

Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology

Allport, Gordon Willard (1897-1967)

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Gordon Willard Allport was one of the great personality theorists of the twentieth century. His work was a synthesis of individual personality traits and the traditional psychology of William James, which emphasized psychological traits that are common among humans. He also examined complex social interactions. As a humanistic psychologist, he opposed both behavioral and psychoanalytical theories of psychology. Above all, Allport believed in the uniqueness of the individual. A prolific and gifted writer, he was the recipient of numerous professional awards.

Allport, born in 1897 in Montezuma, Indiana, was the youngest of four sons in the family of John Edwards and Nellie Edith (Wise) Allport. He was educated in Cleveland, Ohio, where the family moved when he was six years old. John Allport was a physician with a clinic in the family home and, as they were growing up, his sons assisted him in his practice. Gordon Allport's mother, a former school teacher, maintained a home environment that emphasized religion and intellectual development. As a teenager, Allport ran his own printing business and edited his high school newspaper. Following graduation in 1915, scholarships enabled him to join his brother Floyd at Harvard College. Although his education was interrupted for military service during the First World War, Allport earned his A.B. degree in 1919, with majors in philosophy and economics. Following a year of teaching English and sociology at Robert College in Istanbul, Turkey, Allport returned to Harvard with a fellowship to study psychology. He was influenced both by his brother Floyd and by the noted experimental psychologist Hugo Münsterberg. He coauthored his first publication, "Personality Traits: Their Classification and Measurement," with his brother in 1921. Allport received his M.A. degree in 1921 and his Ph.D. in 1922, for his study of personality traits under the direction of Herbert S. Langfeld.

A Sheldon Traveling Fellowship enabled Allport to spend two years studying in Berlin and Hamburg, Germany, and in Cambridge, England. He then returned to Harvard as an instructor in social ethics from 1924 to 1926. Allport married Ada Lufkin Gould in 1925. Their son, Robert Bradlee Allport, grew up to become a pediatrician. After four years as an assistant professor of psychology at Dartmouth College, Allport returned to Harvard where he remained for the rest of his career. He became an associate professor of psychology in 1937 and a full professor in 1942. He served as chairman of the Psychology Department and helped found Harvard's Department of Social Relations. In 1939 he was elected president of the American Psychological Association and, in 1964, received the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award of that society. In 1963, he was awarded the Gold Medal of the American Psychological Foundation.

Publishes theory of personality

Allport's first major book, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (1937), distinguished between traits that are common to many people, such as assertiveness, and personal dispositions which are traits that are characteristic of the individual. The latter were classified according to their degree of influence on an individual personality. Allport also identified how individuals develop self-awareness throughout childhood and adolescence. One of Allport's most important concepts, functional autonomy, encompassed his theories of motivation. Finally, he attempted to define the mature personality. *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* remained the standard text on personality theory for many years. In 1961, following years of study and research, Allport published a major revision of this work, *Pattern and Growth in Personality*. He also helped to develop methods of personality assessment, including the *A-S Reaction Study* (1928), with his brother Floyd Allport.

Examines the nature of prejudice

Allport was a man of diverse interests. During World War II, as a member of the National Research Council, he began studying the social problem of spreading rumors. In 1947 he published *The Psychology of Rumor* with Leo Postman. Allport also was concerned with racial and religious prejudice. His 1954 book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, was a milestone study. As a visiting consultant at the University of Natal in South Africa in 1956, Allport predicted that the white supremacist cultures of both South Africa and the American South would be overthrown. Like his predecessor William James, Allport also examined the psychology of religion in *The Individual and his Religion: A Psychological Interpretation* (1950), in which he warned of the prejudices that could be fostered by institutionalized religions.

During his career, Allport published 12 books and more than 200 papers on psychology and held important positions in American and foreign psychological associations. Allport was editor of the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* from 1937 until 1949. Boston University awarded him an honorary L.H.D. degree in 1958. He also held honorary doctorates from Ohio Wesleyan University, Colby College, and the University of Durham in England. He died of lung cancer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1967.

Further Reading

For Your Information

* Allport, G. W. "Autobiography." In *A History of Psychology in Autobiography*, edited by E. Boring and G. Lindzey. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

* Evans, Richard I. *Gordon Allport, the Man and his Ideas*. New York: Dutton, 1971.

* Maddi, Salvatore R. and Paul T. Costa. *Humanism in Personology: Allport, Maslow, and Murray*. Chicago: AldineAtherton, 1972.

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