

Chapter 12

Allport: Psychology of the Individual

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Discuss how Allport's meeting with Freud affected his choice of a career.
2. Discuss Allport's definition of personality.
3. List and discuss Allport's characteristics of the psychologically healthy personality.
4. Discuss Allport's concept of personal dispositions, including how they differ from traits.
5. Explain the distinction between motivational and stylistic dispositions.
6. Define proprium, and give reasons why Allport chose this term rather than "self."
7. List and illustrate the three levels of personal dispositions.
8. Differentiate between reactive and proactive theories of motivation.
9. Explain and give examples of Allport's concept of functional autonomy.
10. Explain the rationale and the results of the analysis of Letters from Jenny.
11. Summarize the research study on the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS).
12. Discuss how religion and prayer may be related to mental health.

Lecture Outline

I. Overview of Allport's Psychology of the Individual

In Allport's theory, his major emphasis was on the *uniqueness of the individual*. He called the study of the individual **morphogenic science** and contrasted it with the **nomothetic** methods used by most other psychologists. Allport also advocated an **eclectic** approach to theory building. He accepted some of the contributions of Freud, Maslow, Rogers, Eysenck, Skinner, and others, but he believed that no one of these theorists is able to adequately explain the total growing and unique personality.

II. Biography of Gordon Allport

Gordon Willard Allport was born on November 11, 1897, in Montezuma, Indiana. His father was a physician and mother a former schoolteacher. He received a bachelor's degree with a major in philosophy. He had also taken undergraduate courses in psychology and social ethics, and both disciplines had made a lasting impression on him. As a 22-year-old student, Gordon Allport had a short but pertinent visit with Freud in Vienna, a meeting that changed Allport's life and altered the course of personality psychology in the United States. When Allport returned to the United States, he immediately enrolled in the PhD program at Harvard.

After finishing his degree, he spent the following 2 years in Europe studying under the great German psychologists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler, William Stern, Heinz Werner, and others in Berlin and Hamburg. Two years after beginning his teaching career at Harvard, Allport took a position at Dartmouth College. Four years later, he returned to Harvard and remained there for the rest of his professional career. In 1966, Allport was honored as the first Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard. On October 9, 1967, Allport, a heavy smoker, died of lung cancer.

III. Allport's Approach to Personality Theory

Answers to three interrelated questions reveal Allport's approach to personality theory:

- What is personality?
- What is the role of *conscious motivation* in personality theory?
- What are the characteristics of the psychologically healthy person?

A. What Is Personality?

Allport defined personality as “*the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment.*” The term psychophysical emphasizes the importance of both the psychological and the physical aspects of personality. In summary, personality is both physical and psychological; it includes both overt behaviors and covert thoughts; it not only *is* something, but also it *does* something. Personality is both substance and change, both product and process, both structure and growth.

B. What Is the Role of Conscious Motivation?

More than any other personality theorist, Allport emphasized the importance of conscious motivation. His emphasis on conscious motivation probably goes back to his short-lived discussion with Freud, when Allport had not yet selected a career in psychology. Whereas Freud would assume an underlying unconscious meaning to the story of the little boy on the tram, Allport was inclined to accept self-reports at face value. However, Allport (1961) did not ignore the existence or even the importance of unconscious processes. He recognized the fact that some motivation is driven by hidden impulses and sublimated drives.

C. What Are the Characteristics of a Healthy Person?

A few general assumptions are required to understand Allport's conception of the mature personality. First, psychologically mature people are characterized by **proactive** behavior; that is, they not only react to external stimuli, but they are capable of consciously acting on their environment in new and innovative ways and causing their environment to react to them. Several years before Maslow conceptualized the self-actualizing personality, Allport listed six criteria for the mature personality:

- *extension of the sense of self;*
- *warm relating of self to others;*
- *emotional security or self-acceptance;*
- *realistic perception;*
- *insight and humor; and*
- *unifying philosophy of life.*

IV. Structure of Personality

To Allport, the most important structures of personality are those that permit the description of the person in terms of individual characteristics, and he called these individual characteristics *personal dispositions*.

A. Personal Dispositions

Allport carefully distinguished between *common traits* and individual traits. **Common traits** are general characteristics held in common by many people. **Personal dispositions** are of even greater importance because they permit researchers to study a single individual. Allport (1961) defined a personal disposition as “a generalized neuropsychic structure (peculiar to the individual), with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide consistent (equivalent) forms of adaptive and stylistic behavior.”

Some people possess an eminent characteristic or ruling passion so outstanding that it dominates their lives. Allport (1961) called these personal dispositions **cardinal dispositions**. They are so obvious that they cannot be hidden; nearly every action in a person’s life revolves around this one cardinal disposition. Few people have cardinal dispositions, but everyone has several **central dispositions**, which include the 5–10 most outstanding characteristics around which a person’s life focuses. Less conspicuous but far greater in number than central dispositions are the **secondary dispositions**. Everyone has many secondary dispositions that are not central to the personality yet occur with some regularity and are responsible for much of one’s specific behaviors. All personal dispositions are dynamic in the sense that they have motivational power. Nevertheless, some are much more strongly felt than others, and Allport called these intensely experienced dispositions *motivational dispositions*.

Unlike Maslow, who drew a clear line between coping and expressive behaviors, Allport saw no distinct division between motivational and stylistic personal dispositions. Although some dispositions are clearly stylistic, others are obviously based on a strongly felt need and are thus motivational.

B. Proprium

Allport used the term **proprium** to refer to those behaviors and characteristics that people regard as warm, central, and important in their lives. The proprium is not the whole personality, because many characteristics and behaviors of a person are not warm and central; rather, they exist on the periphery of personality.

These nonpropriate behaviors include the following:

- basic drives and needs that are ordinarily met and satisfied without much difficulty;
- tribal customs such as wearing clothes, saying “hello” to people, and driving on the right side of the road; and
- habitual behaviors, such as smoking or brushing one’s teeth, that are performed automatically and that are not crucial to the person’s sense of self.

V. Motivation

Most people, Allport believed, are motivated by present drives rather than by past events and are aware of what they are doing and have some understanding of why they are doing it. He also contended that theories of motivation must consider the differences between peripheral motives and **propriate strivings**. Peripheral motives are those that *reduce a need*, whereas propriate strivings seek to *maintain tension and disequilibrium*.

A. A Theory of Motivation

Allport believed that a useful theory of personality rests on the assumption that people not only react to their environment but also shape their environment and cause it to react to them. Psychoanalysis and the various learning theories are basically homeostatic, or **reactive**, theories because they see people as being motivated primarily by needs to reduce tension and to return to a state of equilibrium.

An adequate theory of personality, Allport contended, must allow for *proactive behavior*. Allport claimed that theories of unchanging motives are incomplete because they are limited to an explanation of reactive behavior. The mature person, however, is not motivated merely to seek pleasure and reduce pain but to acquire new systems of motivation that are functionally independent from their original motives.

B. Functional Autonomy

The concept of **functional autonomy** represents Allport’s most distinctive and, at the same time, most controversial postulate. In general, the concept of functional autonomy holds that some, but not all, human motives are functionally independent from the original motive responsible for the behavior.

Allport (1961) defined functional autonomy as “*any acquired system of motivation in which the tensions involved are not of the same kind as the antecedent tensions from which the acquired system developed.*” In other words, what begins as one motive may grow into

a new one that is historically continuous with the original but functionally autonomous from it.

- The more elementary of the two levels of functional autonomy is **perseverative functional autonomy**. Allport borrowed this term from the word “perseveration,” which is the tendency of an impression to leave an influence on subsequent experience.
- The master system of motivation that confers unity on personality is **proprieate functional autonomy**, which refers to those self-sustaining motives that are related to the proprium.

In general, *a present motive is functionally autonomous to the extent that it seeks new goals*, meaning that the behavior will continue even as the motivation for it changes.

Functional autonomy is not an explanation for all human motivation. Allport (1961) listed eight processes that are not functionally autonomous:

- biological drives, such as eating, breathing, and sleeping;
- motives directly linked to the reduction of basic drives;
- reflex actions such as an eyeblink;
- constitutional equipment, namely, physique, intelligence, and temperament;
- habits in the process of being formed;
- patterns of behavior that require primary reinforcement;
- sublimations that can be tied to childhood sexual desires; and
- some neurotic or pathological symptoms.

VI. The Study of the Individual

Because psychology has historically dealt with general laws and characteristics that people have in common, Allport repeatedly advocated the development and the use of research methods that study the individual.

A. Morphogenic Science

Early in his writings, Allport distinguished between two scientific approaches: the *nomothetic*, which seeks general laws, and the **idiographic**, which refers to that which is peculiar to the single case. Both “idiographic” and “morphogenic” pertain to the individual, but “idiographic” does not suggest structure or pattern.

Semimorphogenic approaches include self-rating scales, such as the adjective checklist; standardized tests in which people are compared to themselves rather than a norm group; the Allport–Vernon–Lindzey *Study of Values* (1960); and the Q sort technique of Stephenson (1953). Consistent with common sense, but contrary to many psychologists, Allport was willing to accept at face value the self-disclosure statements of most participants in a study.

B. The Diaries of Marion Taylor

In the late 1930s, Allport and his wife, Ada, became acquainted with an extremely rich source of personal data about a woman whom they called Marion Taylor. Taylor also included descriptions of her by her mother, her younger sister, her favorite teacher, two of her friends, and a neighbor, as well as notes in a baby book, school records, scores on several psychological tests, autobiographical material, and two personal meetings with Ada Allport. However, the Allports never published this material. However, their work with Marion Taylor probably helped them organize and publish a second case—the story of Jenny Gove Masterson, another pseudonym.

C. Letters From Jenny

Allport's morphogenic approach to the study of lives is best illustrated in his famous Letters from Jenny. These letters reveal the story of an older woman and her intense love/hate feelings toward her son, Ross. Between March 1926 (when she was 58) and October 1937 (when she died), Jenny wrote a series of 301 letters to Ross's former college roommate, Glenn, and his wife, Isabel, who almost certainly were Gordon and Ada Allport (Winter, 1993). Two of Gordon Allport's students, Alfred Baldwin and Jeffrey Paige, used *personal structure analysis* and factor analysis, respectively. Allport used a commonsense approach to discern Jenny's personality structure as revealed by her letters. All three approaches yielded similar results, which indicate the feasibility of morphogenic studies.

VII. Related Research

More than any other personality theorist, Gordon Allport maintained a lifelong active interest in the scientific study of religion and published six lectures on the subject under the title *The Individual and His Religion* (Allport, 1950).

A. Understanding and Reducing Prejudice

Allport was interested in prejudice, and developing ways to reduce racial prejudice was of the utmost importance to him. Allport (1954) proposed that one of the most important components to reducing prejudice was contact: If members of majority and minority groups interacted more under optimal conditions, there would be less prejudice. This became known as the *contact hypothesis*, and the optimal conditions were relatively simple:

- equal status between the two groups;
- common goals;
- cooperation between groups; and
- support of an authority figure, law, or custom.

In two complex meta-analyses of over 500 studies and more than 250,000 participants, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) and Pettigrew et al. (2011) examined the validity of Allport's

contact hypothesis. They found that, indeed, intergroup contact reduces prejudice, and that Allport's four conditions for optimal contact between groups facilitate this effect.

B. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religious Orientation

Allport believed that a deep religious commitment was a mark of a mature individual, but he also believed that not all churchgoers have a mature religious orientation. Some, in fact, are highly prejudiced.

To understand the relationship between church attendance and prejudice, Allport and Ross (1967) developed the Religious Orientation Scale (ROS), which is applicable only for churchgoers. Allport and Ross assumed that people with an extrinsic orientation have a utilitarian view of religion; that is, they see it as a means to an end. There is a self-serving religion of comfort and social convention. People with an intrinsic orientation live their religion and find their master motive in their religious faith. Rather than using religion for some end, they bring other needs into harmony with their religious values.

One recent study explored whether intrinsic versus extrinsic religiosity influences individuals' conceptualizations of forgiveness and their attitudes toward forgiveness as a therapeutic intervention (Seedall & Butler, 2014). Seedall and Butler (2014) found that, as hypothesized, intrinsically religious participants were significantly more accepting of forgiveness in therapy than extrinsically religious participants were.

Is Allport and Ross's model applicable to other religions? Since the 2000s, researchers have attempted to answer this question, especially as it might apply to Islamic religion. Among the first to expand Allport's theory of religious motivation to Muslims was Ghorbani and colleagues (2002) and Watson et al. (2002). Ghorbani and colleagues (2002) developed a new scale, the Muslim-Christian Religious Orientation Scales (MCROS) that was not only geared to Muslim and Christian belief systems but it also expanded the definition and measurement of extrinsic religiosity. Other researchers have used modified measures of the Allport-Ross ROS Scale in studying the connection between religiosity and psychological health outcomes in Muslim students (Butt, 2014).

VIII. Critique of Allport

Allport based his theory of personality more on philosophical speculation and common sense than on scientific investigations. As a consequence, his theory rates low on its ability to organize psychological data and to be falsified. Also, on the criterion of generating research, Allport's theory receives a moderate rating.

IX. Concept of Humanity

Allport had a basically *optimistic* and hopeful view of human nature. He believed people desire both change and challenge; and people are active, purposive, and flexible. On the six

dimensions for a concept of humanity, he rates higher than any other theorist on conscious influences and on the uniqueness of the individual. Allport (1961) adopted a limited-freedom approach. His view of humanity is more teleological than causal. He also held an optimistic view of humanity, maintaining that people have at least limited freedom. While the growth of personality always takes place within a social setting, Allport placed only moderate emphasis on social factors.