

# Gordon Allport: Architect of Modern Personality Theory

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Gordon Willard Allport

Gordon Willard Allport (November 11, 1897 - October 9, 1967) was an American psychologist. Allport was one of the first psychologists to focus on the study of the personality, and is often referred to as one of the founding figures of personality psychology. He contributed to the formation of Values Scales and rejected both a psychoanalytic approach to personality, which he

thought often went too deep, and a behavioral approach, which he thought often did not go deep enough. He emphasized the uniqueness of each individual, and the importance of the present context, as opposed to past history, for understanding the personality.

Allport had a profound and lasting influence on the field of psychology, even though his work is cited much less often than other well known figures. Part of his influence stemmed from his knack for attacking and broadly conceptualizing important and interesting topics (e.g. rumor, prejudice, religion, traits). Part of his influence was a result of the deep and lasting impression he made on his students during his long teaching career, many of whom went on to have important psychological careers. Among his many students were Jerome S. Bruner, Anthony Greenwald, Stanley Milgram, Leo Postman, Thomas Pettigrew, and M. Brewster Smith.

### **Allport's trait theory**

Allport is known as a "trait" psychologist. One of his early projects was to go through the dictionary and locate every term that he thought could describe a person. From this, he developed a list of 4500 trait like words. He organized these into three levels of traits. This is similar to Goldberg's fundamental lexical hypothesis, or the hypothesis that over time, humans develop widely used, generic terms for individual differences in their daily interactions.

Allport's three trait levels are:

Cardinal trait - This is the trait that dominates and shapes a person's behavior. These are ruling passions/obsessions, such as a need for money, fame etc.

Central trait - This is a general characteristic found in some degree in every person. These are the basic building blocks that shape most of our behavior although they are not as overwhelming as cardinal traits. An example of a central trait would be honesty.

Secondary trait - These are characteristics seen only in certain circumstances (such as particular likes or dislikes that a very close friend may know). They must be included to provide a complete picture of human complexity.

### **Genotypes and phenotypes**

Allport hypothesized the idea of internal and external forces that influence an individual's behavior. He called these forces Genotypes and Phenotypes. Genotypes are internal forces relates to how a person retains information and uses it to interact with the external world. Phenotypes are external forces, these relate to the way an individual accepts his surroundings and how others influence their behavior. These forces generate the ways in which we behave and are the groundwork for the creation of individual traits.

## Functional autonomy of motives

Allport was one of the first researchers to draw a distinction between Motive and Drive. He suggested that a drive formed as a reaction to a motive may outgrow the motive as a reason. The drive then is autonomous and distinct from the motive, whether it is instinct or any other. Allport gives the example of a man who seeks to perfect his task or craft. His reasons may be a sense of inferiority engrained in his childhood but his diligence in his work and the motive it acquires later on is a need to excel in his chosen profession. In the words of Allport, the theory "avoids the absurdity of regarding the energy of life now, in the present, as somehow consisting of early archaic forms (instincts, prepotent reflexes, or the never-changing Id). Learning brings new systems of interests into existence just as it does new abilities and skills. At each stage of development these interests are always contemporary; whatever drives, drives now." We also can see functional autonomy (the notion that motives can become independent of their origins) in the drive associated with making money to buy goods and services when it becomes an end in itself. Many obsessive and compulsive acts and thoughts might be manifestations of functional autonomy .