National Typology

Personality and National Character. R. LYNN. Pergamon, New York, 1971. xiv, 200 pp., illus. $10.50. International Series of Monographs in Experimental Psychology, vol. 12.

Do we understand the personality of the individual well enough to begin studying national personality characteristics? Does the concept of national character have any scientific value? Those who answer these questions affirmatively may applaud this book as a courageous effort; others may consider the effort foolhardy.

The thesis of this monograph is that some differences among nations can be accounted for by national variations in anxiety levels, these in turn being most probably explained by differences in climate and in racial composition (which the author defines in terms of anthropological classifications developed for western European groups). High national anxiety is inferred from high rates of suicide and of "alcoholism" (deaths from cirrhosis and alcoholism), together with low rates of mental hospitalization and low caloric intake. The indicated poles are reported to be more or less positively correlated over 18 countries. Among these, Japan is second on suicide and eighth on alcoholism but lowest on mental hospitalization and caloric intake. West Germany stands high on the first pair and low on the second pair. At the other extreme, Ireland has the lowest values for suicide and alcoholism together with the highest for hospitalization and caloric intake. The United States has its own pattern—fourth on hospitalization but sixth on alcoholism, with middle values for the other two.

This treatise exemplifies two major weaknesses in much social science. One is the treatment of overlapping concepts as if they were the same. "Anxiety" has, for Lynn, "the implications of worry and strong motivation," and he thinks that the same concept (not just the same word) is used by Freudian psychoanalysts, by Russian workers following Pavlov, and by two psychological groups relying heavily on questionnaires. Although these varied conceptualizations, using a label found in everyday discourse, may have some common aspects, they are certainly not identical and interchangeable. While the social sciences may be of a genre different from that of the natural sciences, it is essential in the social as in the natural sciences that concepts be precisely defined and that scientists have unanimity on the meaning of basic and central terms.

The other weakness characterizing a great deal of social science is the combining or averaging of observations which, though more or less correlated with each other, have features that are distinctive, if not unique. By averaging the ranks of his countries on his four measures (weighing them equally), Lynn apparently hopes to obtain a composite ranking which extracts some common core of anxiety from the measures. Each measure itself averages diverse events, such as hospitalizations for assorted psychiatric diagnoses, all subsumed later under the rubric of psychosis. (He grants the very rough nature of this coarse lumping at a subsequent point when he argues that high anxiety characterizes some psychotics, in contrast to the low level of anxiety which he attributes to the majority.) Perhaps such averaging is necessary at the early stages of sciences attempting to study social phenomena in vivo. An alternative strategy is to delineate less confounded events or to generate occurrences that are determined by fewer and more manageable factors and are therefore sufficiently replicable to form the basis of a more exact science.

Beyond these generic features of the book, there are fundamental flaws in method and execution. The careful reader will note that the author makes much of a correlation of, say, .37 at one point and considers it inconsequential later. There is too much effort to explain away facts that do not fit the thesis. Most of the book reports single correlations where the problem obviously calls for multivariate methods. Brushed aside are most analyses of anxiety into separate aspects and ignored are such conceptual distinctions as dispositional, enduring trait versus momentary current state and generalized anxiety versus anxiety with a specific focus.

Equally subject to question is the representing of a nation by a prevalence or incidence rate of less than 1 percent. In effect, the comparative frequency of such a rare event as suicide is taken as an estimate of the central tendency for a nation, or as an index of the typical degree of some characteristic in its total population. Surely the extents of variation within groups may differ sufficiently to produce differences in some extreme category even when the central tendencies of the groups are identical.

Even more fundamental is the question whether Lynn is examining the data appropriate to the scientific issue underlying his work. Is it meaningful or profitable to ask whether one nation has more anxiety and more of a disposition to commit suicide than another, or can such questions only be asked about persons? It can be shown that the correlation between two variables obtained when the observations are the means of groups is often very different from that obtained when the observations assess individuals within one group. It is the latter, correlations over persons, that Lynn uses to support his arguments about covariation over his selected nations.

He also uses data without fully discussing their inadequacy: Was caloric intake adjusted for body weight? Does mental hospitalization vary with psychiatric practices and facilities? Granted that the evidence pertinent to his problem is limited, he does not help his brief by using such diverse evidence as data on rats, data on human sleep (where he finds low anxiety), and questionnaire responses. A collection of tools from the kits of miscellaneous craftsmen is no substitute for a precision instrument designed for the task at hand.

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Hard Question

Is There an Optimum Level of Population? An AAAS symposium, Boston, Dec. 1969. S. FRED SINGER, Ed. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1971. xiv, 426 pp., illus. $12.50. A Population Council Book.

The first requirement of a title is that it describe the content of the book. In the present case, the job is done adequately, since the question mark of the title is never lifted to the reader's satisfaction. The question was asked of 31 university professors, foundation men, and civil servants (basis of selection unknown; it may have been random) as participants in a symposium arranged by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the results, compiled from this record