

OBSESSIONAL PERSONALITY AND ANAL-EROTIC CHARACTER

By

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POPULAR psychiatric terms are often used uncritically and it is salutary to examine our usage from time to time. "Obsessional" is such a word; it may describe a symptom or a type of personality, with immediate possibilities of misunderstanding. Here it is used to describe a type of personality, as in the phrase "obsessional personality". The current usage of this phrase will be examined and it will be compared with the usage of the "anal-erotic character" of psychoanalysis. The two terms differ: the obsessional personality is purely descriptive while the anal-erotic character is based on a theory of personality development; yet they are often used synonymously. Do they differ in descriptive detail? If so, how and why? An attempt will be made to answer these questions by an analysis of descriptions of the terms.

THE OBSESSIONAL AND ANAL-EROTIC CHARACTERS

The existence of a number of traits commonly occurring together and forming an "obsessional personality" is accepted by most clinical psychiatrists. At the beginning of this century Kraepelin wrote of the pedantry and concern over trivialities in the premorbid personality of obsessional patients, and Janet (9) described the generally accepted picture at length. The traits usually included in the description are: "excessive cleanliness, orderliness, pedantry, conscientiousness, uncertainty, inconclusive ways of thinking and acting; perhaps also a fondness for collecting things, including money; sexual disturbances, though not of any characteristic sort, are common" (Lewis, 12).

A rough and ready practical description of this kind is open to criticism on the grounds of imprecise definition of its component traits and lack of proof of their co-existence. Lewis (11) noted that the traits could be restricted to one field and absent in another; a person might be over-orderly, but not scrupulously clean and not a collector. He did not consider the evidence for the obsessional personality complete.

Despite these reservations, a description of obsessional personality is entrenched in most standard textbooks. Of eight examined (six British and two American) only one (Henderson and Gillespie, 7) contains no such personality profile. With this consensus it can be assumed that the obsessional personality exists; it can be defined provisionally as what psychiatrists say it is. It is then possible to investigate their statements for agreement and consistency.

The anal-erotic character was first described by Freud (6) in 1908 as a "triad of characteristics which are almost always to be found together—orderliness, parsimoniousness and obstinacy". He suggested that they arose from the dissipation of anal-eroticism and its employment in other ways. This interpretation was elaborated by Fenichel (4); frugality represents a continuation of the anal habit of retention, orderliness an elaboration of obedience, and obstinacy a rebellion against the environmental requirements covering the regulation of excretory functions. Like other psychoanalytic

theories this one is difficult to test experimentally. Orlansky (17), reviewing the relation of infant care to personality, concluded that information in the field of sphincter training was too meagre either to substantiate or disprove the Freudian theory. Since then Sewell (20) has tried to correlate toilet-training practices and personality ratings made at five years of age. No differences were found between those with late and early bladder or bowel control, nor between those punished for toilet accidents and those not. Personality structure in adult life would have to be included before the results could be considered conclusive.

In fact the theory has been modified by later psychotherapists. For example, Horney believes that instead of relating these traits to the anal sphere they should be understood as a response to the sum total of early environmental experiences, and Sullivan discussed "preoccupation" in childhood as a precursor of obsessional development. Such trends in theory away from toilet training to more general environmental disturbances in childhood make the theory even less testable.

Again, disputes will be set aside and the assumption made that the anal-erotic character is what psychoanalysts say it is. A similar investigation should yield a profile which can be compared with the description of the obsessional character. By comparing the results it will be seen whether or not the current usages of "obsessional personality" and "anal-erotic character" differ.

METHOD

The collected statements of authors about the obsessional and anal-erotic characters were studied by the method of comparative matching (Raven, 18). This technique was developed to provide a method of comparing patients' statements and has been used with success in follow-up studies (Frankl and Mayer-Gross, 5) and in constructing personality profiles of groups of patients (Hetherington and White, 8; McAdam and Orme, 14). It permits comparison and grouping without losing sight of the original material, and allows some quantitative assessment of material not lending itself readily to conventional statistical methods.

Each distinct statement of the authors is recorded on a filing card. For example, the sentence "they are obstinate and stubborn" would be entered on two cards as "obstinate" and "stubborn". The cards are then sorted on a large surface, those that have the same or similar meanings being placed together. When they have been matched in this way into as small a number of piles as possible, each pile is labelled and each card is marked according to the pile in which it has been placed, to identify its position later. After an interval the cards are shuffled and a new sort is made. Each card is marked again to show its position in this second sort. After a further interval a third sort is carried out and noted. Finally the cards are sorted again, this time according to the first three sorts now recorded on each card. Some cards will have been together in all sorts and these provide categories on which there has been agreement on each occasion. With these established, other cards, which have been once in one category and twice in another, suggest relations between the categories or the possibility of amalgamating closely related categories. For example, the description "obstinate" was twice placed in a group of statements relating to persistence and once in a group relating to rigidity, suggesting that the categories of "persistence" and "rigidity" are related to each other.

Those categories that have many "joining statements" of this kind are closely related, those that have few less closely. If two categories have no

statements in common they can be regarded as distinct and unrelated. In this way a subjective but disciplined sort is made which eventually assumes a hierarchical structure. The stress laid on the various categories is evident in the number of statements each contains.

The first three sorts should be carried out by three different people. The final sort then provides a consensus of opinion on the grouping.

Many of the problems of arrangement are as much semantic as psychiatric. Many synonyms occur and in doubtful cases a dictionary and Roget's Thesaurus are helpful.

The results of the technique can be presented in two ways: as a table showing the main categories derived and their incidence, and as a detailed composite verbal portrait of the personality, entirely composed of words and statements from the original sources.

For the obsessional personality eight textbooks were selected as representative of current conventional psychiatric teaching (Curran and Partridge, 2; Ewalt, Strecker and Ebaugh, 3; Henderson and Gillespie, 7; Lewis, in Price, 13; Mayer-Gross, Slater and Roth, 15; Noyes, 16; Skottowe, 21; Valentine, 22). Of these six are British and two American. In all 113 statements were obtained and analysed.

To provide similar material for the anal-erotic character sources were selected in a different way. Psychoanalysis emphasizes original sources and it was appropriate therefore to examine the classical papers on the subject—those by Freud (6), Abraham (1) and Jones (10). These three papers furnished 90 statements which were analysed by the same comparative matching technique. As there was agreement among the authors on the three main categories laid down by Freud these were used to name the categories nearest to them that emerged in the sorting. The results are presented in the same way as those for the obsessional personality.

RESULTS

TABLE I

The Obsessional Personality

Main Categories	No. of Statements	Subcategories	No. of Statements
Inertia*	41	Inert	9
		Rigid	15
		Persistent	17
Inconclusiveness ..	31	Inconclusive	12
		Repetitive checking ..	6
		Fearing error	4
		Uncertain	9
Orderliness	25	Orderly	17
		Liking discipline ..	8
Mood Changes	9	See description	
Others	7	See description	
Total statements ..	113		

THE OBSESSIONAL PERSONALITY—COMPOSITE DESCRIPTION

(Numbers in brackets refer to the number of times the word or phrase occurs; unnumbered words or phrases occurred singly).

*Inertia**

They are dull, slow, inhibited, cautious and deliberate. They are unoriginal and unlikely to realize their potentialities.

They are *persistent*, overconscientious (4), dependable (2) and have considerable qualities of endurance (2), and drive (2). They are reliable and dogged and may be obstinate, stubborn and self-centred (2). They are *rigid* (5), inflexible (2) and unadaptable (2). Their ideals and standards are high and rigid and they are unwilling to discuss or modify them although they put them before self interest. They are austere and unapproachable.

Inconclusiveness

They are *inconclusive*, indecisive (5), vacillating in behaviour and thought, cannot leave well alone and make unsatisfiable attempts to reach order and perfection. They are always busy and never finished, harassed by responsibilities, and cannot work under pressure.

They *repeat and check* (3), repeatedly and needlessly make sure, and weigh the pros and cons of decisions.

They *fear error*. They are afraid of making mistakes or omissions, have moral scruples and fear transgressing the social code.

In general they are *uncertain of themselves* (2), insecure, worrying, doubting and hesitant, but try to hide it.

Orderliness

They are over-orderly (3) and live by routine (2), being upset if it is disturbed (2). They are meticulous (4), perfectionists (2), sticklers for precision (2), hairsplitters, and give their history with detail and care. They are fastidious, overneat (2), overtidy and overcleanly.

They are *fond of discipline*, adhering to rules and regulations themselves while being strict and domineering in their application to others. They conform carefully to their religious and moral codes, are formal in manners, and usually select a cut and dried religion. They have an exaggerated sense of duty.

Mood Changes

They are hypochondriacal, attentive to their bowels and to any trifling bodily sensation (2). They may be irritable, morose, and have neurasthenic or depressive tendencies, although they are not subject to swift changes of mood.

Others

Other characteristics noted singly are submissiveness, introversion, parsimony, a fondness for collecting and a tendency to be superstitious. Some are day-dreamers and a few have sexual sadistic fantasies.

ANAL-EROTIC PERSONALITY—COMPOSITE DESCRIPTION

Obstinacy

They are *persevering* (5), thorough (3), reliable (2), conscientious, determined, dogged, and persistent. This may lead them to be called obstinate (3), stubborn or defiant. Added to this is a quality of *selfwilled* (3) *independence*.

* These features are called *inertia* in the sense that they are difficult to move but once moving difficult to deflect (Mayer-Gross *et al.*, 16).

They are individualistic and must do things their own way (2), disliking interference (2) and believing that no one can do them as well as they can (3). They refuse to accommodate themselves to others' arrangements.

In extreme cases their obstinacy and self-will make them *power-loving*, tyrannizing, dictating, hypercritical, carping, and they may be vindictive (2), revengeful and envious.

Orderliness

They are orderly, fond of indexing and tabulating and have powers of organization. They crave symmetry (2), accuracy, "fair play" and believe there is a "right" way to do every task. They are often called pedantic (3), and perfectionistic (2). They lay emphasis on bodily cleanliness (2).

Parsimony

They are parsimonious and avaricious but may be generous and extravagant. They are interested in property and possessions (2), especially money (2). They collect (2), hoard (2) and gather objects. They are concerned over wasting time.

Procrastination

They procrastinate (2) and postpone action (2), leaving the initiative to others and interrupting actions they begin.

Mood

They are irritable, irascible, surly and malcontented, morose, unhappy and hypochondriacal. They are inaccessible but can be unusually tender.

Inertia

They are slow and heavy thinking, unproductive and avoid effort.

Others

They tend to be occupied with the reverse side of things (2) and to enjoy painting and modelling.

TABLE II

The Anal-Erotic Character

Main Categories	No. of Statements	Subcategories	No. of Statements
Obstinacy	41	Persevering	19
		Self-willed, independent	13
		Power-loving	9
Orderliness	15		
Parsimony	11		
Procrastination	6		
Mood changes	9		
Inertia	4		
Others	4		
Total statements	90		

DISCUSSION

A comparison of the two tables and the two descriptions shows that the main categories have much in common. Although the names selected for the main categories vary slightly there is agreement on the importance of orderliness, persistence and rigidity. Although less frequent, irritability and depression are common to both. For each category a counterpart can be found except for a few traits mentioned singly in each. The differences are in emphasis.

The description of the obsessional personality shows a greater emphasis on inconclusiveness and on related fears, doubts, and checking activities. This suggests an overlap or continuum between these traits and the symptoms of obsessional illness which is not evident in the anal-erotic characteristics listed.

The anal-erotic character contains more terms of opprobrium. Persistence is called obstinacy, rigidity well-willed independence, and a regard for discipline becomes love of power. Items which appear only in the anal character, or which receive more prominence there, are more obviously derived from the underlying theory, for example, the stress laid on parsimony and the item concerning the reverse side of things.

Much of the difference in emphasis can be traced to words that not only describe a trait but imply that it is used either successfully or unsuccessfully in the individual's adjustment. Thus a person whose regard for order and method is successfully utilized will be called conscientious and thorough, while a person with the same regard for order and method may be called pedantic, bureaucratic and a petty disciplinarian when his adjustment is poor. The words used in both cases refer to the same quality—in this case orderliness—but by the judgment implicit in them they make a comment on the success or failure of the individual adjustment. By selecting appropriate words it would be possible to construct two ideal personalities—one described in terms of success, the other in terms of failure. The personality described in successful terms would be one in which perseverance led to success, orderliness brought clarity and results, and insistence on checking was only sufficient to avoid errors. The personality described only in terms of failure would be one in which orderliness and discipline had become ends in themselves, in which inconclusiveness and fear of error made any task endless, and in which rigidity had become a barrier to originality and invention.

By itself, this does not account for all the verbal differences between the composite portraits. There are two different sources for accounts of the obsessional personality and the anal-erotic character: observations of the patient's behaviour and the patient's subjective account. The amount of objectivity shown by obsessional personalities in describing their traits varies greatly. A person regarded by outside observers as fanatically tidy may agree, may rate himself untidy, or claim that he does not think tidiness more important than do others. This "insight", or its lack, varies greatly from patient to patient, and if the patient's account is used alone, as in questionnaire assessment, accurate appraisal may be impossible. Those personalities who do not regard themselves as abnormal are likely to have certain terms used about them with this judgment implicit in them. Their persistence is called obstinacy and they may be labelled domineering, carping and critical. They believe that their way is the best way.

If it is accepted that most terms used to describe obsessional traits contain a comment on their "success" or "failure" or on the patient's self-awareness or "insight", the different emphases of the two composite portraits are

explicable. The anal-erotic character describes obsessional traits in successful terms. Where failure is implied it is in the direction of failure to get on with others; others suffer rather than the person described. The description of the obsessional personality contains terms implying success, but lays more emphasis on failure in the other direction—that in which the person suffers rather than others.

Sandler and Hazari (19) obtained two vectors from a factor analysis of the responses to 40 items relating to obsessionalism made by 100 neurotic patients. The patients were not necessarily obsessional neurotics or obsessional personalities. The two vectors were labelled “reactive narcissistic” and “obsessional”. The items making up the first groupings are all related to orderliness and persistence while those making up the “obsessional” vector concern inconclusiveness and definite symptoms of neurosis, for example, anxiety, compulsions, phobias, obsessions and ruminations. These findings support the idea of a dichotomy between successful and unsuccessful obsessionalism and suggest a link between unsuccessful obsessional traits and symptoms of illness. The questionnaire method employed cannot take into account differences in “insight”.

In brief, the comparative matching technique indicates that differences in the current usage of the two terms are slight. They can be explained in terms of success or failure and “insight” or its lack. Since these judgments are already implicit in the vocabulary of the psychiatrist, it would seem worth while to make them explicit in any clinical research on obsessional traits. This would involve comparing the patient’s self-assessment with that of the observer or relatives to obtain a measure of “insight”, and rating each trait in regard to its effectiveness for the individual—its success or failure. It is possible that such an analysis might yield information of practical importance in determining which obsessional personalities are likely to break down, either with obsessional, depressive or other psychiatric symptoms.

This first application of the comparative matching technique to psychiatric usage shows that a useful composite picture can be obtained. Further applications in this area can readily be seen: to provide representative opinions for teaching purposes, to compare past and present usage, or to contrast usage in different schools of psychiatry in different countries.

SUMMARY

1. The technique of comparative matching is used to construct a representative description of the obsessional personality from current textbooks and of the anal-erotic character from psychoanalytic writings.
2. Comparison of the two descriptions shows that they differ only in emphasis.
3. The differences are explained in terms of the success or failure of each trait in personal adjustment and the degree of insight present.

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