10.3: Allport's Psychology of Personality

As a rule, science regards the individual as a mere bothersome accident. Psychology, too, ordinarily treats him as something to be brushed aside so the main business of accounting for the uniformity of events can get under way…With the intention of supplementing this abstract portrait by one that is more life-like, a new movement within psychological science has gradually grown up. It attempts in a variety of ways and from many points of view to depict and account for the manifest individuality of mind. This new movement has come to be known (in America) as the psychology of personality. (pg. vii; Allport, 1937)

With these words, in the preface to Personality: A Psychological Interpretation, Allport “officially” established the study of personality as a discipline in the field of psychology. His goal was two-fold: (1) to gather together the most important research on personality to date, and (2) to provide a framework within which the study of personality might then proceed toward understanding this “endlessly rich subject-matter” (Allport, 1937).

What Is Personality and What Are Traits?

Allport provides an interesting history of the use of the term persona, including a set of definitions written by Cicero (106-43 B.C.): as one appears to others (but not as one really is); the part one plays in life; the collection of personal qualities that fits one’s career (or place in life); and distinction and dignity. These and other definitions of persona represent a contradiction, that persona, or personality in psychological terms, is both something vital and internal and yet also something external and false. Although psychologists came to favor definitions that emphasized an assemblage of personal qualities, Allport noted that no two psychologists could easily agree on one definition for the term “personality.” So Allport offered a definition of his own:

Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment. (pg. 48; Allport, 1937)
Dynamic Organization: According to Allport, personality involves active organization, which is constantly evolving and changing, and which involves motivation and self-regulation. Thus, it is dynamic, not static. Organization also brings with it the possibility of disorganization, and the resulting abnormalities associated with personality disorders and/or mental illness.

Psychophysical Systems: The term “psychophysical” is meant to remind us that personality reflects both mind and body, the total organism. The systems include habits, attitudes, sentiments, and dispositions of various kinds. Most important, however, are the traits, which may be either latent or active.

Determine: In Allport’s view, “personality is something and does something.” Personality is not synonymous with behavior, it underlies it, and it comes from within the individual. The systems mentioned above can be viewed as determining tendencies.

Unique: Naturally, each adjustment by an individual is unique in time, space, and quality. However, Allport mentioned this aspect in anticipation of his later discussion of individual vs. common traits (see below).

Adjustments to His Environment: Personality, according to Allport, is a mode of survival, it has functional and evolutionary significance. For humans, we are not simply reactive, as plants and animals are, because we can be spontaneous and creative. We can, and do, seek mastery over our environment (both behavioral and geographic). Unfortunately, once again the possibility exists for maladaptive behavior that arises under abnormal conditions (such as an abusive home environment).

In 1961, Allport wrote an updated and substantially revised version of his personality text entitled Pattern and Growth in Personality. He made only one significant change to his definition of personality, which reflected a greater emphasis on cognitive processes. He changed the phrase “unique adjustments to his environment” to “characteristic behavior and thought” (pg. 28; Allport, 1961). He described “characteristic” in essentially the same way as he had described “unique” so that change was insignificant. However, the phrase “behavior and thought” was intended to indicate that individuals do more than simply adjust to their environment, they also reflect on it. Thus, the human intellect is an important factor in the manner in which we seek mastery over our environment and, indeed, over our lives.

So now we turn our attention to traits, those special psychophysical systems that are at the center of Allport’s theory of personality. In 1936, Allport and Odbert had examined the 1925 edition of Webster’s New International Dictionary and identified 17,953 words (4½ percent of the English language) that described aspects of distinctive and personal behavior that would commonly be described as traits (see Allport, 1937). Allport viewed a trait as both a form of readiness and a determining tendency. There are a number of other concepts that share some similarity with traits, such as habits, attitudes, needs, types, and instincts. In each case, however, these other forms of readiness to engage in certain responses or activities are different than traits, particularly with regard to their specificity and external focus or, as in the case of types, they describe a collection of correlated attributes. After describing the differences, Allport arrived at the following definition of a trait:

We are left with a concept of trait as a generalized and focalized neuropsychic system (peculiar to the individual), with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide consistent (equivalent) forms of adaptive and expressive behavior. (pg. 295; Allport, 1937)

The essential aspect of this definition is equivalence, both perceptually and behaviorally. As the result of a trait, different
stimuli are perceived as similar, and responded to in similar ways. This occurs regardless of the nature of the stimuli themselves. Suppose, for example, an individual is paranoid. If someone walks by and says “Hi, how are you today?” the paranoid individual might wonder “What is that supposed to mean? Why are they pretending to be so nice? What are they really up to?” As illogical as this response might seem, a paranoid trait has the ability to render even a simple hello as a threat.

Allport also made an important distinction between individual traits and common traits. Underlying this discussion was another important topic in Allport’s approach to psychology: the distinction between the idiographic and nomothetic approaches to studying psychology. As psychologists attempted to define their discipline as a scientific endeavor, they pursued a nomothetic approach, one that emphasizes general rules that apply to all. However, the psychology of personality that Allport was pursuing is inherently idiographic, an approach that emphasizes individuality. Strictly speaking, no two people can have exactly the same trait. Thus, all traits are inherently individual traits. However, this creates an extraordinary challenge for psychologists, both experimental psychologists who would measure traits and clinical psychologists who would describe an individual as possessing a certain trait (at some level) in order to provide a framework for communication and therapy. Allport agreed that is was logical to assume the existence of common traits, since normal people in a given culture would naturally tend to develop comparable modes of adjustment. However, Allport cautioned that developing clinical or experimental measures of such traits would at best be approximations of the individual traits present in each person (Allport, 1937, 1961).

Discussion Question \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Allport described the persona as something vital and internal, yet external and false. How can this be? Can you think of different aspects of your personality that fit both perspectives, and if so, how do those aspects of your personality fit together?

**Personal Dispositions**

Having acknowledged that there is logic to examining common traits as opposed to individual traits, Allport then returned to each individual’s unique personality by addressing **personal dispositions**. A personal disposition is based on traits, but somewhat more complex, such as in a unique combination of traits (e.g., someone who is tentatively aggressive, as opposed to someone who is belligerently aggressive). In another important change between the 1937 and 1961 editions of Allport’s general personality text, the latter book discusses cardinal, central, and secondary dispositions, rather than cardinal, central, and secondary traits.

A **cardinal disposition** is one that dominates an individual’s entire life. It cannot remain hidden, and the individual will be known by it. Historically, some commonly used terms have adopted the reputation of famous figures, including at least one that appears in the DSM-IV-TR: the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (named after Narcissus, from Greek mythology). Another example would be to describe someone as Christ-like. Personalities that possess one cardinal disposition, however, are quite unusual.

Much more common are **central dispositions**. If you were asked to describe a good friend, you would most likely offer a handful of distinguishable central dispositions. The interesting question, of course, is how many central dispositions does a typical personal have? Allport suggested that a person’s central dispositions would be those things one would mention in a carefully written letter of recommendation, a response that might make sense to someone like a professor,
Of lesser importance, according to Allport, are the **secondary dispositions**. These are less conspicuous, less consistent, and are less often called into play. In concluding his discussion of cardinal, central, and secondary dispositions, Allport acknowledged that these gradations are arbitrary, and presented primarily for convenience. In reality, he said, there are many degrees of personality organization, from the most loosely structured and unstable to the most pervasive and firmly structured. The value of these distinctions is to provide a relative measure of the influence of traits and dispositions when discussing personality.

**Personality Development, Functional Autonomy, and the Mature Personality**

According to Allport, a newborn infant has no personality, for it has not experienced the world in which it will live and it has had no opportunity to develop its distinctive modes of adjusting to that environment. Personality exists only later, after the common elements of human nature have interacted and produced the unique, self-continuing, and evolving systems that form the individual’s personality. The basic aspects of growth, following the infant’s initial random and diffuse behavior, involve **differentiation**, **integration**, **maturation**, and **learning**. As the child’s nervous system develops, it gradually gains finer control over its movement. Little by little, the young child differentiates more efficient and adaptive patterns of behavior, including vocal behavior. Psychologically, this differentiation involves more than just behaviors themselves, it also includes the ability to control the initiation of those behaviors. Very young children have little capacity for delaying their actions; they want to do things now! As the child’s behavioral repertoire increases, it becomes just as necessary and adaptive to begin integrating some of those behaviors into coordinated actions. Once again, if applied to psychological and cognitive processes, the development of traits and dispositions begins with the integration of life’s experiences. As these processes are occurring, the child is also maturing physically. Allport did not view maturation as something that contributed directly to personality, but it does indirectly by bringing out every inherited feature of the individual, including temperament, intellectual capacity, physical features, etc. All of these factors, plus the extensive contribution of different types of learning, contribute to the manner in which the individual experiences their environment (Allport, 1937). However, we can never truly know the personality that develops:

Of the whole of our own natures we are never directly aware, nor of any large portion of the whole. At any single moment the range of consciousness is remarkably slight. It seems only a restless pencil point of light entirely insufficient to illuminate the edifice of personality…It is through…temporal reference and content, that we arrive at the conviction that we do somehow possess consistent personalities surrounding the momentary conscious core. (pg. 159; Allport, 1937)

As a sense of self develops, these developmental processes of childhood progress through a series of stages: (1) a sense of bodily self, (2) a sense of continuing identity, (3) a sense of self-esteem or pride, (4) the extension of self, (5) a self-image, (6) a sense of self asrationally able to cope, and finally, in adolescence, (7) a sense of “directedness” or “intentionality.” Allport described these seven aspects of selfhood as a sense of self-relevance that we feel. When combined, they create the “me” as felt and known. In order to identify this sense of “me” or “I” Allport recommended the term **proprium**. Proprium is derived from the Latin term proprius, and it refers to a property common to the members of some class, but which is not part of the definition of that class. In other words, everyone has a personality, but no one’s personality is part of the definition of what it means to be a person. But why not simply use the word “self?” Allport felt that many psychologists use the words “self” and “ego” to mean only one or two aspects of the entire proprium. Also, Allport wanted to distinguish between the self as an object, and the self as the “knower” of that object. The proprium
refers specifically to the self as an object, whereas self refers both to the object and the "knower." We can be directly aware of the proprium in a way that we can never be fully aware of the "knower" (Allport, 1961).

As the child matures, both physically and psychologically, the individual's interests and motives become stable and predictable. A special type of psychological maturity (as opposed to genetic/biological maturity) takes place, which Allport termed functional autonomy. Functional autonomy regards adult motives as varied, and as self-sustaining systems that are unique to the individual. They may have arisen out of developmental processes and experiences, but they are independent of them. This means that any tie between adult motives and early childhood experience is historical, not functional. This is a radically different view than that of Sigmund Freud and most psychodynamic theorists, who considered early childhood experiences to be the driving force behind adult behavior, especially neurotic behavior. Allport offers the example of a good workman. Such a workman feels compelled to do his best work, even though his income no longer depends on maintaining high standards. Indeed, doing his very best on every job may actually hurt him financially, but his personal standards, his motivation, demand nothing less (Allport, 1937, 1961). When viewed a different way, functional autonomy serves another important motivational role. If one considers early childhood experiences to be the determining factors in personality, then all adult motives must have some infantile source. However, by separating adult motives from their childhood antecedents, then there does not need to be anything childish about what motivates adults. This allows for entirely new sources of motivation to be relevant during adulthood, motives that might have been completely beyond the intellectual and cognitive capacities of children.

In considering what constitutes a mature personality, Allport considered the writings of Sigmund Freud, Richard Clarke Cabot, Erik Erikson, and Abraham Maslow. He also considered the length of each man’s list. Allport settled on a list of six ideal characteristics of the mature personality. He described the list as an ideal, because he freely acknowledged that no one is perfect, even the “sturdiest of personalities have their foibles and their regressive moments; and to a large extent they depend on environmental supports for their maturity” (pp. 282-282; Allport, 1961).

*Extension of the Sense of Self:* The mature person focuses on more than simple needs or drive-reduction; they develop strong interests outside of themselves. By truly participating in life, they give direction to their life.

*Warm Relating of Self to Others:* The mature person is marked by two kinds of warmth. On one hand, through self-extension they are capable of great intimacy in their capacity for love, whether it involves family members or friends. On the other hand, they avoid gossipy, intrusive, or possessive relationships with other people. They respect other persons as persons, they express tolerance and the so-called “democratic character structure.”

*Emotional Security (Self-Acceptance):* Mature individuals demonstrate emotional poise; they have the ability to avoid overreacting. Especially important, according to Allport, is that they possess the quality of “frustration tolerance.”

*Realistic Perception, Skills, and Assignments:* Generally speaking, the mature person is in close contact with what we call the “real world.” They see things, including people, for what they really are.

*Self-Objectification - Insight and Humor:* In describing this characteristic, Allport quoted Socrates: “know thyself.” In Allport’s psychology classes, 96 percent of his students thought they had average or better than average insight (by definition, only 50 percent can be above the average). So people think they have good insight, but this is often not the case. There does appear to be a high correlation between insight and humor. People who truly know themselves are able to look at themselves objectively, and to laugh at their own failings and mistakes.
The Unifying Philosophy of Life: According to Allport, humor may be essential, but it is never sufficient. Maturity requires a sense of life’s purpose. This sense of purpose can be found in having a clear direction to one’s life, in a strong orientation to values, within one’s religious sentiment, or through a generic conscience. Allport found it quite interesting that many people consider their desire to serve society was a more important generic motive than the fulfillment of any sense of religious or spiritual duty. He concluded that an integrated sense of moral obligation can provide a unifying philosophy of life regardless of whether or not it is tied to one’s religious sentiments.

Consider Allport’s definition of a mature personality. Do you know anyone who fits all of the criteria? What are they like as a person, and do you consider them a friend (or, do they consider you a friend)?

The Assessment of Personality

Personality is so complex a thing that every legitimate method must be employed in its study. (pg. 369; Allport, 1937)

In Chapter 1 we examined the common procedures used to assess personality today, and Allport reviewed similar concepts, as well as procedures that were available at the time. It is interesting to note that, in his 1937 text, the very first topic in Allport’s survey of assessment methods is the importance of evaluating the cultural setting. Two other topics were also of particular interest to Allport: the study of expressive behavior and the use of personal documents.

Allport’s first two books, Studies in Expressive Movement (Allport & Vernon, 1933) and The Psychology of Radio (Cantril & Allport, 1935), both addressed what Allport considered to be the second level at which personality is evaluated (the first level consists of the traits, interests, attitudes, etc., that compose the “inner” personality). He considered the study of expressive movement to be a more direct analysis of personality, since it is based on observation, and does not require the use of tests that only indirectly address the inner dispositions revealed in the first level of analysis. For example, what a patient says or writes while taking the Rorschach test is projective, but how they say or write it, the tone of their voice or the style of their handwriting, is expressive (Allport, 1961). Perhaps the primary value of expressive behavior is that it is freely emitted by the person being observed. It can include all aspects of behavior, including walking, talking, handwriting, gesturing, shaking hands, sketching, doodling, etc. Cantril and Allport examined a variety of curious aspects of radio voices. For example, a natural voice is more revealing of personality than a voice transmitted over the radio. They also found that blind people are not better at judging personality from voices than other people, perhaps dispelling the common belief that when people lose one sense they enhance their ability to rely on other senses. Much of what they found was difficult to interpret, however. Voice definitely conveyed accurate measures of personality, but there are no characteristics of personality that are always revealed correctly. Most people preferred to hear a male voice on the radio, but no one could actually explain why, and there were a variety of differences based on the specific aspects of the message or its content (Cantril & Allport, 1935). As for handwriting analysis, Allport felt that through careful research it could become a valid tool for personality analysis. He acknowledged that this was a difficult and complex task, but he concluded that both handwriting and gestures reflect essentially stable and consistent individual styles (Allport & Vernon, 1933).

There are many types of personal documents, including letters, diaries, recorded interviews, and autobiographies. Perhaps the richest of these sources, personal letters, may well become a thing of the past. Letter writing has become
much less formal with the advent of phone calls and email. Today, text messages don’t even rely on whole words. Politicians often rely on speech writers, so even their written words aren’t necessarily their own. Of greater concern, according to Allport, is that personal documents are not representative samples and they are not objective (Allport, 1942, 1961). However, if they can still provide insight into the nature of an individual’s personality, then why shouldn’t they be used with caution? Allport had a unique set of letters that had been written over a number of years by a woman, between the ages of 58 and 70, to a young married couple. The young husband had been her son’s college roommate. Seeing value in the letters as a source of psychological material, the couple made them available for publication, and they came into Allport’s possession to be published. For many years he used the letters to provide examples in his own classes, and eventually Allport published them again, along with his analysis of the woman’s personality, in Letters from Jenny (Allport, 1965). Of particular interest, is that Allport interpreted the letters in a variety of ways, including existential, Jungian, Adlerian, and Freudian perspectives. Allport concluded by addressing whether or not Jenny was normal, a point on which some people disagreed. Using his six characteristics of a mature personality, he assigned relatively low scores to Jenny based on her letters, but he also found some strengths within each characteristic. Thus, although Jenny appears to have been troubled, Allport concludes that it is not a simple matter to say she is normal or abnormal, but “her tangled life has contributed stimulus and challenge to posterity” (pg. 223; Allport, 1965).

Religion and Prejudice

Two contrary sets of threads are woven into the fabric of all religion - the warp of brotherhood and the woof of bigotry. I am not speaking of religion in any ideal sense, but, rather, of religion-in-the-round as it actually exists historically, culturally, and in the lives of individual men and women, the great majority of whom (in our land) profess some religious affiliation and belief. Taken in-the-round, there is something about religion that makes for prejudice, and something about it that unmakes prejudice. It is this paradoxical situation that I wish to explore here. (pg. 218; Allport, 1968)

Allport was a deeply spiritual man, and he often wrote about the role of religion in personality. Religion is such an important factor in so many people’s lives, that Allport considered it “thoroughly ridiculous” that psychologists had paid so little attention to it (see Evans, 1981b). Although Allport acknowledged that there were useful and logical reasons for psychology to establish itself as a scientific endeavor, he felt it was just as illogical to reject religion. Allport made neither assumptions nor denials regarding the claims of revealed religion, and he felt that as a scientist he had no right to do so. Still, he believed that psychology must examine subjective religion in the structure of personality whenever and wherever religion is involved. So he delivered a series of six lectures on religion, and published them as The Individual and His Religion (Allport, 1950). The book takes a positive perspective on the role of religion. Allport acknowledged that religion seems primarily symptomatic of fear and frustration in many people’s live, but he preferred to focus on the psychology, not the psychopathology, of religion. What he found was that the religious sentiment, as it pertains to personality, is as varied and unique as each individual. His findings echoed those of William James, whose own foray into this area of psychology was published in The Varieties of Religious Experience (James, 1902/1987).

The relation between religion and prejudice seems to stem from a dichotomy within religion itself. There appears to be an intrinsic value and an extrinsic value associated with religion. The extrinsic or outwardly directed attitude, one that the individual uses for their own purposes, is correlated with prejudice, whereas the intrinsic attitude is correlated with very low prejudice (Evans, 1981b). In focusing on the positive aspects of the intrinsic religious sentiment, Allport suggested that it was attached to the most elusive facets of becoming, enhancing one’s unifying philosophy of life and a sense of direction, intentionality, and good conscience (Allport, 1955). When fully developed, the religious sentiment is distinct
from its developmental origins (it has functional autonomy). In other words, it is not simply the following of family tradition, or the practice of meaningless rituals, but rather it becomes a unique part of the individual. It becomes morally true for the person, as it engages reason, faith, and love. This was particularly true for Allport. From 1938 to 1966, about twice a year, Allport offered a prayerful meditation during the daily prayers in Appleton Chapel at Harvard University (collected in Bertocci, 1978). In a meditation offered on The Virtues and Social Science, Allport wrote:

We have much to learn about industrial relations, about the resolution of conflict (personal, national, international); about the control of prejudice, the strengthening of brotherhood and compassion. In such areas as these we have yet to make vital discoveries; we have yet “to think God’s thoughts after Him.” (pp. 89-90; Allport cited in Bertocci, 1978)

Unfortunately, however, there remains the extrinsic attitude toward religion that is correlated with prejudice. In many ways, religions encourage bigotry, most commonly through doctrines of revelation or election. Revealed truth is not to be tampered with, and certain people are chosen, or cursed, above all others. However, these attitudes often follow a very selective reading of the religious texts, and even disagree with other writings. Nonetheless, one cannot deny the horrifying impact that religion can have when perverted for purposes of those who wield power. Allport relates stories such as the Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels declaring that Hitler was the intermediary between the German people and God’s throne, or the member of the Ku Klux Klan (an allegedly Christian organization) who justified killing Black children by saying that when you kill rattlesnakes you don’t care if they are young or old (Allport, 1960, 1968). Allport described such people as using religion as they would use any social group, for their own purposes: making friends, influencing people, furthering business pursuits, gaining prestige, etc. It becomes exclusionistic so that only the members of the group benefit, not anyone else. However, although this is a common outcome of religious activity, there remains a minority of people for whom this does not occur. They serve their religion, not the other way around. They have adopted the creeds and doctrines as an important component of their value system, but included within that value system is the doctrine of human brotherhood (see Evans, 1981b). Religion is, of course, only one factor that leads to prejudice and discrimination. Allport studied those factors in great detail in his classic work on prejudice.

Connections Across Cultures: The Nature of Prejudice

Since Allport was committed to social ethics throughout his life, his classic study on prejudice did not arise suddenly. During World War II, one of his projects was to study the effects of rumor. A rumor, according to Allport’s definition, is a specific proposition for belief, passed from person to person, without any secure standards of evidence. When a rumor follows some event, the information that people report is based on memory. Important aspects of those memories are often false, and they are false in conjunction with negative stereotypes. Interestingly, this is much less likely to occur with children, who often fail to identify the racial aspects of scenes they have observed (at least in a research setting). Rumors are particularly dangerous when they incite riots, and Allport and Postman wrote that “no riot ever occurs without rumors to incite, accompany, and intensify the violence” (pg. 193; Allport & Postman, 1947). In 1943 there were major riots in Harlem and Detroit, in which negative racial rumors played an important role. In Detroit in particular, according to Allport, if the authorities had listened to the rumors the violence might have been avoided.

The following year, Allport taught a course on minority group problems to the police captains for the city of Boston, Massachusetts. In 1947 he repeated the course for police officers in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One year later, he presented some of his material in a Freedom Pamphlet entitled ABC’s of Scapegoating (Allport, 1948). This pamphlet later grew (rather dramatically, from 36 pages to 537 pages) into his book The Nature of Prejudice, which was published.
in 1954 (Allport, 1979). Despite this preparation, the challenge of a major study on prejudice was still daunting. The problem of the causes of prejudice was so large that it took Allport several years to work out the table of contents, which ended up being eight pages long, including sections on preferential thinking, group differences, perceiving and thinking about group differences, sociocultural factors, acquiring prejudice, the dynamics of prejudice, character structure, and reducing group tensions.

Despite being over 500 pages long, The Nature of Prejudice is concise. In part, this indicates the magnitude of the problem of prejudice, and also makes it extremely difficult to summarize the book. Allport begins by asking “What is the problem?” He describes five levels at which people act on prejudice. Most people will only talk about their prejudice with like-minded friends. If the prejudice is strong, they may actively avoid members of another group, and then they may discriminate against them, engaging in detrimental activities toward the disliked group. More extreme prejudice may actually lead to physical attacks, and ultimately, to extermination, such as lynchings or genocide. Is this behavior to be expected? According to Allport, the essential ingredients of prejudice, erroneous generalization and hostility, are natural and common capacities of the human mind. What is necessary, however, is the formation of in-groups, and the rejection of out-groups. We form in-groups naturally as we develop; we learn to like the things we are familiar with. This does not require hostility toward out-groups, but it is an unfortunate reality that many people define their loyalty to the in-group in terms of rejecting the values and customs of the out-group. For those people, rejecting the out-group becomes a powerful need.

Although many differences exist between groups, why has race been emphasized? The answer is, in part, disturbingly simple: we can see race. In addition, most people don’t know the difference between race and ethnic group, or race and social caste. Thus, it is simply easier to identify out-groups on the basis of race. Making matters worse, of course, is the reality that we can’t even define race that well. Allport discusses research that has suggested as many as thirty different human races or types, yet most of us think in terms of three basic races: White, Black, and Asian (more recently the number would be four, including Hispanics). Discriminating against one “race,” such as Blacks in America, without even beginning to understand individual character (i.e., personality) or other aspects of culture, such as religion, customs, or national character (which can also be quite complex), is simply an ignorant act. Yet a point that Allport returns to, as an explanation regarding how natural it is to be prejudice, is that people who are different seem strange, and strangeness is something that makes most people uncomfortable, and it may actually be aversive to many people.

Unfortunately, the victimization of minority groups can enhance the differences and discomfort that exist between groups. As Allport noted:

Ask yourself what would happen to your own personality if you heard it said over and over again that you were lazy, a simple child of nature, expected to steal, and had inferior blood. Suppose this opinion were forced on you by the majority of your fellow-citizens. And suppose nothing that you could do would change this opinion - because you happen to have black skin. (pg. 142; Allport, 1979)

Minorities can become obsessively concerned about everything they do and everywhere they go in public. They develop a basic feeling of insecurity. The simplest response to prejudice is to deny one’s membership in the minority group. For example, some very light-skinned Blacks have passed as White people. But this can lead to great personal conflict, and the feeling that one is a traitor. Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panthers, had to fight against prejudice within the Black community itself against those Blacks whose skin was viewed as too light. Oppressed minority group members might also become withdrawn, passive, or they might act like clowns, trying to make fun of their circumstances. Worse,
they may identify with the majority group, leading to self-hate and acting out against members of their own group. Of course, there are those who will also fight back aggressively, such as Huey Newton and the members of the Black Panthers.

How might we begin to combat prejudice? Allport discussed an interesting study that addressed the sociological theory of contact between groups. During the Detroit riots of 1943, both Black and White students at Wayne University (which later became Wayne State University) attended class peacefully during what became known as Bloody Monday. It has been suggested that when groups of humans meet they go through a four-stage process: contact itself, followed by competition, then accommodation, and finally assimilation. Thus, the initial contact naturally leads to a peaceful progression of the inter-group relationship. While this is not always the case, there are many examples where it has been. But, it cannot occur without the initial contact. Thus, encouraging contact between groups is an important step in combating prejudice. Allport notes, however, that it is important for the contact to be of equal status and to be in the pursuit of common goals.

Allport also addressed the issue of using legislation to fight prejudice. Unfortunately, as he points out, laws can only have an indirect effect on personal prejudice. They cannot affect one’s thoughts and feelings, they can only influence behavior. However, it is also known that behavior can influence one’s thoughts, opinions, and attitudes. Thus, Allport encourages the continued use of legislation as a significant method for reducing public discrimination and personal prejudice. More important, however, is the need to take positive action toward reducing prejudice, including the use of intercultural education.

In a fascinating study published one year after The Nature of Prejudice, Gillespie & Allport presented the results of a study entitled Youth’s Outlook on the Future (Gillespie & Allport, 1955). What made the study remarkable was that it included students from the United States, New Zealand, South Africa (both Black and White students), Egypt, Mexico, France, Italy, Germany, Japan, and Israel. Included among the questions was the issue of racial equality, whether students desired greater racial equality and whether they expected greater racial equality. A large majority of college students reported that they desired greater racial equality, ranging from 83 to 99 percent. The notable exceptions were Germany (65 percent), and English speaking South Africans (75 percent) and Afrikaners in South Africa (14 percent - this was during Apartheid). As for the expectation that there would be greater racial equality in the future, students in most of the countries studied said yes between 67 to 73 percent of the time, with notable exceptions being Black South Africans (57 percent), Japanese (53 percent), and Mexicans (87 percent). Thus, most college students around the world (in 1955) desired racial equality, but a significant portion of them did not expect to see it in the future. Considering the state of the world today, we are far from learning the final outcome of this crucial social issue.

If it were possible to achieve a world in which people were not prejudice, what attitude should replace it? This question was recently addressed by Whitley and Kite (2006), and they identify the two most commonly raised options: color-blindness and multiculturalism. The color-blind perspective suggests that people should ignore race and ethnicity, acting as if they simply don’t exist, whereas the multicultural perspective considers ethnic/racial identity as cognitively inescapable and fundamental to self-concept. Color-blind proponents argue that as long as race is an issue, there will be some forms of discrimination. Multicultural proponents argue in favor or retaining one’s cultural heritage, thus preserving integrity, while also encouraging group interaction and harmonious coexistence. Does one approach appear to be more effective at reducing prejudice? To date, the evidence favors the multicultural approach. Whitley and Kite suggest that reducing prejudice is most likely to occur as a result of individuals both changing their own attitudes and working to help others change their attitudes as well. It is important to reflect on one’s own thoughts and behaviors, and to help others...
become aware of their attitudes and behaviors. In addition, it is important to learn more about other groups, and to actively participate in inter-group contact (Whitley & Kite, 2006). In other words, multiculturalism works best when it actually exists; people need to associate with people of other races, religions, and cultures. Only then can ignorance, as in simply not knowing about other people and their cultural differences, be replaced by knowledge and acceptance.

When Allport published his study on prejudice, it was important that the topic was even being addressed. Today, it is more common to examine the nature of cultural differences and to pursue positive aspects of the value of multicultural settings. A number of recent studies have emphasized various aspects of the differences between people from various cultures, the importance of not feeling so different, and how interaction between groups can prove valuable. For example, the Chinese tend to anticipate change more readily than Americans, they predict greater levels of change when it begins, and they consider those who predict change to be wise (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001). Asian Americans, South Koreans, and Russians are more likely than Americans to adopt avoidance goals, but the adoption of those goals is not a negative predictor of subjective well-being in those collectivist cultures, as it is in individualistic cultures (Elliot et al., 2001). The Japanese appear to be subject to cognitive dissonance effects in a “free” choice paradigm, but only in the presence of important others. Americans, in contrast, are less affected by social-cue manipulations in a “free” choice situation (Kitayama et al., 2004). Although social stereotyping typically results in an over-generalized tendency to include people in groups, under certain circumstance it can also lead to excluding certain individuals from their apparent in-group (Biernat, 2003). Particularly for young people, in-group connection is very important. Low-income, high risk African American and Latino teens who do not “look” like other members of their in-group are at a much higher risk for dropping out of school, but the ability to fit in has a protective effect (Oyserman et al., 2006). Even when significant contact between groups does occur, it may only reduce certain aspects of prejudice, and may do so only for the minority group (as opposed to any change in the majority group; Henry & Hardin, 2006). So how can contact between different cultural groups begin to reduce prejudice and discrimination in such a complex issue? It has been shown that when college students are placed in racially diverse groups, they actually engage in more complex thinking, and they credited minority members with adding to the novelty of their discussions (Antonio et al., 2004). Perhaps most importantly, multiculturalism can also foster the development of a character strength described by Fowers and Davidov (2006) as openness to the other.

However, multiculturalism is not without its challenges. Working in diverse teams can lead to social divisions, increasing the likelihood of negative performance teams. Accordingly, it is essential to examine the types of diversity that come into play, since some favor and exploit a wider variety of perspectives and skills, whereas others more readily lead to conflict and division (Kravitz, 2005; Mannix & Neale, 2005). Within the field of psychology, a discipline actively encouraging the growth of minority group membership, there has been a lag in successfully moving students beyond the bachelor’s degree to the doctoral level (Maton et al., 2006). The challenges faced by minority graduate students and faculty are, not surprisingly, as diverse as the individuals themselves (see Vasquez et al., 2006). Thus, we have a long way to go in understanding and overcoming prejudice and discrimination. However, within a framework first established in detail by Allport, our examination and understanding of the major issues is rapidly growing.

discussion question \(\PageIndex{3}\)

Are you prejudiced? Now that you have probably answered no, think again. Are there times, or situations, where you find yourself having thoughts that make you uncomfortable when you stop to really think about them? What do you think is more important, eliminating prejudice, or enacting laws...
against discrimination?