Definition: Allport, Gordon W. from The Columbia Encyclopedia

Gordon Willard Allport grew up in the Midwest and earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees (1922) at Harvard University. His Ph.D. thesis foreshadowed his life's work, because it dealt with the psychology of personality and assessment. For two years he traveled and studied in Turkey, Germany, and England. He returned to Harvard to serve as an instructor from 1924 to 1926; he was then appointed Assistant Professor of Psychology at Dartmouth College in 1927. He came back to Harvard in 1930 and remained on the Harvard faculty until his retirement, serving for several years as chairman of the psychology department. He was president of the American Psychological Association in 1939 and received numerous honorary doctorates. His outstanding position in the psychology of personality attracted many students who have held posts of distinction in American and other universities.

He regarded personality as the natural subject matter of psychology and believed that other standard topics, such as human learning, could not be studied adequately without taking into account the self or ego who wanted to learn. His approach was eclectic, drawing on a wide variety of sources, including McDougall's theory of motives and experimental and social psychodynamic theories. However, he was strongly opposed to Freudian views of the unconscious; his position was much closer to that of Adler. He rejected any reductionist theory that attributed human behavior to innate instincts, childhood conditioning, or repressed complexes. Personality is an organized whole, not a bundle of habits and fixations. It is present now, and it looks to the future rather than to the past. Thus, in his book Becoming (1955) he argued that the self can make choices and to some extent influence the development of its own personality. A fundamental part in personality growth is played by what Allport called the functional autonomy of motives, i.e., the emergence of new motivation systems. For example, a son may take up medicine because his father is a doctor; but gradually his interests develop and medicine becomes a goal in its own right, independent of the initial drive.

Allport was not given to extreme views. He avoided writing dogmatically or provocatively and preferred courtesy to controversy. He could aptly be called one of the first humanists in psychology, but he did not allow his humanitarian sentiments to interfere with scientific integrity and logical thinking in his writings. He realized, however, that there is a fundamental contradiction between scientific and intuitive
views of man. These are referred to as the nomothetic and idiographic standpoints. The nomothetist tries to arrive at general laws that apply to all human kind, and one’s procedures are based on accurate measurements of behavior. Inevitably this involves fragmentation of the individual into measurable variables. But the idiographic view sees each particular individual as a unique whole and relies largely on intuitive understanding. Allport believed that the two should be combined. Nomothetic characteristics can be measured, for example, by personality questionnaires that measure extraversion, dominance, anxiety, etc. Idiographic description must be based on case study data, or inferred from personal documents such as diaries or imaginative writing. He rejected the usefulness of projective techniques for understanding normal people as distinct from neurotics. He himself did devise certain tests of personality traits, attitudes, and values, but saw little point in factorial studies of personality.

Allport’s personality theory put him at odds with the vast majority of American psychologists, who were behavioristic empiricists. Nevertheless, he was widely respected for his ideas. He dealt with the bewildering complexity of personality by posting personality traits as the basic units or components. A trait is a generalized type of behavior that characterizes each individual and distinguishes that person from others. It is a real and causal neuropsychic structure, not merely biosocial—that is, derived from the impressions of people who observe the individual. This concept has been attacked by later writers who point out the frequent inconsistency, rather than the generality, of people’s behaviors in different situations. Unfortunately, Allport did not live long enough to answer such critics as Walter Mischel, who regarded personal behavior as determined more by the situation than by internal traits. But he did allow for the uniqueness of each individual personality by distinguishing common traits—variables that occur in different strengths in all persons—from unique traits or personal dispositions peculiar to the particular person.

Although Allport’s main work was the development of a comprehensive theory of personality, he had wide-ranging interests, including eidetic imagery, religion, social attitudes, rumor, and radio. The book that probably has the greatest practical and social value was his analysis of The Nature of Prejudice (1954). His major work was Pattern and Growth in Personality.

The following citation was presented when Allport was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Psychological Foundation in 1963: “To Gordon Willard Allport, outstanding teacher and scholar. He has brought warmth, wit, humanistic knowledge, and rigorous inquiry to the study of human individuality and social process.”

See also
Career Counseling; Vocational Counseling.

References

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