
UNIT 1 GORDON ALLPORT: A DISPOSITIONAL THEORY OF PERSONALITY

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Allport “The basic principle of behaviour is its continuous flow”[1961,p.33]. Allport’s major personality concepts have to do with motivation—with what makes a person ‘go’. At the same time a person’ “stream of activity” has both a ‘variable portion ‘ and a ‘constant portion’. Allport describes his constant portion with his concept of *trait*,and the variable portion with what he calls *functional autonomy*, or the tendency for a behaviour to continue to be performed for reasons that differ from the reasons that originally motivated it. Both –the trait and functional autonomy –are motivational; many traits have motive power, and functional autonomy explains adult motivation. Whether traits or functional autonomy, Allport talks about *dynamics* of personality.

1.1 OBJECTIVES

On completion of this unit, you will be able to:

- Define Personality in terms of Allport’s approach;
- Explain the various traits that contribute to personality;
- Enumerate the different traits and differentiate between the various traits;
- Define functional autonomy of motives; and
- Analyse various factors contributing to mature personality.

1.2 DEFINITION OF PERSONALITY

Personality is the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment.[ALLPORT,1937,P.48]

The term *dynamic organisation* refers to important points: Not only is personality constantly developing and changing, but there is within the person some kind of central organisation that holds the components of personality together and relates them to each other.

The term *psychophysical systems* implies that person is not just a hypothetical construct formed by the observer but a real phenomenon composed of mind and body elements fused into ‘a personality unity’[Allport,1937,p.48].

Characteristics in Allport’s definition signifies the uniqueness of the single person. No two people are alike in this personological systems. Finally, behaviour and *thought* means everything a person does. Personality expresses itself in some way in virtually all observable human actions.

While defining personality, Allport clearly makes a distinction between *character* and *temperament*. Character means some code of behaviour in terms of which people or their acts are evaluated e.g. a person may be described as having a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ character. Temperament refers to those dispositions that are closely linked to biological or physiological determinants. Here, heredity plays an important role, which is the raw material, along with intelligence and physique, out of which personality is made.

1.3 CONCEPT OF TRAIT AND PERSONAL DISPOSITIONS

Allport defines trait as a neuro psychic structure having the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide equivalent (meaningfully consistent) forms of adaptive and expressive behaviour.[Allport, 1961,p.347]

In simpler terms, a trait is a predisposition to act in the same way in a wide range of situations. For example, if a person is basically shy, s/he will tend to be quiet and reserved in many different situations, that is sitting in a class room, eating at the cafeteria, etc.

Traits are psychological entities that render many stimuli as well as many responses functionally equivalent. In other words, many stimuli may evoke the same response, or many responses (feelings, perceptions, interpretations, actions) have the same functional meaning in terms of the trait.

Allport [1966] published an article entitled “Traits Revisited” in which he proposed eight basic defining characteristics of trait. They are as follows:

- 1) *A trait has more than nominal existence.* Personality traits are a very real and vital part of everyone’s existence. Everyone possesses certain ‘generalised action tendencies’. For example, aggressiveness, honesty, etc. These personal

characteristics are real and actually exist inside people. To cite an example from real life situation, imagine a person always telling the truth even at the cost of apprehending one's own intimate friend.

- 2) *A trait is more generalised than a habit.* Traits account for the relatively permanent and general features of our behaviour. While habits refer to more specific tendencies and are less generalised in terms of the situations which may arouse them or the responses which they evoke. For example a child may brush his teeth twice daily. This is a habit. But over the years the child may learn to brush the hair, wash and iron clothes, clean the room and many such activities which are all learned over a period of time and not necessarily habits. All these habits woven together may form the trait of personal cleanliness.
- 3) *A trait is dynamic or at least determinative in behaviour.* Traits do not lie dormant waiting to be aroused by external stimuli. Traits motivate people to engage in behaviours that are conducive to expressing their traits. To give an example, a student with high sociable trait does not just sit around and wait to attend parties, but actively seeks out parties so that the sociability trait can be expressed.. Thus, traits guide and direct a person's actions.
- 4) *A trait's existence may be established empirically.* Traits cannot be observed directly, but it is possible to verify their existence. To give an example, repeated actions of the subject, case histories or biographies, or statistical techniques that determine the degree of coherence among separate responses.
- 5) *A trait is only relatively independent of other traits.* No trait is independent of the other. They overlap. There is no rigid boundary separating one trait from another. The personality is comprised of a network of overlapping traits only *relatively* independent of one another.
- 6) *A trait is not synonymous with moral or social judgement.* Personality is important, not character. Many traits like loyalty, greed, etc. are bound by social demands and socio cultural factors.
- 7) *A trait may be viewed in light of either the personality that contains it or its distribution in the population at large.* To give an example, take for instance, the trait of shyness which has both unique and universal aspects. It is unique for the person because it influences a person's life, while as the trait can be studied universally by constructing a reliable and valid "shyness scale" and determine how people differ on it.
- 8) Acts or even habits that are inconsistent with a trait are not proof of the nonexistence of the trait.

Not everyone shows the same degree of integration with respect to a given trait. Also, the same person may possess contradictory traits. Lastly, there are instances where social situations, rather than personality traits are the prime movers of behaviour.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Define Personality in terms of Allport's theory.

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- 2) What do you understand by “traits”?

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- 3) What are the basic characteristics of traits?

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1.4 TYPES OF TRAITS

Traits are determining tendencies or predispositions to respond consistently over time and across situations. Allport proposed that traits may be classified into a three-fold and somewhat overlapping category system according to the degree to which they pervade and influence individual behaviour.

- 1) **Cardinal Trait:** If a trait is extremely pervasive, that is, if almost all of a person’s activities can be traced to its influence, it is a cardinal trait. The meaning may be grasped by considering many trait adjectives derived from history and fictional characters. To give an example when someone is being referred to as being a Ghandian, the cardinal disposition of being ‘non-violent’ is being inferred.
- 2) **Central Trait:** Less pervasive but still quite generalised disposition of the individual. These are also called the building blocks of personality. To cite an example, a person being outgoing, sociable, etc. In other words, central traits are those tendencies that a person often expresses, which people around the person can readily discern.
- 3) **Secondary Trait:** Dispositions which are less conspicuous, less generalised, less consistent and less relevant as compared to cardinal or central traits. These are called secondary traits. To give an example, food preferences of an individual. However it must be remembered that to know of the secondary traits of a person, the person must be known quite intimately in order to discern the secondary traits.

1.4.1 Common Traits versus Individual Traits

Allport [1937] also distinguished between *common* traits and *individual* traits. The former (also called dimensional or nomothetic traits) includes any generalised disposition to which most people within a given culture can be reasonably compared. For example, social attitude, anxiety, value, and the like are generalised disposition and the majority of people within the particular culture could be measurably compared with one another on those common traits and dimensions.

Traits never occur in any two people in exactly the same way.

Thus, those characteristics peculiar to the individual which do not permit comparisons among individual are referred to as individual traits. These are also called as personal dispositions or morphological traits and these traits always operate in unique ways within each person, and this category of traits most accurately pinpoints the personality structure of any given individual, that is the organised focus of his life. The true personality surfaces only when the individual traits are examined which can be obtained from such resources as a persons' case history, diary, letters, and other such documents.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) What are the various types of traits?

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- 2) Define common traits.

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- 3) Define individual traits.

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- 4) How does one differentiate between common and individual traits?

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1.5 THE PROPIUM: DEVELOPMENT OF SELFHOOD

One thing that motivates human beings is the tendency to satisfy biological survival needs, which Allport referred to as opportunistic functioning. He noted that opportunistic functioning can be characterised as reactive, past-oriented, and biological.

Allport also felt that opportunistic functioning was relatively unimportant for understanding most of human behaviour, as he was of the view that most behaviours of individuals is motivated by something very different. This different aspect is the one that helps express one's unique self. This type of something motivating the functioning of a person in terms of expressing of the self was termed by Allport as appropriate functioning. Allport also said that most of what persons do in life are a matter of being who the persons are, what are their individual qualities, etc. Appropriate functioning can be characterised as proactive, future-oriented, and psychological.

Appropriate comes from the word 'proprium', which is Allport's name for that essential concept, the self. He had reviewed hundreds of definitions for that concept and came to feel that, in order to be more scientific, it would be necessary to dispense with the common word self and substitute something else. However despite the word proprium was considered a good substitute, this term never could actually substitute self and 'self' continue to be used to represent the individual's unique features that motivate the person's behaviour.

To get an intuitive feel for what appropriate functioning means, think of the last time you wanted to do something or become something because you really felt like doing or becoming that something that would be expressive of the things about yourself that you believe to be most important. Remember the last time you did something to express your self, the last time you told yourself, "that's really me!" Doing things in keeping with what you really are, that's appropriate functioning.

1.5.1 The Proprium Defined

Putting so much emphasis on the self or proprium, Allport wanted to define it as carefully as possible. He considered proprium from two basic view points, viz., phenomenological and functional.

Phenomenological means the self is considered in terms of what it experiences. Allport suggested that the self is composed of all the aspects of a person experiencing, that is what the person sees as most essential or important and not incidental or accidental. It also means warm as against being cold in terms of emotions, and central which means that the self is the central part and not peripheral of the self.

Allport considered the self as having seven functions, as given below:

- 1) Sense of body
- 2) Self-identity
- 3) Self-esteem

- 4) Self-extension
- 5) Self-image
- 6) Rational coping
- 7) Propriate striving

Table below shows the appropriate functions of personality in order of their sequential appearance in the developing individual.

Table: Developmental Stages of the Proprium by Allport

Stage	Aspects of personality	Definition
1	Sense of bodily self	Awareness of bodily sensations. First aspect of proprium that evolves during the first year of life. Infants become aware of sensations coming from muscles, tendons, and joints etc. These recurrent sensations constitute the bodily self.
2	Sense of Identity	Continuity of self despite changes taking place. Second aspects of proprium evolves through language, the child recognises him/herself as a distinct and constant point of reference. By learning one's name, clothing, toys etc. helps in strengthening the sense of identity.
3.	Sense of self esteem	Pride in one's accomplishments. Self-esteem is the feeling of pride that results when a person accomplishes things on one's own. This aspect of proprium emerges during the third year of life. It depends on the child's success in mastering tasks and his urge to explore and manipulate the environment.
4.	Sense of self extension	Self comes to include relevant aspects of the social and physical environment. This evolves during 4 to 6 years of age, when children realise that their physical bodies also belongs to certain aspects of their environment, including people. Children learn the meaning of "mine"
5.	Self Image	Aspirations of the person begins to reflect the goals and expectations of significant others. It evolves around 5 or 6 years. It is the time the child realises what is expected of him/her by significant others. The child begins to distinguish between the 'good me' and the 'bad me'

6.	Sense of self as rational coper	Abstract reasoning and logic applied to solving everyday problems. This occurs between 6 and 12 years of age, when the child realises that s/he has the rational capacity to find solutions to life's problems and thereby cope effectively with reality demands. Reflective and formal thinking appears
7.	Propriate striving	Unified sense of self and planning for long range goals. Allport[1961] believed that the core problem of an adolescent is the selection of career and other life goals. Pursuing long range goals, having a sense of directedness and intentionality in striving for defined objectives, imparting to life a sense of purpose etc. are part of and essence of proprieate striving. Realisation of proprieate striving requires a unified sense of selfhood. And hence, this occurs only in adulthood, when all aspects of self are consolidated

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Define Proprium and describe the same.

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- 2) What are the various stages of development of the proprium?

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- 3) What is meant by proprieate functioning?

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- 4) How is appropriate functioning different from appropriate striving? Explain

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1.6 FUNCTIONAL AUTONOMY

Functional autonomy of motives

Allport didn't believe in looking too much into a person's past in order to understand his present. This belief is most strongly evident in the concept of functional autonomy. This concept states that the motives for a certain behaviour today are independent (autonomous) of their origins. For instance a person might have wanted to become an Information Technology specialist, because of the person getting first rank and getting prizes in it. However as of today the motive is different. That is, the person is n IT specialist because that itself is giving the person all that needs to be achieved. To take another example, a person might have developed a taste for pizzas, due to some reason, but that is actually not important, what is important is that the person likes pizzas as of today and that is what the person is now and that matters.

Allport thus did not believe in looking too much into a person's past in order to understand the present. This perhaps led to the term functional autonomy in which a person's motives today are independent (autonomous) of their origins.

The concept of *functional autonomy* of motives provides the necessary base for a theory of motivation. It simply means that adult motives are not related to past motives. The past is past, there are no strings attached. In other words, the reasons why an adult now engages in some behaviour are independent of whatever reasons that might have originally caused her/him to engage in that behaviour.

Allport suggested that much of adult behaviour is caused by functionally autonomous motives. For example, he pointed to the case of a young student who first undertakes a field study in college because it is required, because it pleases his parents, or because it comes at a convenient hour. As he starts working he finds himself absorbed in the topic, perhaps for life. The original motives with which he started on the project is no more present. What was a means to an end becomes an end itself.[1961,p.235]

1.6.1 Types of Functional Autonomy

Allport [1961] differentiated between two types of functional autonomy, viz., (i) preservative functional autonomy (ii) Propriate functional autonomy.

The first, preservative *functional autonomy* refers to feedback mechanisms in the nervous system that are governed by simple neurological principles. These mechanisms become neurologically self-maintaining over time and help to keep the organism on track. E.g. eating and going to bed at the same time each day. The main feature is repetitious activity.

The second, *propriate functional autonomy* refers to the acquired interests, values, attitudes and intentions of the person. It is the master system of motivation that imparts consistency to the person's striving for a congruent self image and a higher level of maturity and growth. People may not be constantly rewarded to sustain their efforts. Thus, it represents the striving for values and goals, and the sense of responsibility that people take for their lives.

Self Assessment Questions

- 1) Define functional autonomy of motives and elucidate the concept

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- 2) Discuss the different types of functional autonomy and highlight the differences.

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1.7 THE MATURE PERSONALITY

Allport [1961] believed that the emergence of personal maturity is a continuous and lifelong process of *becoming*. The behaviour of a mature person is functionally autonomous and is motivated by conscious processes. While the behaviour of immature persons is dominated by unconscious motives stemming from childhood experiences, Allport concluded that the psychologically mature adult is characterised by six attributes, namely

- 1) Has a widely extended sense of self
- 2) Has a capacity for warm social interactions
- 3) Demonstrates emotional security and self acceptance

- 4) Demonstrates realistic perception, skills and assignments
- 5) Demonstrates self insight and humour
- 6) Has a unifying philosophy of life.

Each of these are explained in detail in the following paragraphs:

- 1) *The mature person has a widely extended sense of self:* Truly mature persons can get ‘outside’ of themselves. They actively participate in work, family and social relationships, hobbies, political and religious issues, or whatever else they experience as valuable.
- 2) *The mature person has a capacity for warm social interactions:* There are two kinds of interpersonal warmth, that is, intimacy and compassion. The intimate aspect of warmth is seen in a person’s capacity to show deep love for family and close friends. Compassion is reflected in a person’s ability to tolerate differences (concerning values or attitudes) between the self and others ,which allows the person to show profound respect and appreciation for the human condition and a sense of kinship with all people.
- 3) *The mature person demonstrates emotional security and self-acceptance:* Mature adults have a positive image of themselves and are thus able to tolerate frustrating or irritating events as well as their shortcomings without becoming inwardly hostile. They also deal with their emotions, like, depression, anger, guilt, in such a way that they do not interfere with the well-being of others.
- 4) *The mature person demonstrates realistic perception, skills, and assignments:* Healthy people see things as they are, not as they wish them to be. They are in direct contact with the reality. They do not distort it perceptually to fit their needs and fantasies. Healthy people possess appropriate skills for their work, provisionally setting aside personal desires and impulses while task takes a priority.
- 5) *The mature person demonstrates self-insight and humour:* Mature adults have an accurate picture of their own strengths and weaknesses. Humour is an important aspect in self insight because it prevents unnecessary self glorification and just plain phoniness. Humour is the ability to laugh at the things one cherishes (including oneself) and still cherish them.
- 6) *The mature person has a unifying philosophy of life:* Mature person can “put it all together”, with a clear, consistent, and systematic way of seeing meaning in their lives. A person needs to have a value system that will present him a dominant goal or theme that makes his life meaningful. Different people may develop different central values around which their lives will revolve. A mature person has a set of deeply held values which serve as a unifying foundation of his/her life. A unifying philosophy of life therefore provides a kind of overriding value orientation that gives meaning and significance to everything the person does.

1.8 APPLICATION: THE STUDY OF VALUES

The unifying philosophy of a mature person is founded upon *values*, that is, basic convictions about what is and is not of real importance in life. Believing that a person’s efforts to find order and meaning in life are governed by values,

Allport identified and measured basic value dimensions. He helped to develop a personality test, the *Study of Values*. Allport's model is based on the work of Eduard Spranger, a European psychologist.

In his book *Types of Men*, Spranger outlined six major value types. These values are found in varying degrees in all people. People construct the unity of their lives around them (Allport, 1961). Thus, no person falls exclusively under any one value category. Rather, different value combinations are more or less salient in the lives of different people.

For Allport, these values are best described as deep level traits. They are described as:

- i) The Theoretical
- ii) The economic
- iii) The aesthetic
- iv) The social
- v) The political
- vi) The religious.

Let us consider each of these in some detail

- i) **The Theoretical:** The person is primarily concerned with the discovery of *truth*. Such a person is characterised by a rational, critical, and empirical approach to life. The person is highly intellectual and tends to pursue a career in science or philosophy.
- ii) **The Economic:** The economic person places highest value on whatever is *useful or pragmatic*. Such a person is highly 'practical' and is keenly interested in making money.
- iii) **The Aesthetic:** This person places the highest value on *form and harmony*. Every single experience is given importance from the point of view of grace, symmetry, or fitness.
- iv) **The Social:** The highest value of the social type is *love of people*. Such a person is likely to view the theoretical, economic, and aesthetic attitudes as cold and inhuman, and thus would regard love as the only suitable form of relationship.
- v) **The Political:** The main interest of the political person is *power*. Such people look out for personal power, influence, and renowned above all else.
- vi) **The Religious:** This person is mainly concerned with understanding the world as a *unified whole*. The religious person seeks unity and higher meaning in the cosmos.

Allport assessed individual differences in the relative strength of these six values by means of the *Study of Values* scale. Developed and standardised with college students, the test consists of 45 questions and requires 20 minutes to complete. The reliability and validity data support the utility of the test. Average scores on the six values differ in the expected directions for different occupational groups, as for example, in the case of business students they score poorly on the aesthetic value, and theology students score poorly on the religious value.(Allport et al., 1960).The test reflects Allport's belief that values are an essential part of an individual's personality.

1.9 LET US SUM UP

Gordon Allport regarded the explanation of an individual's uniqueness as the paramount goal of psychology. He viewed personality as the dynamic organisation of those internal psychophysical systems that determine a person's characteristic behaviour and thoughts. He considered trait as the most significant unit of analysis for understanding behaviour.

Traits account for a person's behavioural consistency over time and across situations. They may be classified as cardinal, central, or secondary, according to the degree of pervasiveness within a personality. He also made distinction between common and personal dispositions. The former are generalised traits to which most people within a given culture can be compared, whereas the latter refer to characteristics peculiar to a person which do not permit comparisons with others.

The overall construct that unifies traits and provides direction for the person's life is termed the proprium, or self as known, that contributes to an inward sense of unity. Another concept is of functional autonomy. This principle asserts that adult motives are not related to the earlier experiences in which they originally originated. There are two types of functional autonomies, preservative functional autonomy (feedback mechanisms in the nervous system) and proprieate functional autonomy (the person's acquired interests ,values, attitudes, and intentions). The latter allows for the development of the truly mature person.

1.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How important is Allport's concept of "proprium" in describing the total personality?
- 2) What do you think of Allport's concept of "functional autonomy?"
- 3) How well do Allport's six characteristics of a mature personality fit your own idea of what constitutes a healthy personality?
- 4) What are the various values put forward by Allport?

1.11 GLOSSARY

Bodily self	: That aspect of the propiym based on the person's perception of his /her body. Allport considered it to be a lifelong anchor of self-awareness.
Cardinal disposition	: A characteristic so pervasive that virtually all a person's activities can be traced to its influence.
Central disposition	: A characteristic that influences the person's behaviour in a variety of settings ; central traits are the "building blocks " of personality structure.
Character	: Term used to refer a moral standard or value system against which a person's actions are evaluated.
Common trait	: Any generalised disposition against which most people within a given culture can reasonably be compared(nomothetic trait).

Dispositional perspective: An approach to personality emphasising the enduring qualities or traits that reside within the person and that render the person's behaviour consistent overtime and across situations.

Functional autonomy :

Process whereby a given form of behaviour becomes an end or goal in itself despite the fact that it may originally have been adopted for another reason. What was formerly a means to an end becomes an end itself.

Individual trait

: A trait unique to the individual(personal disposition).

Propriate striving

: The person's motivation to enhance self through the pursuit of important, long-range goals. Such motivation will increase the the level of tension.

Proprium

: All aspects of a person that make him unique. It represents creative, forward moving and positive quality of human nature.

Psychophysical system

: An important aspect of Allport's definition which suggests that both mental and physical factors must be considered when we seek to understand human functioning.

Secondary disposition:

A trait that has little or no influence on behaviour, as for example, a specific food preference.

Self as a rational coper:

A person's realisation that s/he can cope effectively wiyh reality demands and achieve personal goals.

Self esteem

: The favourableness of a person's self-image.

Self extension

: The person's feelings about his /her material possessions.

Self identity

: The person's recognition of self as a distinct and constant point of referencerelative to others.

Self image

: The diversity of roles a person plays in order to gain the approval of others and to manage their impressions of who and what the person is.

Self objectification

: The ability to view oneself objectively and to recognise one's strength and weaknesses.

1.12 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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