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ABSTRACT

Gordon Allport believed that one could learn about the content and structure of people's personalities by looking at their expressive movements. While his expectations were not absolute, he did believe that different expressive behaviors were consistent with each other, and that any given expressive behavior, for a particular individual, would be consistent across time and across situations. An important development in the study of expressive behavior is found in the literature on the deliberate regulation and control of expressive behaviors. This impression management perspective can be seen as complementary to, rather than competitive with, Allport's ideas about unselfconscious expressiveness. Several points can be made regarding the deliberate regulation of expressive behaviors: (1) it may well occur quite frequently; (2) it can ruin expressive consistency; (3) it can enhance expressive consistency; (4) attempts at deliberate regulation are not always successful; and (5) the impression management perspective on expressive behaviors suggests a different way of conceptualizing such behaviors. Allport saw much to be learned about expressive behaviors, especially facial behaviors, and he outlined six questions which might guide the scientific study of the face. Researchers have made various attempts to study these areas, and the issue of accuracy of personality perception has recently resurfaced at both the theoretical and the methodological levels. (NB)

The Ability to Judge Others

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Allport had a very strong opinion about where to look in order to figure out the content and structure of people's personalities--look at their expressive movements. That is, look not only at what people are doing, but how they are doing it; listen not only to what they are communicating, but also the manner in which they are communicating it. In telling us to take these expressive movements very seriously, Allport was not telling us to disregard what people are doing or trying to do. In fact, he maintains that what people are trying to do is most fundamental in revealing the nature of their traits. But still, he cautioned, we should not ignore the "hows" of behavior. Sometimes the ways that people do things are redundant with the fact that they are doing those things. To embellish Allport's own example a little, if a group of people were to walk to Yankee Stadium every time the Yankees had a home game, that behavior would suggest that they were very enthusiastic about Yankee baseball. If, in addition, one were to observe that on the way to the Stadium, they all had bubbly faces and sprightly gaits, and that their tee-shirts, hats, watches, and tote bags were all emblazoned with the Yankee insignia, that information would only serve to underscore the information already available from the knowledge that they attend every game. But, Allport claimed, expressive movements can do more than simply tell us the same information in a different way. Allport believed that expressive behavior is unconsciously determined and therefore can provide a clue to deep-seated aspects of personality which are not always evident in the content of behavior.

Allport had a very broad view of the kinds of behaviors that might be meaningfully expressive. Some of these are very familiar to contemporary students of nonverbal communication--they include cues such as facial expressions, body postures, speech fluency, and vocal intensity. Other expressive cues that interested Allport are somewhat less familiar to us now--cues such as the speed with which we draw things, the size of the check marks that we make when filling out checklists, and the degree to which we

overestimate the size of angles. Still other cues are ones which were once of some interest to psychologists, but, with a few exceptions, are no longer taken very seriously. These include styles of handwriting and the pressure applied to one's pen or pencil while writing.

Allport thought that these very diverse expressive behaviors fell into three basic clusters of expansiveness, emphasis, and outward tendency or extraversion. But if he had modern data-analytic techniques at his disposal, his heart would be not in the specific clusters, but in the unrotated first factor. He believed that one of the fundamental truths about expressive behaviors was that they all simultaneously expressed the same trait. To cite one of his favorite quotes, "One and the same spirit is manifest in all."

Allport's assumption, then, is clearly one of consistency of expressive movements. He believed that different expressive behaviors were consistent with each other, and that any given expressive behavior, for a particular individual, would be consistent across time and across situations. His expectations were not absolute, however. Instead, he cautioned that we should never expect consistency to be perfect. If it were, then we could take any one expressive behavior and learn everything about personality from it. Allport's belief, in contrast, was that we need to look at the entire patterning of expressive cues, and that we should expect to find as much consistency in expressive behavior as there is in the personality itself--not more and not less. Expressive behavior, like personality, includes much that is consistent, but it is also marked by conflict and contradiction.

Despite the words of caution in Allport's conclusions, the thrust of his perspective was very optimistic with regard to the question of whether we can expect to be able accurately to understand other people's feelings and traits. The promise of this perspective was not lost on subsequent researchers, and there have been attempts to search for consistencies across different kinds of expressive behaviors and for links between personality and expressive behavior.

Though no one is quite ready to tie a ribbon around the results of this research and present it to the ghost of Gordon Allport in celebration of this fiftieth anniversary, I think it is fair to say that some progress has been made. You can see evidence of that progress in the refinement in the kinds of questions that are posed. We no longer ask simply whether there is consistency nor even just how much consistency there might be; we now ask where we should look for this consistency--in what kinds of people, what kinds of situations, and along what sorts of dimensions? And we are all very sensitized to the importance of asking the complementary question of when not to expect any consistency at all.

Allport, in his 1937 book, bemoaned the fact that there was very little research on the relationship between particular traits and particular expressive behaviors, and noted that methodologically, researchers were not at all sure how to go about producing the relevant data. Representative of the immature state of the literature at that time was Adler's suggestion, based on no data, that one way to distinguish optimists from pessimists was to observe them when they are sleeping; pessimists, he said, would "curl themselves into the smallest possible space and...draw the covers over their heads" (quote is from Allport, 1937, p. 486). Contemporary researchers would know how to substantiate (or insubstantiate) this particular claim empirically, but haven't quite brought themselves to do so. However, researchers have documented other stable expressive differences; for example, we know about the loud voices of extraverts (Scherer, 1979) and the fidgety and withdrawn behavior of the socially anxious (Leary, 1983; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

I think one very important development in the study of expressive behavior that cannot be fully credited to Allport is the literature on the deliberate regulation and control of expressive behaviors. Although Allport was willing to admit--though somewhat grudgingly, I think--that people might try deliberately to disguise their expressive behaviors, he was willing to concede this only for specific behaviors or for short periods

of time. When it came to what he referred to as style, or the totality and complexity of all expressive behaviors taken together, he did not think that deliberate disguise was even a possibility. In his words, "Style...develops gradually from within; it cannot for long be simulated or feigned" (1937, p. 493).

Enter Erving Goffman (1959). And a growing list of followers and semi-followers. From an impression-management perspective, many behaviors do not emanate purely and spontaneously from the true personality within; rather, they are the product of deliberate regulation and control. Even behaviors that appear perfectly spontaneous and natural are not necessarily so; instead, they might be the creations of especially smooth and skilled self-presenters. Or, it may be the case that the expressive behaviors in question are being emitted unselfconsciously at the moment, but only because they were carefully constructed at one time in the past, then practiced and practiced and practiced until they became habitual and thus nearly indistinguishable from truly spontaneous expressions (cf. Schlenker, 1980). So the first point about the deliberate regulation of expressive behaviors is that it may well occur quite frequently.

The second point is that deliberate attempts at controlling one's expressive behaviors can ruin expressive consistency. If, for example, upon demolishing a much-loathed opponent at tennis, you allow yourself just a little tiny smile, woe to the researcher who tries to find smug mirth in every other aspect of your expressive behavior, too.

Third, attempts at deliberate regulation can also enhance expressive consistency (Lippa, 1983). If a person wanted to convince you that she was an extravert, she might deliberately try to convey extraversion in every way she could think of. She might try to don an extraverted posture and extraverted gestures, she might speak with an extravert's voice, and put on an extraverted face. So, consistency across different expressive behaviors might be accentuated. But deliberate control can also increase the consistency of the link between traits and expressive behaviors. I think that most people believe that

their true personalities, as they construe them, are immediately apparent to others (cf. DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987). They seem to feel that there's no need to make an effort to appear to be the way they think they really are, because they will appear that way even if they don't try. However, when it is really important to them that another person should be aware of their virtuous personality traits, they might not take any chances. The person in this situation who believes she is an extravert and really is an extravert will take great pains to make sure that her extraversion is abundantly clear to her partner. This is deliberate regulation, but it is regulation that strengthens the link between personality and expressiveness rather than shattering it.

A further point about deliberate attempts at expressive control is that they are not always successful. Freud (1959, p. 94), of course, delighted in warning us that if we try to keep a secret, betrayal will ooze out of us at every pore. When the data on this issue rolled in, they suggested that some pores are much ozzier than others. For example, when people are not too aroused or emotional, they tend to be very successful at regulating their facial expressions. Research on deception provides some interesting demonstrations of this. When the stakes for telling a successful lie are not too high, liars are very good at using their faces to fool their targets. In fact, in those situations, their targets might actually have a somewhat better chance of detecting the lie if they cannot see the liar's face at all. However, as the stakes go up, and it becomes more important to the liar to get away with the lie, facial expressions and sometimes other nonverbal cues, too, are likely to "leak" the information that the liar is trying to hide (DePaulo, Stone, & Lassiter, 1985).

Deliberate attempts at regulation can fail for other reasons, too. For example, some people are unaware of their expressive behaviors or insensitive to their impact on others; still others realize that such behaviors are impactful, but are inept at controlling them. Further, sometimes the very act of trying to control expressive behaviors backfires, and

the person's behavior appears to others to be awkward, unnatural, or overly controlled (DePaulo, Lanier, & Davis, 1983).

The final point I want to make about the impression management perspective on expressive behaviors is that it suggests a different way of conceptualizing such behaviors. From this perspective, expressive behaviors are not always unbridled expressions of a true underlying personality. Instead, they might sometimes be better regarded as manifestations of social skills--skills that can perhaps be practiced and trained (Argyle & Kendon, 1967; Friedman, 1979). From this perspective, socially anxious individuals are not necessarily stuck with their stammering, gaze avoidance, and desperate nods and smiles, and even extraverts can learn to calm down and shut up.

I see the impression management perspective as complementary to, rather than competitive with, Allport's ideas about unselfconscious expressiveness. Certainly there are times, such as when we are caught up in the emotion of the moment, that we are spontaneously and unselfconsciously expressive. Further, even when we do try purposefully to regulate our expressive behaviors, even these attempts may be stamped with the ink of our own personal styles.

Allport realized that much remained to be learned about expressive behaviors, especially facial behaviors, and he outlined six questions which he thought could guide the scientific study of the face. The first of these sounds much like a quaint hypothesis from fifty years ago. Allport asked whether "native factors in personality, such as temperament and intelligence, are reflected in the bodily form and structure [such as "the bony configuration of the face"]; whereas acquired traits are represented in muscular sets and changes" (1937, p. 482). The other five questions, though, could almost serve as chapter headings in a contemporary textbook on the face.

The second question Allport posed was about the eyes. Allport wondered whether "the subtleties of glance...are especially rich in expressive significance? (1937), p. 482).

Fifty years later, we now know much about the flavor of that richness. We know that gaze can express affiliation and liking, and dominance and status. We know that it can be used to gain information, to avoid giving away information, and to regulate the flow of conversation. We know that it can grab a target's attention and arouse that person, so that she is primed to figure out why she is being looked at. Finally, I think it would please Allport to hear that patterns of gazing have been empirically linked to gender, culture, psychiatric status, and, of course, personality (e.g., Argyle & Cook, 1976; Ellsworth & Ludwig, 1972; Ellsworth & Langer, 1976; Exline, 1972).

Allport's third question was, "Can patterns of facial expression...be analyzed into the contraction of separate muscles?" (1937, p. 482). It took researchers about 40 of the 50 years to get to this question in a comprehensive way, but the end results are truly elegant. In Ekman's Facial Action Coding System (Ekman & Friesen, 1976), for example, any facial movement can be described in terms of the separate facial muscles whose triggering produced that movement. This, of course, is just what Dr. Allport ordered.

Allport's fourth question was about smiling. "Why," he asked, "is the smile so disarming a pattern of expression?" Allport undoubtedly had a charming smile in mind when he posed this question, and we still don't have a complete answer to the question of why such smiles can be so disarmingly charming. But we do know that they aren't all so scintillating; they can be perfidious as well as polite and sociable, artful as well as ingenuous, and miserable as well as mirthful (e.g., Brunner, 1979; Bugental, Love, & Gianetto, 1971; Ekman & Friesen, 1982; Kraut & Johnston, 1979). And, true to tradition, research has uncovered stable individual differences in at least some of these uses of the smile (e.g., Hall, 1984).

Judge for yourself whether this fifth question has a contemporary ring to it. Allport asked, "Why so frequently does an affective reaction to liking or disliking a stranger precede (and sometimes preclude) objective judgment?" He goes on to note that

sometimes when we have a strong affective reaction to someone we just met, it may be because that person is similar to some other person about whom we feel strongly. Allport goes on to ask, "[If this is so, then] why is the affective judgment swifter than the conscious recognition of similarity?"

The sixth question Allport raised takes us back more directly to the issue with which we began--that of the ability accurately to judge others on the basis of their expressive behaviors. In formulating this last question, Allport referred to an impactful study conducted by Landis in 1924. In this study, Landis tried to elicit spontaneous emotional reactions in very involving and realistic ways. For example, one of the tasks that Landis asked his subjects to perform was to slice the head off a live rat. What he found was that when his subjects were chopping off the rat's head, some of them looked disgusted, but others looked rather somber, and still others actually laughed. This study, and others showing similar results, had a devastating impact on future research on nonverbal expressiveness. For all the wrong reasons, theorists jumped to the inappropriate conclusion that we simply could not expect people to be able to make accurate judgments of others based only on their facial expressions. Allport was particularly prescient on this issue; he thought he smelled a rat. "If," he asked, "...patterns of expression differ markedly from individual to individual, how does it happen that we are able to judge other people as well as we do?" Allport was a great believer in intuition, and in this case, his intuition told him that people can indeed in many instances make accurate judgments about others on the basis of their facial expressions. The missing link in the Landis study was the one between the situation of chopping off a rat's head and the particular emotion experienced by each individual subject. Different subjects presumably experienced different emotions or sets of emotions, and had different self-presentational goals. Years later, researchers would try to manipulate the emotions experienced by subjects, so that on any given trial, they were experiencing one of the basic emotions in

a relatively pure form. When researchers such as Izard (1971) and Ekman (1972; Ekman & Friesen, 1986) elicited emotions such as surprise, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and (most recently) contempt in this very careful way, they found that the resulting facial expressions could be recognized by persons on every continent and in every little village into which these researchers ventured. This research, of course, was on accuracy of emotion perception, and Allport was even more interested in accuracy of personality perception. But that issue, too, has resurfaced, and with a theoretical and methodological vengeance. At this very moment, two papers on accuracy of person perception have just appeared or are about to appear in Psychological Bulletin--David Funder's (1987) and Dave Kenny and Linda Albright's (in press). Accuracy is back--and just in time for this fiftieth anniversary celebration.

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