the importer of the idiographic/nomothetic distinction to psychology; (b) that Stern and others acknowledged that distinction; (c) that all that happened generations prior to Allport's promotion of the terms in the personality context; and (d) that Münsterberg, Stern and Allport all shared the notion that psychological science should include a balance of both the idiographic and the nomothetic. Psychological science should recognize that Allport, like those who preceded him, emphasized the importance of the idiographic not as a substitute for or an enemy of the nomothetic, but as an informer and companion of it.

Notes

1. The set of issues embodied in the distinction and related ones (see Runyan, 1982, for a discussion) are beyond the scope of this brief note. For a discussion of Münsterberg's views in the context of the historical versus natural sciences distinction, see Münsterberg, (1903); see also Hale (1980, pp. 70–86). For a discussion of antecedents to nomothetic/idiographic methods, see MacKinnon and Maslow (1951), especially their discussion of the *Naturwissenschaft* versus *Geisteswissenschaft* distinction. It is worthy of mention that Gould (2002) made a similar distinction (and reconciliation) in recognizing that natural history had

elements of both contingency (evolutionary history is unique and could have been different) and universality (we are all carbon-based critters).

2. Margaret Münsterberg (1922, pp. 318–319) appears to affirm this with respect to her father's views.

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