Trait Theory: The Man Who Met Freud and Defined Personality

Authored by

mohammad looti

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Gordon Allport was born in Montezuma, Indiana, in 1897, the youngest of four brothers. A shy and studious boy, he was teased quite a bit and lived a fairly isolated childhood. His father was a country doctor, which meant that Gordon grew up with his father's patients and nurses and all the paraphernalia of a miniature hospital. Everyone worked hard. His early life was otherwise fairly pleasant and uneventful.

One of Allport's stories is always mentioned in his biographies: When he was 22, he traveled to Vienna. He had arranged to meet with the great Sigmund Freud! When he arrived in Freud's office, Freud simply sat and waited for Gordon to begin. After a little bit, Gordon could no longer stand the silence, and he blurted out an observation he had made on his way to meet Freud. He mentioned that he had seen a little boy on the bus who was very upset at having to sit where a dirty old man had sat previously. Gordon thought this was likely something he had learned from his mother, a very neat and apparently rather domineering type. Freud, instead of taking it as a simple observation, took it to be an expression of some deep, unconscious process in Gordon's mind, and said "And was that little boy you?

This experience made him realize that depth psychology sometimes digs too deeply, in the same way that he had earlier realized that behaviorism often doesn't dig deeply enough!

Allport received his Ph.D. in Psychology in 1922 from Harvard, following in the foot steps of his brother Floyd, who became an important social psychologist. His career was spent developing his theory, examining such social issues as prejudice, and developing personality tests. He died in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1967.

Theory

One thing that motivates human beings is the tendency to satisfy biological survival needs, which Allport referred to as opportunistic functioning. He noted that opportunistic functioning can be characterized as reactive, past-oriented, and, of course, biological.
But Allport felt that opportunistic functioning was relatively unimportant for understanding most of human behavior. Most human behavior, he believed, is motivated by something very different -- functioning in a manner expressive of the self -- which he called propriate functioning. Most of what we do in life is a matter of being who we are! Propriate functioning can be characterized as proactive, future-oriented, and psychological.

Propriate comes from the word proprium, which is Allport's name for that essential concept, the self. He had reviewed hundreds of definitions for that concept and came to feel that, in order to more scientific, it would be necessary to dispense with the common word self and substitute something else. For better or worse, the word proprium never caught on.

To get an intuitive feel for what propriate functioning means, think of the last time you wanted to do

something or become something because you really felt that doing or becoming that something would be expressive of the things about yourself that you believe to be most important. Remember the last time you did something to express your self, the last time you told yourself, "that's really me!" Doing things in keeping with what you really are, that's propriate functioning.

The proprium

Putting so much emphasis on the self or proprium, Allport wanted to define it as carefully as possible. He came at that task from two directions, phenomenologically and functionally.

First, phenomenologically, i.e. the self as experienced: He suggested that the self is composed of the aspects of your experiencing that you see as most essential (as opposed to incidental or accidental), warm (or "precious," as opposed to emotionally cool), and central (as opposed to peripheral).

His functional definition became a developmental theory all by itself. The self has seven functions, which tend to arise at certain times of one's life:

1. Sense of body
2. Self-identity
3. Self-esteem
4. Self-extension
5. Self-image
6. Rational coping
7. Propriate striving

Sense of body develops in the first two years of life. We have one, we feel its closeness, its warmth. It has boundaries that pain and injury, touch and movement, make us aware of. Allport had a favorite demonstration of this aspect of self: Imagine spitting saliva into a cup -- and then drinking it down! What's the problem? It's the same stuff you swallow all day long! But, of course, it has gone out from your bodily self and become, thereby, foreign to you.

Self-identity also develops in the first two years. There comes a point were we recognize ourselves as continuing, as having a past, present, and future. We see ourselves as individual entities, separate and different from others. We even have a name! Will you be the same person when you wake up tomorrow? Of course -- we take that continuity for granted.

Self-esteem develops between two and four years old. There also comes a time when we recognize that we have value, to others and to ourselves. This is especially tied to a continuing development of our competencies. This, for Allport, is what the "anal" stage is really all about!

Self-extension develops between four and six. Certain things, people, and events around us also come to be thought of as central and warm, essential to my existence. "My" is very close to "me!" Some people define themselves in terms of their parents, spouse, or children, their clan, gang, community, college, or nation. Some find their identity in activities: I'm a psychologist, a student, a bricklayer. Some find identity in a place: my house, my hometown. When my child does something wrong, why do I feel guilty? If someone scratches my car, why do I feel like they just punches me?

Self-image also develops between four and six. This is the "looking-glass self," the me as others see me. This is the impression I make on others, my "look," my social esteem or status, including my sexual identity. It is the beginning of what others call conscience, ideal self, and persona.

Rational coping is learned predominantly in the years from six till twelve. The child begins to develop his or her abilities to deal with life's problems rationally and effectively. This is analogous to Erikson's "industry."

Propriate striving doesn't usually begin till after twelve years old. This is my self as goals, ideal, plans, vocations, callings, a sense of direction, a sense of purpose. The culmination of propriate striving, according to Allport, is the ability to say that I am the proprietor of my life -- i.e. the owner and operator!

(One can't help but notice the time periods Allport uses -- they are very close to the time periods of Freud's stages! But please understand that Allport's scheme is not a stage theory -- just a description of the usual way people develop.)

Traits or dispositions

Now, as the proprium is developing in this way, we are also developing personal traits, or personal dispositions. Allport originally used the word traits, but found that so many people assumed he meant traits as perceived by someone looking at another person or measured by personality tests, rather than as unique, individual characteristics within a person, that he changed it to dispositions.

A personal disposition is defined 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."

A personal disposition produces equivalences in function and meaning between various perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and actions that are not necessarily equivalent in the natural world, or in anyone else's mind. A person with the personal disposition "fear of communism" may equate Russians, liberals, professors, strikers, social activists, environmentalists, feminists, and so on. He may lump them all together and respond to any of them with a set of behaviors that express his fear: making speeches, writing letters, voting, arming himself, getting angry, etc.

Another way to put it is to say that dispositions are concrete, easily recognized, consistencies in our behaviors.

Allport believes that traits are essentially unique to each individual: One person's "fear of communism" isn't the same as another's. And you can't really expect that knowledge of other people is going to help you understand any one particular person. For this reason, Allport strongly pushed what he called idiographic methods -- methods that focused on studying one person at a time, such as interviews, observation, analysis of letters or diaries, and so on. These are nowadays generally referred to as qualitative methods.

Allport does recognize that within any particular culture, there are common traits or dispositions, ones that are a part of that culture, that everyone in that culture recognizes and names. In our culture, we commonly differentiate between introverts and extraverts or liberals and conservatives, and we all know (roughly) what we mean. But another culture may not recognize these. What, for example, would liberal and conservative mean in the middle ages?

Allport recognizes that some traits are more closely tied to the proprium (one's self) than others. Central traits are the building blocks of your personality. When you describe someone, you are likely to use words that refer to these central traits: smart, dumb, wild, shy, sneaky, dopey, grumpy.... He noted that most people have somewhere between five and ten of these.

There are also secondary traits, ones that aren't quite so obvious, or so general, or so consistent. Preferences, attitudes, situational traits are all secondary. For example, "he gets angry when you try to tickle him," "she has some very unusual sexual preferences," and "you can't take him to restaurants."

But then there are cardinal traits. These are the traits that some people have which practically define their life. Someone who spends their life seeking fame, or fortune, or sex is such a person. Often we use specific historical people to name these cardinal traits: Scrooge (greed), Joan of Arc (heroic self-sacrifice), Mother Teresa (religious service), Marquis de Sade (sadism), Machiavelli (political ruthlessness), and so on. Relatively few people develop a cardinal trait. If they do, it tends to be late in life.

Psychological maturity

If you have a well-developed proprium and a rich, adaptive set of dispositions, you have attained psychological maturity, Allport's term for mental health. He lists seven characteristics:

Specific, enduring extensions of self, i.e. involvement.
Dependable techniques for warm relating to others (e.g. trust, empathy, genuineness, tolerance...).
Emotional security and self-acceptance.

Habits of realistic perception (as opposed to defensiveness).
Problem-centeredness, and the development of problem-solving skills.
Self-objectification -- insight into one's own behavior, the ability to laugh at oneself, etc.
A unifying philosophy of life, including a particular value orientation, differentiated religious sentiment, and a personalized conscience.

Functional autonomy

Allport didn't believe in looking too much into a person's past in order to understand his present. This belief is most strongly evident in the concept of functional autonomy: Your motives today are independent (autonomous) of their origins. It doesn't matter, for example, why you wanted to become a doctor, or why you developed a taste for olives or for kinky sex, the fact is that this is the way you are now!

Functional autonomy comes in two flavors: The first is perseverative functional autonomy. This refers essentially to habits -- behaviors that no longer serve their original purpose, but still continue. You may have started smoking as a symbol of adolescent rebellion, for example, but now you smoke because you can't quit! Social rituals such as saying "bless you" when someone sneezes had a reason once upon a time (during the plague, a sneeze was a far more serious symptom than it is today!), but now continues because it is seen as polite.

Propriate functional autonomy is something a bit more self-directed than habits. Values are the usual example. Perhaps you were punished for being selfish when you were a child. That doesn't in any way detract from your well-known generosity today -- it has become your value!
Perhaps you can see how the idea of functional autonomy may have derived from Allport's frustration with Freud (or the behaviorists). Of course, that hardly means that it's only a defensive belief on Allport's part!

The idea of propriate functional autonomy -- values -- lead Allport and his associates Vernon and Lindzey to develop a categorization of values (in a book called A Study of Values, 1960) and a test of values.

the theoretical -- a scientist, for example, values truth.
the economic -- a businessperson may value usefulness.
the aesthetic -- an artist naturally values beauty.
the social -- a nurse may have a strong love of people.
the political -- a politician may value power.
the religious -- a monk or nun probably values unity.

Most of us, of course, have several of these values at more moderate levels, plus we may value one or two of these quite negatively. There are modern tests used for helping kids find their

careers that have very similar dimensions.

Conclusions

Allport is one of those theorists who was so right about so many things that his ideas have simply passed on into the spirit of the times. His theory is one of the first humanistic theories, and would influence many others, including Kelly, Maslow, and Rogers. One unfortunate aspect of his theory is his original use of the word trait, which brought down the wrath of a number of situationally oriented behaviorists who would have been much more open to his theory if they had bothered to understand it. But that has always been a weakness of psychology in general and personality in particular: Ignorance of the past and the theories and research of others.