10.2: 10.1 A Brief Biography of Gordon Allport

Gordon Willard Allport was born on November 11, 1897, in Montezuma, Indiana. His father had been a businessman, but then decided to go into medicine and become a country doctor. It was in Indiana that Allport’s father set up his first medical practice shortly before Allport was born, the youngest of four brothers. The family soon moved to Ohio, eventually settling in Glenville, where Allport spent his school years. His brothers were considerably older, causing him to feel like an outsider. Despite feelings of isolation, he worked hard to be the star of a small group of friends. He also did well in school, though he was uninspired and not curious about much outside of routine adolescent concerns (Allport, 1968).

His home life was marked by trust and affection, but it was not one of leisure. Rather, it was marked by “plain Protestant piety and hard work” (pg. 379; Allport, 1968). His mother had been a schoolteacher, and she encouraged philosophical and religious interests among her children. Also, the family home doubled as his father’s medical clinic and hospital, so there was always much work to be done around the house. Family vacations were rare, and his father liked it that way. According to Allport, his father believed that everyone should work as hard as they could and accept as pay only what their family needed to survive, so that there might be enough wealth to go around for everyone. In many ways, the Allport children were taught the importance of being concerned with the welfare of others (Allport, 1968).

After graduating from high school, in 1915, Allport followed his brother Floyd to Harvard University. Floyd Allport had graduated from Harvard in 1913, and then continued in the graduate program in psychology. Floyd Allport encouraged his younger brother to study psychology, and he was the teaching assistant for Allport’s first psychology course. At the beginning of his first semester Allport received poor grades, but after redoubling his efforts, he ended his first year with all As. What Allport found most interesting was the distinction between “causal” psychology and “purposive” psychology, and he wondered if the two couldn’t be reconciled. During World War I he was a member of the Students’ Army Training Corps, but the war ended before he had to serve in Europe. Allport also studied in the Department of Social Ethics, and he engaged in extensive community service. He ran a boys’ club in Boston, Massachusetts, did volunteer work for the
Family Society and as a probation officer, and he spent a summer working at the Humane Society in Cleveland, Ohio. Allport found this community service to be very rewarding, partly because he enjoyed it, and partly because it helped him to feel competent (offsetting his general feelings of inferiority). He became convinced that effective social service could only be provided if one first had a sound understanding of human personality. At the 1919 Harvard commencement, he received his bachelor’s degree and his brother Floyd received a Ph.D. (Floyd Allport is considered one of the founders of the discipline of social psychology).

After graduating, Allport spent a year teaching English and sociology at Robert College in Constantinople, Turkey. He was then offered a fellowship for the graduate program in psychology at Harvard. On the way back to the United States, Allport had an extraordinarily influential meeting with Sigmund Freud. He stopped in Vienna to visit his brother Fayette, and while there he requested a meeting with Freud. He received a kind invitation, and when he arrived Freud sat silently waiting for Allport to state the purpose of their meeting. Unprepared for silence, Allport quickly chose to relate a story of a young boy he had seen who was terribly afraid of dirt. The boy’s mother was so dominant and proper that Allport thought the source of the boy’s anxiety was clear. Freud, however, looked at Allport and asked “And was that little boy you?” Freud had entirely misinterpreted Allport’s reason for visiting him, assuming that it was a therapeutic encounter. Allport became convinced that depth psychology might plunge too deeply, and that psychologists should consider manifest motives before digging into the unconscious (Allport, 1968).

Allport found graduate school quite easy, and in 1922 he received his Ph.D. However, he was unable to find any colleagues who shared his interest in a humanistic approach to the study of personality. Thus, he had to chart his own path. His first paper, published with his brother, was on classifying and measuring personality traits. His course entitled Personality: Its Psychological and Social Aspects, first taught at Harvard in 1924, was probably the first personality course in America. Allport then received a fellowship that allowed him to spend 2 years studying in Germany and England. In 1925 he married Ada Lufkin Gould, who had a masters’ degree in clinical psychology, and in 1927 they had a son named Robert. Allport also moved to Dartmouth College that year. In 1928 he and Floyd published a test for measuring dominant and submissive tendencies, but they never collaborated again. Although they helped each other from time to time, their psychological perspectives were simply too different as their careers progressed (Allport, 1968).

In 1930 Allport returned to Harvard, where he remained for the rest of his career. His first book, Studies in Expressive Movement, included a section on handwriting analysis and personality, known as graphology (Allport & Vernon, 1933). This was followed by The Psychology of Radio (Cantril & Allport, 1935), and then the landmark Personality: A Psychological Interpretation (Allport, 1937). It was in the latter book that Allport outlined the majority of the theory for which he is recognized, and it was the culmination of ideas that had been “cooking” in his head since graduate school. It was his ambition at the time to give a psychological definition to the field of personality. He certainly helped to accomplish that task, but it should also be noted that another landmark personality text, with a similar goal, was published the same year by Ross Stagner, entitled Psychology of Personality (Stagner, 1937; for a discussion of the significance of these two books see Craik, 1993; Stagner, 1993). Somewhat unfairly, Allport is often recognized for having published the first personality textbook, and Stagner is overlooked. However, Stagner was quite young at the time (only 28 years old). Accordingly, Allport was well-established in his field, and Stagner cites earlier work by both Gordon and Floyd Allport numerous times in his textbook.

During World War II, Allport worked with the Emergency Committee in Psychology under the American Psychological Association. He spent some time working on the problem of morale among the American people, and he wrote a daily column for the Boston Traveler that focused, in part, on rumors. An important aspect of rumors was those rumors
designed to enhance prejudice and group antagonism. This work led to a series of seminars on race relations for the Boston Police Department, a book entitled *The Psychology of Rumor* (Allport & Postman, 1947), and ultimately to Allport’s classic study *The Nature of Prejudice* (first published in 1954; Allport, 1979). Another factor facilitating Allport’s work on social issues was the establishment of a new department at Harvard shortly after WWII: the Department of Social Relations. Given his lifelong interest in social ethics, Allport flourished in this new environment, remaining active in its administration throughout his career. Later in his career Allport continued to refine his personality and social psychological theories, he pursued his interest in social and religious development, with books such as *The Individual and His Religion* (Allport, 1950) and *Becoming* (Allport, 1955), and the application of trait theory to the analysis of an individual’s historical documents. With regard to the latter, Allport had published *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* in 1942, and after using a collection of personal letters reflecting a mother-son relationships as lecture aids for many years, he eventually published *Letters from Jenny* in 1965. In 1966, as Allport was entering into semiretirement, Harvard University appointed him the first Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics. Cabot, a wealthy Boston philanthropist, was also a professor of cardiology and social ethics at Harvard. Cabot had been a professional friend and mentor to Allport for many years, and Allport credited him with having a great influence on Allport’s career. As early as 1919, when Allport was just earning his bachelor’s degree, Cabot was commenting on the poor state of the study of personality. Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that he mentored and supported Allport, who went on to become the “patron saint” of personality psychology (Nicholson, 2003).

Allport died in 1967, 1 month shy of his seventieth birthday, leaving behind many unfinished books, articles, and two psychological tests. He had received many honors, including a Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement from the American Psychological Foundation in 1963 (an award his older brother Floyd won five years later) and a Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association in 1964 (Maddi & Costa, 1972). He was the first personality psychologist elected president of APA, and a 1951 survey placed him second only to Freud as a personality theorist whose work was directly applicable to clinical practice. However, one award stood out for him, and it is the only one he mentions in his autobiography. At the XVII International Congress of Psychology, fifty-five of his former doctoral students gave him a two-volume set of their own writings, with an inscription thanking him for respecting their individuality. In Allport’s own words, this was “an intimate honor, and one I prize above all others” (pg. 407; Allport, 1968). In that same autobiography, which was actually published after his death, he acknowledged a small number of personality theorists whom he felt were on the right path toward understanding human life, including Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Henry Murray.

Placing Allport in Context: The Beginning of Trait Theory

Gordon Allport is viewed by many as the founder of trait theories of personality. In addition, because of his specific focus on personality itself, he is also viewed as the founder of personality psychology as a distinct discipline. His entire approach to psychology, and more specifically to personality, was born of his strong devotion to social ethics. He was a profoundly spiritual man, who challenged the negative aspects of religious dogma and championed the positive aspects of having a spiritual direction in one’s life. Because his psychology carried with it that devotion to social ethics, he wrote one of the most famous books on prejudice, in which he suggested that the future role of psychology in understanding this disturbing inclination of people everywhere must be based on values.

Since his approach to studying and teaching psychology emphasized the value and uniqueness of each person, he is considered to have been a humanistic psychologist, even though he is seldom grouped with Carl Rogers and Abraham
Maslow (instead, he is grouped with other trait theorists). Always aware of the future challenges facing those who would study personality, Allport hoped that movements toward individual, humanistic, and existential psychology would continue:

I’m quite certain there will be a strong movement toward what is called a third force which will be neither behavioristic nor psychoanalytic. But I wouldn’t be willing to predict that it will dominate the field, though I can say I do hope it will develop sturdily and result in fruitful new methods to approach molar and complex levels of personality structure and social behavior…Human nature is such a hard nut to crack that no one should be denied a chance to contribute to it at any level. (pg. 112; Allport cited in Evans, 1981b)