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.

DONALD W. FISKE
Department of Psychology,
University of Chicago,
Chicago, Illinois

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

Summary of answers of the 31 members of the symposium.

I. Is there an optimum size of population?	
Yes	13
No	7
No answer	11
II. What is the optimum size?	
6 to 8 billion people (in the world)	1
50 million people (in the United States)	1
20,000 to 30,000 students (in a school district)	1
12 adults (in a social group)	1
Not any particular number	3
Don't know, but we have exceeded it	7
Don't know, period	10
Optimum is not a meaningful concept	7

of the proceedings, may be seen in the table above.

Optimum is variously described in these discussions as: the size that optimizes the welfare function, or the possibility of averting the crisis of survival, or the potentialities of human creativity; a rate rather than a size, and presumably a zero rate of growth; the population characteristics that insure "the good life." The optimum population could be, in the participants' conflicting views: the maximum population; that level at which the growth of population has ended and society has firmly established its determination to live in harmonious balance with the environment; a will-o'-the-wisp that can be pursued but never grasped. They define it in terms of energy, resources, the nation's health service, the size of the brain, the environment—or do not define it at all. In fact, the indexer of the book quickly stopped collecting definitions, and does not refer to a thoughtful section by J. Spengler which is entirely devoted to the concept.

The subject of optimum population plagued demographers and economists throughout the 19th century. Until this reviewer read the present volume, he had assumed that it was widely taken for granted that the question admitted of no concrete or meaningful answer—no concrete answer, in that it depends on the criteria of optimization, would change with time, and could never be quantified anyway; no meaningful answer, since the concept could never serve as a base for policy. The practical vacuity of the issue is on the whole confirmed by the discussion in the book.

It is only fair to say that the notion of optimum may have failed in economics, because of its static character, but that it is resurrected in biological sciences, where the static environment is meaningful and a growing population leads to ecological disequilibrium. Furthermore, one should not infer from what precedes that a meaningless question necessarily results in a useless book.

The quality and scope of the papers are very diverse, ranging from the one-page platitude to the full-fledged, 30-page scientific contribution, and from a piece I assume is an elaborate practical joke to an esoteric article on primitive societies. The proceedings of symposia should not be judged on criteria of internal consistency or logical cogency. One cannot blame the participants for having answered the question from points of view in their fields of competence. This would be expected to give the least general answers but also the most informative.

In this respect, the volume starts in the grand manner, by a controversy on the optimum in relation to natural resources and energy. One receives the impression that Preston Cloud agreed to circulate his paper (entitled "Resources, population and quality of life") among a number of resource economists, energy specialists, and agronomists and let them tear it apart. On both sides, the performance looks impressive to the nontechnician. To Cloud's irrefutable "We live in a finite world," Alvin Weinberg and R. Philip Hammond oppose an irrefutable counterargument "Energy is convertible into most of the other requirements of life. The energy available in nuclear sources is essentially inexhaustible" (p. 42), and Hans H. Landsberg observes, "In the search for an optimum population, energy production and consumption provides no useful guide" (p. 63). Landsberg himself evokes "discussions among qualified scholars," after which he is "left better educated, but not better able to decide who was right and who was wrong" (p. 64). This reviewer shares in that experience.

Several contributors indicate that their subjects provide no useful guides to determining a population optimum, and that one has to look elsewhere, most often to ecological considerations. Lester R. Brown concludes an optimistic and fascinating review of "Food supplies and the optimum level of population" by stating:

> The relevant question is no longer, "Can we produce enough food?," but, "What are the environmental consequences of doing so?" . . . Based on our lack of technical understanding of the consequences of some of the technologies used to achieve our vaunted levels of productivity, and on our unwillingness to foot the bill for correcting them once we recognize some of the dangers in pursuing them, I conclude that we have already, at some time in the past, exceeded our optimum population level in the United States [p. 88].

(Logically, by the way, one should also conclude that we have never been at the optimum, as we have never understood the consequences of our technology, nor been willing to pay the bill. But the comment illustrates the desire to push the value judgment implied in "the optimum" out of the technical field, to the realm of ecological balance.)

Perhaps the most intellectually satisfying stand in the book is Barry Commoner's refusal to consider the question. He accepts as optimal the very negation of the usual meaning of the word: "that size to which population is likely to have grown by the time humane [that is, voluntary] methods of population control have achieved their ends" (p. 96). Commoner says in effect: Forget about the theoretically best size, and devote all possible efforts to staving off a catastrophe, in view of the enormous population growth that will take place in the world anyway, before the birth rate stabilizes at the level of reproduction.

ETIENNE VAN DE WALLE
Department of Demography,
University of California,
Berkeley