
Gordon Willard Allport
Jan McDougal '01



Gordon Willard Allport was born on November 11, 1897, in Montezuma, Indiana, the fourth and youngest son of John E. Allport and Nellie Wise Allport. His father had engaged in a number of business ventures before becoming a physician at about the time of Gordon's birth. His mother was a former schoolteacher, who taught him the virtues of proper conduct as well as the importance of searching for ultimate religious answers. Allport developed an early interest in philosophy and religion. In the fall of 1915, he entered Harvard, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1919 with a major in philosophy and economics.

He received an opportunity to teach in Turkey and spent the academic year, 1919-1920 in Europe teaching English and Sociology at Robert College in Istanbul. Back at Harvard, Allport finished his work, receiving a Ph.D. in psychology in 1922 at age 24. Harvard offered him a traveling fellowship, so he spent 2 years in Europe studying under German psychologists Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Kohler and others in Berlin and Hamburg (Allport, 1967).

Gordon Allport had a basically optimistic and hopeful view of life. He is considered to be the first personality theorist to study the psychologically healthy individual. He believed that human beings are goal-oriented, proactive and motivated by variety of forces, most of which are within the consciousness. Allport hypothesized the attributes of the mature personality. Psychologically healthy people have the potential to learn new patterns of behavior and grow during any period of their lives.

He developed a theory of personality that emphasized the uniqueness of psychologically healthy individual who strives proactively toward goals that they have consciously set. He criticized other theories that overlooked the essence of the individual person and overemphasizing the state of unconsciousness. Psychologically mature personalities are characterized by proactive behavior, which defines that people not only react to the external stimuli, but are capable of consciously acting on their environment in new and innovative ways and causing their environment to react to them.

He stressed the study of morphogenic science, which gathers data on a single individual. Morphogenic methods can reveal a great deal of information about one person, which can also lead to the generalization of other individuals. Morphogenic refers to patterned properties of the whole individual and allows for intra-personal comparisons. The attributes of an individual are comprised by their unique needs. These individual patterns are the subject matter of morphogenic procedures (Allport, 1937).

Allport's approach to the study of personality is characterized by several key concepts.

He emphasized on the individual characteristics. Allport's approach to the study of personality is uniqueness of the individual. He believed that in some manner, each person is unlike any other individual. The two basic units of personality are personal dispositions and the proprium. He rejected the label trait theories. He believed that the term trait implies a general characteristic held by several people. Allport distinguished between common traits and individual traits, which he called personal dispositions. Common traits described the characteristics of people within a given culture or an environment.

Allport placed the levels of personal dispositions on a continuum from those that are most central to those that are only important to the person. The three levels of personal dispositions are cardinal dispositions, which are exceedingly prominent in a person, followed by central dispositions, which are less dominating, but indicate the person as unique. Central dispositions guide much of a person's adaptive and stylistic behavior, which blends into secondary dispositions, which are less descriptive of that individual. However, one can not infer that an individual's secondary dispositions are less intense than another individual's central dispositions. Comparisons are inappropriate to personal dispositions.

Cardinal dispositions are considered to be an eminent characteristic or ruling passion so outstanding that it dominates their lives. They are so obvious that they cannot be hidden; nearly every action in a person's life revolves around one cardinal disposition. Few people have cardinal dispositions, but everyone has several central dispositions, which includes 5 to 10 most outstanding characteristics around which a person's life focuses. Allport described central dispositions as those that would be listed in an accurate letter of recommendation written by someone who knew the person quite well. Allport believed that 5 to 10 central dispositions that our friends and close acquaintances would agree are descriptive of our personality. A less conspicuous but far greater in number than central dispositions are the secondary dispositions. Everyone has many secondary dispositions, which are not central to the personality but are responsible for much of one's specific behaviors (Allport, 1961).

All personal dispositions are dynamic in the sense that they have motivational powers. These strongly felt dispositions receive their motivation from basic needs and drives. Allport called these intensely experienced dispositions motivational dispositions. He referred to personal dispositions that are less intensely experienced as stylistic dispositions. Both motivational and stylistic dispositions are close to the core of personality. Stylistic dispositions guide action, such as politeness, whereas eating is more motivational, which initiate action.

The term proprium refers to those behaviors and characteristics that we regard as warm, central, and important in our lives. The proprium is not the whole personality, because many characteristics and behaviors of a person are not warm and central. These behaviors include basic drives and needs that are ordinarily met, tribal customs such as saying, "hello" to people, wearing clothes, and driving on the right side of the road; and habitual behaviors such as, brushing one's teeth, that are performed automatically and that are not crucial to the person's sense of self. As the warm center of personality, the proprium includes certain aspects of person that are regarded as important to a sense of self-identity and self-growth. The proprium includes a person's values as well as the part of the conscience that is personal and consistent within a given culture (Allport, 1961).

Allport stressed the importance of psychologically healthy or mature personality. He believed that healthy individuals are motivated by conscious processes that are more autonomous than unhealthy individuals. Psychologically mature adults are motivated mostly by conscious thoughts, with unconscious processes playing a minor role in their behavior. Mature people are characterized by activity, security, and freedom of choice. Healthy adults are generally more aware of what they are doing and their reasons for doing it. In most cases, they have experienced trauma-free childhood, even if their later years may involve conflict and suffering. Age is not considered to be a requisite for maturity, however, healthy individuals seem to become more mature as they get older. A psychologically healthy personality requires extension of self; they develop non-egotistical

interests in activities that are not centered around them. Second they have the capacity to love others non-possessively and unselfishly. They also treat other people with respect and are aware of their needs and desires. Psychologically healthy people possess realistic perceptions of their environment; they do not live in a distorted reality to fit their own wishes. They also possess emotional security and recognize frustrations and inconveniences are part of living (Allport, 1961).

Throughout his research, Allport advocated an eclectic approach to the personality theory. He favored eclecticism, which was considered less restrictive, and offered more hope in understanding the complete and unique person. Allport did not agree with the works of Freud, Cattell, and Skinner; he believed that these theorists were unable to explain the growing and changing personality. He believed that comprehensive personality should be based on insights gathered from learning theory, social psychology, trait theory as well as his own psychology of the individual. He received numerous awards and recognitions for his accomplishments. On October 9, 1967, Allport, a heavy smoker, died of lung cancer.

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