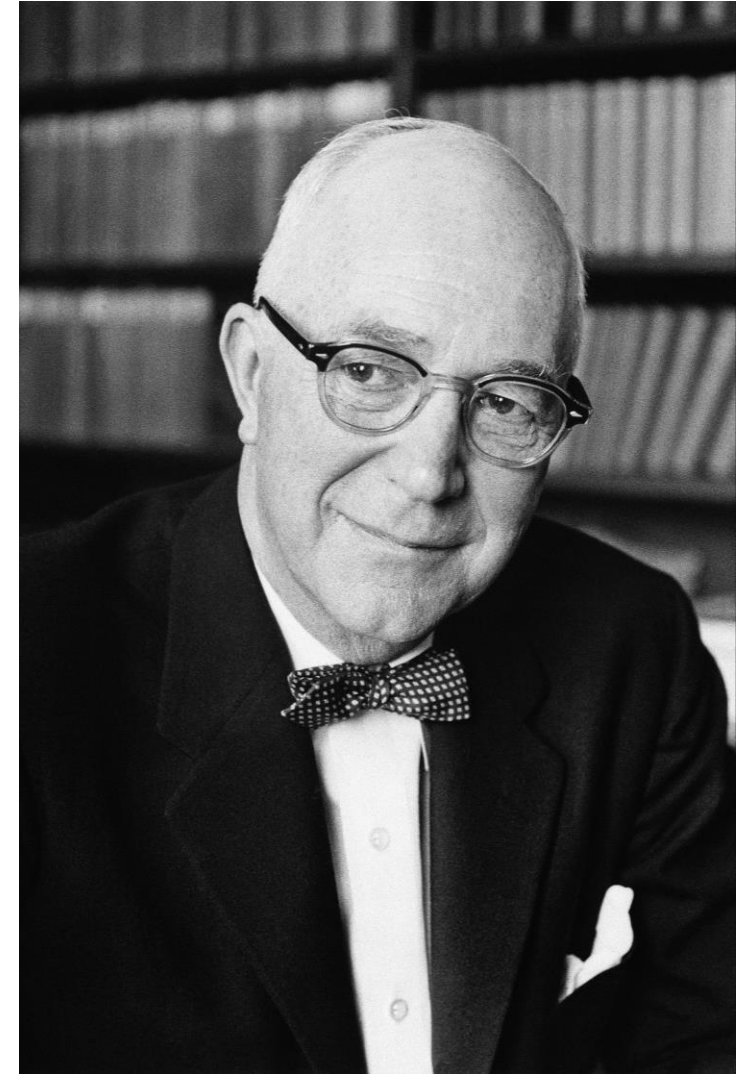# Gordon Allport & the Development of the Proprium

Gordon Allport

Life of Allport

- During a career that spanned more than four decades, **Gordon Allport** (1897–1967) brought personality into the mainstream by making it an academically respectable topic.

- In the mid-1900s, he formulated a theory of personality development in which traits play a prominent role.

Life of Allport

- Born in Indiana as the youngest of four boys
  - Mother was a teacher, strict, and religious
  - Father was a salesman turned medical doctor
- Developed inferiority feelings for which he attempted to compensate by striving to excel (by becoming a world-renowned psychologist)
  - Was isolated from his older brothers and other children

Life of Allport

- Tried to emulate his brother, Floyd, and his accomplishments

- Earned his PhD from Harvard University in 1922

- Studied with noted psychologists in Germany and England

- Conducted research and taught at Harvard for nearly 40 years

- Was active as a volunteer for a boy's club, a group of factory workers, and a contingent of foreign students

Life of Allport

- Described by colleagues and students as someone who genuinely cared about people

- Published books and articles throughout the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s

- Received many distinguished honors for being the first person in psychology to:
  - Conduct research on personality traits in the USA
  - Teach psychological and social aspects of personality as a formal course in the USA

Allport's Definition of Personality

- "**Personality** is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine . . . characteristic behavior and thought" (Allport, 1961, p. 28)

- *Psychophysical* = Composed of both mind and body functioning together as a unit

- Uniqueness of personality reflects both *heredity*, which provides the raw materials, and *environment*, which shapes, expands, or limits the expression of our genes

BODY

MIND
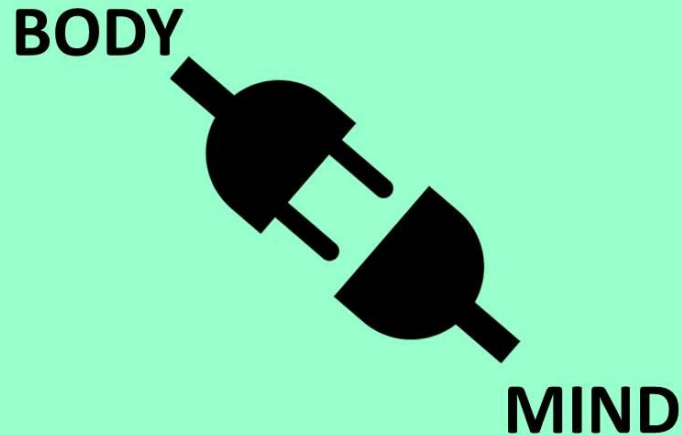
Allport vs. Freud

- Challenge #1 to Freud's psychoanalysis:

  - Did not accept the notion that unconscious forces dominate the personality of normal adults

  - Underwent psychoanalysis with Freud, which led him to suspect that psychoanalysis probed the unconscious too deeply

  - Decided psychology should pay more attention to conscious or visible motivations

Allport vs. Freud

- Challenge #2 to Freud's psychoanalysis:

  - Saw a clear distinction between the normal and the abnormal

  - Believed the best way to study personality was to collect data from emotionally healthy adults

  - Opposed the comparison of healthy adults to other populations such as neurotics, children, those with abnormal personalities, and animals

Personality Traits

- Introduced the notion of *traits* as components of personality

- **Traits**: The distinguishing, consistent, and enduring characteristics that guide our behavior

  - Our predispositions to respond, in a similar manner, to different kinds of stimuli

- Said to be real and exist within everyone

  - Not theoretical constructs or labels

Personality Traits

- Can be demonstrated empirically by observing behavior over time and inferring traits based on the consistency of a person's responses to similar stimuli

  - Measured on a continuum

- Are interrelated and may overlap even though they represent different characteristics

  - E.g., aggressiveness and hostility are distinct but related traits and are frequently observed to occur together in a person's behavior

Personality Traits

- Contribute to, determine, or cause *some* behaviors
  - Vary with the social, environmental, and cultural context
  - 2 types – Individual and common
- Other behaviors caused by free choice or biological drives

Personality Traits

- **Individual traits** are unique to a person and define his or her character.

  - Relabeled as **personal dispositions**

  - Do not all have the same intensity or significance

  - 3 types - Cardinal traits, central traits, or secondary traits

- **Common traits** are shared by a number of people.

  - Relabeled as **traits**

  - Influenced by time, society, and environment

Personal Dispositions

Cardinal trait

- A ruling passion
- A powerful force that dominates behavior
- So pervasive that it influences almost every aspect of one's life
- E.g., sadism, chauvinism

Central traits

- The 5-10 themes that best describe one's behavior
- E.g., aggressiveness, self-pity, cynicism

Secondary traits

- The least influential and consistent of the individual traits
- May be so weak that only a close friend would notice them
- E.g., a preference for a particular type of music or a certain food

Motivation

- Challenge #3 to Freud's psychoanalysis:

    - Suggested that the ultimate and necessary goal of life is to *increase* tension

    - Tension compels us to continually seek new sensations and challenges

    - Rewarded through the *process* of striving for goals (rather than through the specific achievement itself)

    - Meeting one challenge then motivates us to seek another (and another)

Motivation

- Challenge #4 to Freud's psychoanalysis:

  - Considered personality to be discrete and discontinuous

    - Two personalities – One for childhood and one for adulthood

  - **Functional autonomy** is the notion that the motives of mature, healthy adults are not functionally connected to the prior experiences in which they initially appeared.

    - Forces that motivated us in childhood become independent of their original circumstances

    - Does not include reflexes, fixations, neuroses, and behaviors arising from biological drives

Motivation

- Presents an optimistic view of adults in conscious control of their lives, rationally attending to current situations, planning for the future, and actively fashioning an identity

"People it seems, are busy leading their lives into the future, whereas psychology, for the most part, is busy tracing them into the past."

Gordon Allport, *Becoming: Basic Considerations for Psychology of Personality*, 1960

Motivation

- **Perseverative functional autonomy** is the level of functional autonomy that relates to low-level and routine behaviors.

  - Concerned with:

    - Behaviors that once served a purpose (but no longer do) and continue without any external reward

    - Behaviors that are too basic to be considered an integral part of personality

  - E.g., addictions and repetitive physical actions

Motivation

- **Propriate functional autonomy** is an organizing process that maintains our sense of self.

  - *Propriate* comes from **proprium**, Allport's term for the ego or self

  - Determines how one perceives the world, what one remembers from one's experiences, and how one's thoughts are directed

  - Ego retains propriate motives that enhance self-esteem or self-image

Motivation

- The organizing process is governed by three (3) principles:

  - **Principle of organizing the energy level** – Explains how we acquire new motives

  - **Principle of mastery and competence** – Healthy, mature adults are motivated to more efficiently to master new skills and increase their degree of competence

  - **Principle of propriate patterning** – Describes a striving for consistency and integration of the personality

Development of the Proprium

STAGE	DEVELOPMENT
1. *Bodily self*	Stages 1–3 emerge during the first three years. In this stage, infants become aware of their own existence and distinguish their own bodies from objects in the environment.
2. *Self-identity*	Children realize that their identity remains intact despite the many changes that are taking place.
3. *Self-esteem*	Children learn to take pride in their accomplishments.
4. *Extension of self*	Stages 4 and 5 emerge during the fourth through sixth year. In this stage, children come to recognize the objects and people that are part of their own world.
5. *Self-image*	Children develop actual and idealized images of themselves and their behavior and become aware of satisfying (or failing to satisfy) parental expectations.
6. *Self as a rational coper*	Stage 6 develops during ages 6–12. Children begin to apply reason and logic to the solution of everyday problems.
7. *Propriate striving*	Stage 7 develops during adolescence. Young people begin to formulate long-range goals and plans.
Adulthood	Normal, mature adults are functionally autonomous, independent of childhood motives. They function rationally in the present and consciously create their own lifestyles.

- Proposed seven (7) stages to describe the development of the proprium
  - Stages 1–3 – Ages 1-3
  - Stages 4 and 5 – Ages 4-5
  - Stage 6 – Ages 6-12
  - Stage 7 - Adolescence

Stage 1: Bodily Stage

- Occurs in the first year of life

- At the beginning of this stage, infants do not have a personality.

  - Do not separate "me" from everything else

  - Respond to stimuli reflexively without ego mediation

  - Described as pleasure seeking, destructive, selfish, impatient, and dependent

- By the end of this stage, infants become aware of their own existence and distinguish their bodies from objects in the environment.

Stages 2 and 3

STAGE 2 - SELF-IDENTITY

- Occurs in the second year of life

- Children learn their names and see themselves as distinct from others.

- They also learn that they remain the same and their identity remains intact despite changes in their bodies, abilities, and environment.

STAGE 3 - SELF-ESTEEM

- Occurs in the third year of life

- Children learn to take pride in their accomplishments.

Stages 4 and 5

STAGE 4 – EXTENSION-OF-SELF

- Occurs between ages 4 and 5
- In this stage, children come to recognize the objects and people in the environment and identify them as belonging to the child.
  - E.g., "my house," "my parents," "my school"

STAGE 5 – SELF-IMAGE

- Occurs between ages five and six
- Children develop actual and idealized images of themselves and their behavior and become aware of satisfying (or failing to satisfy) parental expectations.

Stages 6 and 7

STAGE 6 - SELF AS A RATIONAL COPER

- Occurs between ages six and twelve
- Children realize that reason and logic can be applied to solving everyday problems.

STAGE 7 - PROPRIATE STRIVING

- Occurs during adolescence
- Proprium complete when young people begin to formulate long-range goals and plans

Infant-Mother Bonding

- Throughout all the stages, parent-child interactions are important.

- The infant-mother bond is crucial for affection and security.

If needs are met, the proprium develops gradually and steadily.	· The child's motives will be transformed into the autonomous propriate strivings of adulthood.
If needs are frustrated, the child's psychological growth is stunted.	· The child becomes insecure, aggressive, demanding, jealous, and self-centered. · The result is a neurotic adult who functions at the level of childhood drives.

Criteria for Healthy Adult Personalities

- Six (6) criteria for normal, mature, emotionally healthy adult personalities:
    - ✓ Extends sense of self to people and activities beyond the self
    - ✓ Relates warmly to others, exhibiting intimacy, compassion, and tolerance
    - ✓ High degree of self-acceptance helps them to achieve emotional security
    - ✓ Holds a realistic perception of life, develops skills, and commits to some type of work
    - ✓ Has a sense of humor and self-objectification (an understanding of or insight into the self)
    - ✓ Subscribes to a unifying philosophy, which is responsible for directing the personality toward future goals

Allport's Methods

- Believed personality is so complex that many techniques should be used

- Listed 11 different methods

Constitutional and physiological diagnosis	Cultural setting, membership, role	Personal documents and case studies	Self-appraisal	Conduct analysis	Ratings
	Tests and scales	Projective techniques	Depth analysis	Expressive behavior	Synoptic procedures

Allport's Methods

- Relied on the **personal-document technique**, which involves examining diaries, autobiographies, letters, literary compositions, and other samples of a person's written or spoken records

- Favored the **idiographic approach**, which is the study of the individual case
  - Famously analyzed more than 300 letters written over a 12-year period by a middle-aged woman identified as Jenny

Allport's Study of Values

- In 1960, Allport and two colleagues (Vernon and Lindzey) published an objective self-report personality test called the *Study of Values*.

- They suggested that personal values are personality traits that represent strongly held interests and motivations.

  - They form the basis of our unifying philosophy of life (1 of the 6 criteria).

  - Everyone possesses some degree of each type of value, but one or two of these will be more dominant in the personality.

Allport's Study of Values

Theoretical values are concerned with the discovery of truth and an empirical, intellectual, and rational approach to life.

Economic values are concerned with the useful and practical.

Aesthetic values relate to artistic experiences and to form, harmony, and grace.

Social values reflect human relationships, altruism, and philanthropy.

Political values deal with personal power, influence, and prestige in all endeavors.

Religious values are concerned with the mystical and with understanding the universe.

Allport's Methods

- Researched **expressive behaviors** that expresses our personality traits
  - Spontaneous and seemingly purposeless behavior, usually displayed without our conscious awareness
- Researched **coping behavior** that is consciously planned, determined by the needs of the situation, and designed for purpose (e.g., change something in one's environment)
  - Easy to change and is displayed with our awareness

Research on Allport's Theory

Research on *expressive behavior* has found that:

- Personality traits can be assessed from facial expressions
- Women and children are better than men and older people at reading facial expressions
- Close friends are better than strangers at decoding facial expressions of emotion
- As many as seven separate emotions can be identified in facial expressions
- We recognize smiles in others by unconsciously mimicking them
- Depressed people are better at recognizing sad expressions
- Computers can recognize and express basic emotions

Strengths of Allport's Theory

- His work helped legitimize the field of psychology in academics.

- His theory was thought to better explain personality than other theories due to its emphasis on healthy adult personalities and the role of both nature and nurture.

- His emphasis on uniqueness and goals reflected humanistic principles and influenced humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers.

Criticisms of Allport's Theory

- His theory of proprium development is difficult to test using experimental methods (and cannot be confirmed).

- Questions remain about his concept of functional autonomy and whether adult personalities are independent of childhood personalities.

- His assessment method of focusing on the individual makes it difficult to generalize and apply the theory from one person to another.