

Dr. Gordon Allport: Elder Statesman in Psychology

One of the challenging quotations of Gordon Allport is that “as the individual matures, the bond with the past is broken”. This statement tells us much about this very historical and distinguished scholar. His claim was that people (or at least mature adults) are not inexorably tied to and irreversibly driven by the events of childhood. Though, he acknowledged that the neurotic was very much a prisoner of early conflicts and experiences.

When dealing with healthy human beings, we find that Gordon Allport presented a positive and hopeful picture, a view that depicts people as being in conscious control of their own lives. In this situation people are able to attend to the present, plan for their future and to fashion their own identity. A fundamental expression was that people are always in the process of becoming, by which he meant that each person can creatively design and implement a satisfactory style of life for himself or herself. The basic urge to become, to grow, to seek unity, and to find meaning it is given in human nature and it is major facet! Within the framework of this inherent need for autonomy, individuality, and selfhood, people grow and develop through their own conscious and deliberate efforts. GROWTH IS A FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF LIFE. Human beings continually move forward toward progress, prosperity, and fulfillment.

Allport’s ideas were reflected in his personal comprehensive stand and his active campaigning for social reform. The humanistic attitude expressed in his work was reflected in his own nature (*Prejudice*; and *Pattern and Growth in Personality*).

It is interesting to notice that he completed at Harvard his Ph.D. in 1922 and his thesis presaged his lifelong work on personality and was entitled “An Experimental Study of the Traits

of Personality”, a topic on which he was later to do much more profound work. This thesis was the very first study in America on personality traits!

Allport spent some years traveling in Europe on a Fellowship. When he returned to Harvard to teach he created a course on the psychological and social aspects of personality, which was the first course ever given in personality in the United States. He taught, researched, studied and worked in social psychology as well as in personality and produced a number of important papers, articles and psychological tests, including the famous “Allport-Vernon-Lindsey Study of Values” and the “A-S (ascendance-submission) Reaction Study”. He influenced several generations of students through his popular undergraduate course and his graduate seminars. Allport became a statesman in psychology and his awards were many: the Gold Medal of American Psychological Foundation, the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award of the American Psychological Association, the regional Eastern Psychological Association, and the Society for the Study of Social Issues.

Allport reviewed some 50 different ways of defining personality before offering his own definition: PERSONALITY IS THE DYNAMIC ORGANIZATION WITHIN THE INDIVIDUAL OF THOSE PSYCHOPHYSICAL SYSTEMS THAT DETERMINE HIS CHARACTERISTIC BEHAVIOR AND THOUGHT.

By dynamic organization he meant that while personality is constantly changing and growing, it is nevertheless organized growth. Also the form of the organization changes, as well as do specific aspects of the personality.

Psychophysical means that personality is composed of a mind and a body acting in concert and as a unit. Personality is neither all mental nor all biological but a combination of the

two. He believed that our knowledge of the mental side of personality was far advanced over our knowledge of its biological composition. As a result a psychological approach to the study of personality was more fruitful than a biological approach until we knew more about the functioning of the brain.

The term determine meant that personality is something and does something. All facets of personality activate and/or direct highly specific behaviors and thoughts. The phrase characteristic behavior and thought meant that everything an individual does or thinks is characteristic of that person. Every person is thus an individual and like no other.

A MAJOR POINT OF SUPPORT OFFERED BY ALLPORT FOR HIS STRESS ON UNIQUENESS IS THAT WE ARE SO MUCH THE PRODUCT OF THE LAWS AND FORM OF OUR HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT.

Heredity provides the personality with its raw materials, which are then shape (stretched or limited) by the conditions of the social environment! The raw materials were physical conditions, intelligence, and temperament. Temperament was the general emotional tone, including how susceptible the person was to stimulation and the intensity of those moods!

The major themes of Allport's theory (motivation, traits, development of personality, techniques of inquiry), while generating lots of good discussions and debates are seen by the community of scholars and researchers as huge contributions to the discipline of psychology, and to the fields of social and organizational sciences.