8.4: Henry Murray and Personology

Henry Murray was primarily psychodynamic in his orientation. However, the fundamental aspect of his theory is the presence of needs in our lives, and there was a distinctly humanistic aspect to his theories as well (Maddi & Costa, 1972). Thus, it seems appropriate to include Murray alongside Maslow’s discussion of human needs. In addition, Murray developed a practical application of his famous test, the Thematic Apperception Test (or TAT), for screening candidates for special work assignments. Once again, this is similar to Maslow’s forays into the field of industrial/organizational psychology. Although it is common to present different fields as fundamentally opposed, such as humanistic psychology vs. psychodynamic psychology, Murray and Maslow provide an ideal opportunity to see the commonalities that often exist between different areas in psychology. It must also be remembered that Murray was no strict adherent to the dogmatic view of psychoanalysis presented by Freud:

…psychoanalysis stands for a conceptual system which explains, it seems to me, as much as any other. But this is no reason for going in blind and swallowing the whole indigestible bolus, cannibalistically devouring the totem father in the hope of acquiring his genius, his authoritative dominance, and thus rising to power in the psychoanalytic society, that battle-ground of Little Corporals. No; I, for one, prefer to take what I please, suspend judgment, reject what I please, speak freely. (pg. 31; Murray, 1940/2008).

Brief Biography of Henry Murray

Henry Alexander Murray, Jr. was born in 1893 in New York City. He had many nicknames, and typically asked his friends to call him Harry. His family was quite wealthy, and had a noble history. He was a descendant of John Murray, the fourth Earl of Dunmore, the last Royal Governor of Virginia, and his mother’s great-grandfather, Colonel Harry Babcock, had served on General George Washington’s staff during the Revolutionary War. Murray lived a life of luxury, spending the summers on Long Island and often traveling throughout Europe. He was educated at exclusive private schools. However, his childhood was not without challenges. He felt abandoned by his mother, who suffered from...
depression much of her life, when Murray was quite young. He stuttered, and was cross-eyed. The operation to help
cure his internal strabismus accidentally left him with an external strabismus. This created problems for Murray when it
came to competing in athletics, but Murray worked hard to overcome his difficulties and he excelled at sports. He
became the quarterback of his football team and won a featherweight boxing championship at school. In college, he
made the rowing team at Harvard University (Maddi & Costa, 1972; Robinson, 1992).

In spite of his athletic success at Harvard, or perhaps because of it, he did not do well academically, receiving below
average grades. Nonetheless, he earned a degree in history in 1915. While at Harvard he also married Josephine
Rantoul, after a lengthy courtship. Despite his mediocre grades at Harvard, Murray was accepted into the Columbia
College of Physicians and Surgeons, and graduated first in his class in 1919. He then completed a surgical internship at
Presbyterian Hospital in New York, where he once treated the future president Franklin D. Roosevelt, followed by a
period of research at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research and Cambridge University, which culminated in a
Ph.D. in biochemistry in 1927. He then accepted a position as assistant to Morton Prince, and became the director of
Harvard University’s psychology clinic. Murray had never taken a psychology course, but he had some interesting
experience (Maddi & Costa, 1972; Robinson, 1992).

Murray had a psychiatry course in medical school, and had read Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*. He also had a
research assistant from Vienna, Alma Rosenthal, who had been a long-time friend of Anna Freud. While both working
together and having an intimate love affair, Rosenthal introduced Murray to the deeper dimensions of the unconscious
mind. However, it was Murray’s lifelong mistress, Christiana Morgan, who introduced him to Jung’s book *Psychology
Types*. Murray was deeply impressed by Jung’s book, but even more by Jung himself. Murray was troubled by the
intense love affair he had developed with Morgan, so he went to Zurich in order to be psychoanalyzed by Jung. Jung
managed to help Murray understand his stuttering and accept having his affair with Morgan. After all, Jung had
maintained a mistress of his own for many years. Jung also managed to convince Murray’s wife and Morgan’s husband
to accept the affair as well, and Christiana Morgan remained a very important colleague throughout Murray’s life. It has
been suggested that she played a far more important role in his theories, and in the development of the TAT, than she
has been given credit for (Maddi & Costa, 1972; Robinson, 1992). Partly because Jung had directly helped him with a
psychological problem, and partly because of the extraordinary range of ideas that Jung was open to, Murray always
spoke highly of Jung (though he believed that Jung tended toward being psychotic, just as Freud tended toward being
neurotic; see Brian, 1995).

Initially, Murray’s reappointment as clinic director was challenged by the experimental psychologists Edwin Boring and
Karl Lashley, but he was supported by the clinical psychologists, who were led by Gordon Allport (Stagner, 1988). As his
work continued he was quite productive (it was during this time that he developed the TAT), and many important
clinicians passed through the clinic. Included among them was Erik Erikson, who came to the clinic after having been
psychoanalyzed by Anna Freud in Vienna. Murray also spent a great deal of time traveling and studying in Europe, and
enjoyed a memorable evening with Sigmund and Anna Freud. As he was preparing to return to the clinic, World War II
began. Murray joined the Army Medical Corps, and eventually worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Of
particular interest was his use of the TAT to screen OSS agents for sensitive missions (the OSS was the precursor to
the CIA, so in peacetime these agents would be called spies). He was in China studying errors they had made in their
assessments when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Murray was shocked, and devoted the rest of his life to
seeking alternatives to war (Maddi & Costa, 1972; Robinson, 1992).

As his career and life approached their ends, Murray received the *Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award* from the
Placing Murray in Context: A Challenging Task

There does not seem to be a consensus on where Murray fits within the field of personality theory. Trained as a Freudian psychoanalyst, he is often grouped with the neo-Freudians. However, he has also been placed with the trait theorists, and he was a colleague of Gordon Allport. However, many personality theory textbooks don’t consider Murray worthy of significant attention. He is included alongside Maslow in this textbook because his work focused primarily on needs. In addition, the practical application of his Thematic Apperception Test in screening candidates for OSS assignments was similar to Maslow’s application of psychological principles in the business field.

The Thematic Apperception Test is certainly Murray’s claim to fame. It remains one of the best-known tests in psychology, having been applied in research, business, and therapeutic settings. Since Murray used the TAT in combination with the Rorschach Inkblot Test, he maintained his ties to traditional psychoanalysis and helped to advance the fame of the other renowned projective test. As such, his practical contributions to psychology seem to outweigh his theoretical contributions.

It has been said that the value of a theory can be measured by the research that follows. David McClelland’s use of the TAT to study the need for achievement is a common topic in introductory psychology textbooks. Thus, Murray’s contributions have inspired classic research in psychology. That alone should ensure a place of significance for Murray in the history of personality theory.

Human Needs

In *Explorations in Personality* (Murray, 1938), Murray describes people as “today’s great problem”. What can we know about someone, and how can we describe it in a way that has clear meaning? Nothing is more important in the field of psychology:

The point of view adopted in this book is that personalities constitute the subject matter of psychology, the life history of a single man being a unit with which this discipline has to deal… Our guiding thought was that personality is a temporal whole and to understand a part of it one must have sense, though vague, of the totality. (pgs. 3-4; Murray, 1938)

Thus, Murray and his colleagues sought to understand the nature of personality, in order to help them understand individuals. He referred to this direct study of personality as **personology**, simply because he considered it clumsy to refer to “the psychology of personality” instead.

Murray described the very elegant process by which the Harvard Clinic group systematically approached their studies, and then presented a lengthy series of propositions regarding a theory of personality. The primary focus of these propositions came down to what Murray called a press-need combination. A **need**, according to Murray, is a
hypothesized process that is imagined to occur in order to account for certain objective and subjective facts. In other words, when an organism reliably acts in a certain way to obtain some goal, we can determine that the organism had a need to achieve that goal. Needs are often recognized only after the fact, the behavior that satisfies the need may be a blind impulse, but it still leads toward satisfying the needed goal. **Press** is the term Murray applied to environmental objects or situations that designate directional tendencies, or that guide our needs. Anything in the environment, either harmful or beneficial to the organism, exerts press. Thus, our current needs, in the context of current environmental press, determine our ongoing behavior (Murray, 1938).

Like Maslow, Murray separated needs into biological and psychology factors based on how essential they were to one’s survival. The primary, or **viscerogenic needs**, include air, water, food, sex, harm-avoidance, etc. The secondary or **psychogenic needs**, which are presumed to derive from the primary needs, are common reaction systems and wishes. Although Murray organizes the psychogenic needs into groups, they are not rank-ordered as was Maslow’s hierarchy, so we will not consider the groups any further. Individually, there are a total of twenty-eight human needs (Murray, 1938). A partial list, with definitions, includes the following:

- Acquisition: the need to gain possessions and property
- Retention: the need to retain possession of things, to refuse to give or lend
- Order: the need to arrange, organize, put away objects, to be tidy and clean
- Construction: the need to build things
- Achievement: the need to overcome obstacles, to exercise power, to strive to do something difficult as well and as quickly as possible
- Recognition: the need to excite praise and commendation, to demand respect
- Exhibition: the need to attract attention to oneself
- Defendance: the need to defend oneself against blame or belittlement
- Counteraction: the need to proudly overcome defeat by restricting and retaliating, to defend one’s honor
- Dominance: the need to influence or control others
- Deference: the need to admire and willingly follow a superior
- Aggression: the need to assault or injure another, to harm, blame, accuse, or ridicule a person
- Abasement: the need to surrender, to comply and accept punishment
- Affiliation: the need to form friendships and associations, to greet, join, and live with others, to love
- Rejection: the need to snub, ignore, or exclude others
- Play: the need to relax, amuse oneself, seek diversion and entertainment
- Cognizance: the need to explore, to ask questions, to satisfy curiosity

According the Murray, in the course of daily life these needs are often interrelated. When a single action can satisfy more than one need, we can say that the needs are fused. However, needs can also come into conflict. For example, an individual’s need for dominance may make it difficult to satisfy their need for affiliation, unless they can find someone with a powerful need for abasement. Such a situation is one of the ways in which psychologists have tried to understand abusive relationships. In other words, when someone with a strong need for affiliation and debasement becomes involved with someone with a strong need for affiliation and dominance (particularly in a pathological sense), the results can be very unfortunate.
Anyone who has children is often reminded of their need for playing, and most any setting can provide an opportunity for play. Here, the author’s children are playing cards.

Any object, or person, that evokes a need is said to “be cathected” by the person being studied. In other words, they have invested some of their limited psychic energy (libido) into that object. Murray believed that an individual’s personality is revealed by the objects to which that person is attached by the cathectic of libido, especially if you can recognize the intensity, endurance, and rigidity of the cathectic. This process not only applies to individuals, but institutions and cultures also have predictable patterns in terms of their cathected objects. Put more simply, we can strive to understand individuals, including doing so from a cross-cultural perspective, by examining the nature and pattern of needs they seek to satisfy in their daily lives (Murray, 1938).

Morris Stein, who worked with Murray in the OSS and then earned a Ph.D. at the Harvard Clinic, combined Murray’s work on identifying human needs and Jung’s concept of psychological types. By looking at patterns in the rank-order of needs among industrial chemists and Peace Corps volunteers, Stein was able to divide each group into separate psychological types (Stein, 1963). For example, there were five basic types of industrial chemists: Type A was achievement oriented but still worked well with others; Type B focused on pleasing others, often at the expense of their own ideas; Type C was achievement oriented, but more driven and hostile than Type A; Type D was motivated by achievement and affiliation, but with an emphasis on order that protected them from criticism or blame; and Type E was particularly focused on relationships marked by cooperation and trust. As interesting as these types may be, they are quite different than the personality types identified amongst the Peace Corps volunteers (Stein, 1963). Thus, although Stein’s investigation suggests that personality types can be identified based on patterns of need, this approach probably would not provide a general theory of personology that could be applied to anyone.

The TAT and the OSS

Murray is typically credited with the development the TAT. However, the original article has Christiana Morgan as the first author (Morgan & Murray, 1935), and in Explorations in Personality most of the TAT work is described by Morgan (Murray, 1938). Apparently, when the test was revised and republished in 1943, Murray did most of the revision, partly because Morgan was quite ill at the time. The TAT consists of a series of pictures depicting potentially dramatic events (although the pictures are actually rather vague). The person taking the test is asked to provide a story that relates events preceding the picture to some final outcome of the situation. It is expected that the subject will project their own thoughts and feelings into the picture as they create their story. In order for this to be possible, Morgan and Murray made sure that in most pictures there was at least one person with whom the subject could easily empathize and identify themselves. The TAT became one of the most popular projective tests ever developed, and continues to be widely used today.

The TAT has been used in two particularly interesting settings outside of clinical psychology: to study the need for achievement (see the next section), and to screen agents for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II.
Murray used the TAT as part of a program to help select members of the OSS for critical, dangerous missions. Even before joining the OSS, Murray worked for the government in support of the war effort. In conjunction with Gordon Allport, he provided an analysis of the personality of Adolf Hitler, along with predictions as to how Hitler might react after Germany was defeated. He also helped to develop a series of questions for the crew of a captured German U-boat. The OSS program involved assessing candidate’s responses to highly stressful situations. In addition to psychological testing, using instruments such as the TAT, the candidates were put into highly stressful situations. For example, they were told to pick two men to help them put together a five-foot cube with wooden poles, blocks, and pegs. However, the available men were all secretly on Murray’s staff. One of them would act helpless and passive, whereas the other made stupid suggestions and constantly criticized the recruit. The task was, of course, never completed, but it provided Murray with the information he needed on how the candidate performed under stress (Brian, 1995; Robinson, 1992).

In the next chapter we will see that the existential psychologist Rollo May talked about our need for myths, in order to make sense out of our often senseless world. Although this was not a need included by Murray, he did have an interest in mythology. The imagination that is necessary to create a story around a picture in the TAT often involves symbolism that arises from the depths of the whole self (Murray, 1960). In this regard, Murray sounds quite similar to Jung and his theory of archetypes, and Murray discussed some classic images from our historical mythology. Of particular interest to Murray, however, is whether or not we will establish new myths in the future. There are older myths that remain oriented to our future, such as the apocalyptic myths or the myth of the Promised Land (Murray, 1960). The existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre lamented the demythologizing of the universe by science, and he advocated a remythologizing of the self (see McAdams, 1992). Given that Murray did include a need for cognizance, the need to explore, to ask questions, and to satisfy curiosity, perhaps there will be new myths created in our future. If so, psychologists will need to keep current with the cultural phenomena that influence people’s unconscious projections onto the TAT and other projective tests.

**David McClelland and the Need for Achievement**

David McClelland, who joined the faculty of Harvard University a few years before Murray retired, conducted some well-known research utilizing the TAT to examine the need for achievement. The research began shortly after World War II, and was supported by the Office of Naval Research. McClelland and his colleagues made an interesting point, in the preface to their book *The Achievement Motive* (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), about studying just one of Murray’s needs: “concentration on a limited research problem is not necessarily narrowing; it may lead ultimately into the whole of psychology.” Indeed, they felt that they learned a great deal about personality by studying one of the most important of human needs.

McClelland and his colleagues used the TAT and borrowed heavily from Murray’s procedures and scoring system. However, they made a number of modifications. They used additional pictures of their own, they often presented the pictures on a screen to a group of subjects, those subjects were all male college students, and some of their experimental conditions were designed to evoke achievement-oriented responses, or responses based on success or failure. An important aspect of this study was that the TAT (and similar pictures developed by McClelland) requires writing imaginative stories of what the subject projects onto the picture. Therefore, situations that stimulate achievement-oriented imagination can result in higher scores on the need for achievement, something that McClelland and his colleagues confirmed in Navaho children during the course of their research (suggesting it is a universal phenomenon). Overall, they found that individuals who are high in their need for achievement perform more tasks during timed tests,
improve more quickly in their ability to perform those tasks, set higher levels of aspirations, remember more of the tasks they failed to perform, and they are more future-oriented and recognize achievement-oriented situations (McClelland et al., 1953). In addition, they found a positive correlation between the need for achievement and cultures and families in which there is an emphasis on the individual development of children, with early childhood being of particular importance. After examining eight Native American cultures (Navaho, Ciricahua-Apache, Western Apache, Hopi, Comanche, Sanpoil, Paiute, and Flatheads), McClelland and his colleagues determined that the need for achievement in each culture (measured from classic legends involving the archetypal trickster "coyote") correlates highly with both an early age onset and the severity of independence training (McClelland et al., 1953). In summary, the need for achievement is a motivational force that develops in early childhood, and which pushes individuals toward accomplishing life's tasks.

An excellent essay on the need for achievement, which addresses some of the criticism this concept has endured, was written by McClelland in a new introduction for the second printing of his book *The Achieving Society* (McClelland, 1976). This book also adds to the cross-cultural reach of McClelland's work, since as he extends his theory on the need for achievement to the societies in which individuals live he also extends his theory to other societies around the world. First, the concept itself has typically been misunderstood:

…the word "achievement" cues all sorts of surplus meanings that the technically defined *n Achievement variable does not have. It refers specifically to the desire to do something better, faster, more efficiently, with less effort. It is not a generalized desire to succeed… (pg. A; McClelland, 1976)

In studying the role of need for achievement within societies, McClelland focused on business and economic development as one of the most easily compared aspects of different cultures. He believed that nations possess something like a “group mind,” which can lead the nation in certain directions. Again using literary sources as examples of cultural perspectives on the need for achievement, McClelland found support for his theory that high need for achievement preceded dramatic societal development in ancient Greece, pre-Incan Peru, Spain in the late middle ages, England leading up to the industrial revolution, and during the development of the United States (particularly in the 1800s). Once again, McClelland cautions against over-generalizing the meaning of need for achievement:

It is a very specific, rather rare, drive which focuses on the goal of efficiency and which expresses itself in activities available in the culture which permit or encourage one to be more efficient; and across cultures the most common form such activity takes is business. (pg. B; McClelland, 1976)

The question of where the need for achievement comes from continued to perplex McClelland. Although early childhood appears to be when a lasting need for achievement develops, the need for achievement can be enhanced in adults through training seminars. More importantly, however, is the question of where need for achievement comes from in the first place, how does it develop within a society? When McClelland was working in Ethiopia with the Peace Corps, he studied the Gurage. This small tribal group was treated with disdain by both the dominant Christian Amhara and the Muslim Galla tribes. And yet the Gurage were recognized for their clever business strategies, and their children wrote stories filled with imagery indicative of a high need for achievement. Since the Gurage had developed without contact with Western Christian, Muslim, or Greco-Roman cultures, they seemed to have developed their own need for achievement. Unfortunately, so little is known about their history, that McClelland was unable to identify the source of their motivation (McClelland, 1976).
In support of the contention that studying the need for achievement could provide insights into many aspects of personality, McClelland pursued a number of interesting topics throughout his career, including how societies can motivate economic growth and identify talent (McClelland, Baldwin, Bronfenbrenner, & Strodtbeck, 1958; McClelland & Winter, 1969), the power motive (McClelland, 1975), the development of social maturity and values (McClelland, 1982a; McClelland, 1982b), and a cross-cultural study on the role of alcohol in society (McClelland, Davis, Kalin, & Wanner, 1972). Moving in a quite different direction, McClelland also wrote a book entitled *The Roots of Consciousness* (McClelland, 1964), in which he argues that Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is really an expression of Jewish spiritual mysticism known as Kabbalah. We will examine Kabbalah, as well as Christian and Islamic mysticism, as a positive approach to one's lifestyle in Chapter 18.

Discussion Question

McClelland found support for his ideas on the development of the need for achievement amongst Native Americans, but he did not find that same support among the Gurage tribe in Ethiopia (they had a strong need for achievement, but the source was unclear). How important do you think it is for us to re-examine psychological theories in multiple cultures, and what would it mean for psychology if we often find contradictions?