

Looking at the personality theory



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A person is a flow of powerful subjective life, conscious and unconscious; a whispering gallery in which voices echo from the distant past; a gulf stream of fantasies with floating memories of past events, currents of contending complexes, plots and counterplots, hopeful intimations and ideals...A personality is a full Congress of orators and pressure groups, of children, demagogues, communists, isolationists, war-mongers, mugwumps, grafters, log rollers, lobbyists, Caesars and Christs, Machiavellis and Judases, Tories and Promethean revolutionists.

(Murray, What Should Psychologists 160-61)

The term personality is used by psychologists to denote a consistent pattern of responses to the world that the environment imposes upon the individual internally and externally (Kassarjian and Robertson 194). All the physical, mental and emotional characteristics of an individual as an integrated whole, especially as they are presented to others, form what we commonly term as personality. According to Robert B. Ewen, " personality refers to important and relatively stable aspects of behaviour."(4) During the past one hundred years extensive research has been done by the various psychologists in this field. This research has given birth to what we now call Personality psychology. Personality psychology is a branch of psychology which studies human personality deeply using psychological theories. The scientific study of personality can be traced back to the year 1937, when Gordon Allport published his book ' Personality: A Psychological Interpretation'.

Personality analysis, like art, is subjective in nature. There is no single best recognised definition or theory of personality yet and different psychologists

have different definitions and theories regarding personality. “ Psychologists themselves cannot arrive at a unifying definition of personality, due in part to its subjective nature.” (Schultz 2) According to Sam Smiley, “ It is the form, or overall unity, of an individual’s traits. It includes the complex of characteristics that distinguish one person from all others, and it admits the behavioural potentials of the individual which transcend all his attitudes and actions. . . . Personality is the totality of a human being’s physiological and psychological traits, and therefore it is the epitome of whatever differentiates one human from every other human.” (82-83)

Robert B. Ewen gives one of the most comprehensive definitions of personality. He says, “ Personality deals with a wide range of human behaviour. To most theorists, personality includes virtually everything about a person-mental, emotional, social, and physical. Some aspects of personality are unobservable, such as thoughts, memories, and dreams, whereas others are observable, such as overt actions. Personality also includes aspects that are concealed from yourself, or unconscious, as well as those that are conscious and well within your awareness.” (4)

Some other significant definitions by noted psychologists are:

Cattell offers the opinion that, “ Personality is that which permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation. . . . Personality is . . . concerned with all the behaviour of the individual, both overt and under the skin.”

(Liebert and Spiegler 3-4) “ Personality refers to the collection of attitudes and knowledge that a person possesses, that is, mainly those personal items

that direct behaviour. In this context, personality is synonymous with mind.”
(McNeal 52)

While defining personality it is only appropriate to remember that the word personality is derived from the Latin word ‘ persona’ which means a mask. One very important observation that has been made in this regard is:

...in early Latin, persona means “ a mask” - dramatis personae are the masks which actors wear in a play, that is, the characters that are represented. Etymologically and historically, then, the personality is the character that is manifested in public. In modern psychology and sociology this corresponds rather closely to the role behaviour of a differentiated person. From one point of view, this constitutes a disguise. Just as the outer body shields the viscera from view, and clothing the genitals, so the public personality shields the private personality from the curious and censorious world. It also operates to conceal underlying motivations from the individual’s own consciousness. (Murray and Kluckhohn 40)

The study of personality is a broad area and includes various theoretical constructs, conceptual approaches and research methodologies. The major theories include psychodynamic perspective, humanistic perspective, trait perspective, behaviourist perspective and cognitive perspective. The major personality theorists include Sigmund Freud, Carl Gustav Jung, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, Harry Stack Sullivan, Erik Erikson, Carl R. Rogers, Abraham H. Maslow, Rollo May, Gordon W. Allport, Raymond B. Cattell, Henry A. Murray, B. F. Skinner, George A. Kelly and Albert Bandura.

The present study deals with Gordon W. Allport's and Henry A. Murray's theories of personality. The main aim is to study and analyse Michael Jackson's personality with the application of Allport's and Murray's personality theories. The thesis focuses on Michael Jackson as an individual and how his character and personality are similar in several aspects to the character and personality of the picaresque hero - the antihero of picaresque novels. It is essential to study in detail the theories of both the psychologists in order to successfully use them as a tool to analyse the personalities of Michael Jackson and the picaresque hero.

Gordon Willard Allport (1897 - 1967) was a premier American psychologist who is often called the father of Personality theory. He is considered to be the founder of personality psychology as he was one of the first psychologists to have focused extensively on the study of personality. He was the first psychologist who gave thorough thought to the concept of traits in a person. He developed a theory called the 'trait theory' and opined that the trait was the most appropriate way of describing and studying personality.

Allport approached psychology and the issue of personality in a unique way. Allport "revolutionized the world of psychology by moving the study of the personality into the mainstream of psychology. His theories are still debated, and he is considered one of the most controversial psychologists of our time." (Hall and Lindzey 260) Allport's opinions differed from other psychologists. He believed in studying healthy and mature individuals. "He felt the study of animals and neurotic people could not lead to conclusions pertinent to normally functioning adults." (Becoming 18)

Secondly, Allport viewed every human being as unique. Therefore, he believed in studying an individual personality as opposed to studying people in common. He criticized scientists for their avoidance of the individual and their prevalent theory that individuality can only be studied by history, art or biography and not by science. He believed that nomothetic methods (general and universal) should be discouraged and idiographic methods (individual) must be encouraged.

If we accept this dogma concerning the scope and limitations of science we shall have to abandon the person as a person. But we are not yet discouraged. That the individual is a system of patterned uniqueness is a fact. That science likes universals and not particulars is also a fact. Yet personality itself is a universal phenomenon though it is found only in individual forms. Since it is a universal phenomenon science must study it; but it cannot study it correctly unless it looks into the individuality of patterning! Such is the dilemma. (Pattern and Growth 9)

Allport stated that there is no correct or incorrect definition of personality, rather all definitions are "full of pitfalls." (Pattern and Growth 28) He defined personality as "a dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustments to his environment." (Personality 48) Because this definition reflects some unique phrasing and word choices, Allport's own explanations of terminology and phrasing are presented.

Dynamic Organization

The personality is constantly changing, and any definition of personality must acknowledge this change. However, this change does not occur in the normal adult in a haphazard fashion; rather, it occurs within the boundaries of an organization. (Allport, Personality 48) This change occurs in a self-regulating and motivating fashion. This definition of organized change implies the existence of a reciprocal process of disorganization, especially in those personalities marked by progressive disintegration. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 28)

Psychophysical

This term serves as a reminder that personality is neither exclusively physical nor mental. Instead, the organization of the personality fuses the physical and mental in "some inextricable unity." (Allport, Personality 48)

Systems

A system is a complex of elements in mutual interaction. The personality is composed of many systems. A habit, sentiment, trait, concept, or style of behaving are all systems and are latent in the personality even when they are not active. Systems are our "potential for activity." (Allport, Pattern and Growth 28-29)

Determine

Personality is something, and it does something. Personality is active. Allport contended that the latent psychophysical systems, when called into action, either motivate or direct a specific activity or thought. (Pattern and Growth 29) Personality is not synonymous with behaviour or activity; personality is

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merely the impression that this activity makes on others. It is what lies behind specific acts and within the individual. (Allport, Personality 48) All systems that comprise a single personality are the “ determining tendencies.” They exert a direct influence on the adjusting and expressive acts which make up the personality. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 29)

Characteristic

All behaviour and thought are characteristic of the person and are unique to that person. Allport acknowledged the use of this term, and the need to define it, appeared redundant in a definition whose very meaning stressed individuality and uniqueness. He used it, though, to “ drive the point home.” (Pattern and Growth 29)

Behaviour and Thought

Allport used these two terms to cover anything whatsoever an individual might do. A person’s main activity, according to Allport, is to adjust to the environment, but he felt it unwise to define personality only in terms of adjustment. He acknowledged the individual also reflects on the environment, strives to master it, and sometimes succeeds in this mastery of the environment. Thought as well as behaviour, then, make for both survival and growth. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 29) The following diagram depicts a comprehensive view of personality.

Allport summarized his own definition of personality:

My own definition of personality is “ essentialist.” “ Personality is what a person “ really is,” regardless of the way other people perceive his qualities

or the methods by which we study them. Our perceptions and our methods may be in error, just as an astronomer may fall short in studying the constitution of a star. But the star is still there, a challenging object for study. My definition does not, of course, deny that a person is variable over time or that his behaviour may change from situation to situation. It says simply that the person has an internal structure and range of characteristics (variable, to be sure, but ascertainable), and it is this structure that we hope to study. (Pattern and Growth 35)

The discussion in detail of Allport's definition of personality and his approach towards both, personality and psychology, leads us to his theory of traits.

According to Allport a trait is:

...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 behaviour. (Personality 295)

He believed that a trait exists within a person and is there even when a person is alone and away from the observation of others. Secondly, he believed that traits define behaviour and make it consistent. " Traits, we must note from the outset, are not per se observables. Nor are they real entities. You will never be able to place them under a microscope. They are descriptive schemas that are the product of human reason and imagination. They serve a heuristic purpose, as do all other constructs about the world in which we live: namely, they give a conceptual order to our world and make it more comprehensible than it would be without them. That Allport ([1937]

1961), for example, stipulates that traits – or personality for that matter – have neuropsychic referents does not turn them into things (reify them so to speak).” (Dumont 149)

Allport clearly distinguished traits from types.

Unlike traits types always have a biosocial reference. A man can be said to have a trait; but he cannot be said to have a type. Rather he fits a type.... types exist not in people or in nature, but rather in the eye of the observer. Type includes more than is in the individual. Traits, on the contrary, are considered wholly within the compass of the individual. The crux of the distinction is that in a “ type” the reference point is always some attribute, or cluster of corresponding attributes abstracted from various personalities. (Personality 295-296)

Yet Allport was aware of the limitations involved in the study of traits: generalities of names; variability of emotions; the ability to observe only the act, which is the result of the trait rather than the trait itself. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 333-334) Even with the limitations involved in trait research, Allport believed them to be one of the strongest means for personality study.

He did not blindly study personality traits, but tried to take into account all of the variables, for example:

No trait theory can be sound unless it allows for, and accounts for, the variability of a person’s conduct. Pressures from the surrounding environment, the companions he is with, and the counter current in the person himself may delay, augment, distort, or inhibit completely the

conduct that we would normally expect to issue from a person's traits. . . . All this is true; yet in a person's stream of activity there is, besides a variable portion, likewise a constant portion; and it is this constant portion we seek to designate with the concept of trait." (Pattern and Growth 333)

Allport draws a distinction between common traits and individual traits. A common trait identifies a trait which to some extent is reflected in many personalities. An individual trait, however, or personal disposition (as Allport came to call them), is peculiar to the individual. He points out that all traits are unique and no one trait can be found in more than one person. But at the same time for the science of personality and psychology to function properly it is important to compare individuals. Allport states that " for all their ultimate differences, normal persons within a given culture-area tend to develop a limited number of roughly comparable modes of adjustment. The original endowment of most human beings, their stages of growth, and the demands of their particular society, are sufficiently standard and comparable to lead to some basic modes of adjustment that from individual to individual are approximately the same."(Pattern and Growth 298)

Common traits are developed, according to Allport, because the human nature develops similar modes of adjusting to a similar environment, though varying degrees of individualism still exist (Pattern and Growth 349). Allport felt common traits were less important to the individual personality because they actually reflect the social mores developed through socialization, rather than personal choices. Therefore, common traits are constantly changing according to the growth, development, and fads of a particular society.

Allport felt the very nature of the common trait made it less influential to the

individual. Individual traits, on the other hand, “ have the capacity to initiate and guide consistent forms of adaptive and stylistic behaviour.” (Allport, Pattern and Growth 373).

However, Allport felt that for a complete and thorough study of personality both common and individual traits are essential: “...individual and common trait [concepts] are complementary in the study of personality. What is unique and what is universal both need to be explored.” (Personality 299)

Allport described traits by names. He identified approximately eighteen thousand words in the English language which named distinctive forms of personal behaviour. Though incomplete, Allport believed that, this list of words had an infinite scope. Allport categorized the 18, 000 trait names: 30% have an evaluative flavour; 25% are comparative; 25% refer to temporary states of mind, mood, emotion, or activity, and 25% are metaphorical (Pattern and Growth 354-355).

Allport was dissatisfied with the limitations of verbal tags. He recognized the weaknesses found in the subjective and limited nature of labelling:

A trait of personality may or may not coincide with some well-defined, conventional social concept. . . It would be ideal if we could . . . find our traits first and then name them. But honesty, loyalty, neatness and tact, though encrusted with social significance, may likewise represent true traits of personality. The danger is that, in devising scales for their measurement, we may be bound by the conventional meanings and thus be led away from the precise integration as it exists in a given individual. Where possible, it would

be well for us to find our traits first and then seek devaluated terms with which to characterize our discoveries. (Becoming 135)

Allport understood that no single act is the product of only one trait, and a trait is only one factor in determining an act. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 334 and 360) This recognition of the complexity of the human nature led Allport to the conclusion that it is ridiculous to try to reduce human nature to a single element simply for the sake of explanation:

We view personality- in the only way it can be intelligibly viewed-as a network of organization, composed of systems within systems, some systems of small magnitude and somewhat peripheral to the central or propiate structure, other systems of wider scope at the core of the total edifice; some easy to set into action, others more dormant; some so culturally conforming that they can readily be viewed as " common"; others definitely idiosyncratic. But in the last analysis this network-complying billions and billions of nerve cells, fashioned by a one-time heredity and by environmental experiences never duplicated-is ultimately unique. (Pattern and Growth 360)

Although there is a certain degree of consistency found within the personality, the personality is not completely predictable. The inconsistency of dispositions could be due to a specific situation, or to the actual existence of opposite dispositions within an individual (Allport, Becoming 135). Allport felt that contradictory behaviour is often not contradictory at all, but a contrasting stylistic demonstration of the same personal disposition. What

must be identified is the deepest disposition that is operating within an individual:

Take the case of Dr. D., always neat about his person and desk, punctilious about lecture notes, outlines, and files; his personal possessions are not only in order but carefully kept under lock and key. Dr. D is also in charge of the departmental library. In this duty he is careless; he leaves the library door unlocked, and books are lost; it does not bother him that dust accumulates. Does this contradiction in behaviour mean that D lacks personal dispositions? Not at all. He has two opposed stylistic dispositions, one of orderliness and one of disorderliness. Different situations arouse different dispositions. Pursuing the case further, the duality is at least partly explained by the fact that D has one cardinal (motivational) disposition from which these contrasting styles proceed. The outstanding fact about his personality is that he is a self-centred egotist who never acts for other people's interests, but always for his own. This cardinal self-centeredness (for which there is abundant evidence) demands orderliness for himself, but not for others. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 363)

A particular trait can be identified and determined in a particular person only if the behaviour it characterises occurs repeatedly in by and large similar situations. According to Allport:

A specific act is always the product of many determinants, not only of lasting sets, but of momentary pressures in the person and in the situation. It is only the repeated occurrence of acts having the same significance (equivalence of response) following upon a definable range of stimuli having the same

personal significance (equivalence of stimuli) that makes necessary the inference of traits and personal dispositions. (Pattern and Growth 374)

Allport put forward his classic doctrine of traits:

A trait has more than nominal existence.

A trait is more than a generalized habit.

A trait is dynamic, or at least determinative.

The existence of a trait may be established empirically or at least statistically.

Traits are only relatively independent of each other.

A trait of personality, psychologically considered, is not the same as a moral quality.

Acts, and even habits, that are inconsistent with a trait are not proof of the nonexistence of the trait.

A trait may be viewed either in the light of the personality which contains it, or in the light of its distribution in the population at large. (What is a Trait 368)

Allport reasoned that some traits have more influence on an individual than other traits. He categorized these traits into three levels: Cardinal traits, Central traits and Secondary traits.

Cardinal Traits

A cardinal trait is so pervasive and outstanding in any given individual that almost every act can be traced to its influence and almost every aspect of a person's life is touched by it. A person is so dominated by the cardinal trait that it can rarely be hidden from others. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 365)

Such a trait is so dominant in a person that the person comes to be known for that trait. It becomes almost synonymous to his personality. Examples of cardinal traits can be: narcissist and Casanova. A cardinal trait is considered to be rare and tends to develop in an individual at a later stage in his life. A person does not necessarily have only one cardinal trait, and this trait may change as a person matures and changes. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 365)

Central Traits

A central trait is less dominant as compared to a cardinal trait. Central traits form the foundation of an individual's personality. "Central traits are easily detected characteristics within a person, traits that all people have a certain number of, five to ten on an average according to Allport." (Schultz 201)

Secondary Traits

On a less conspicuous level of influence are secondary dispositions. These traits are less generalized and less consistent than central dispositions. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 365) They might reflect something only a best friend would know. (Schultz 201).

Allport did not set down any particular number of dispositions an individual might possess.

How many dispositions has a person is a most audacious question, and can be answered in only a preliminary and speculative way. For many reasons the question is audacious: Behaviour is in continuous flow; dispositions never express themselves singly; people manifest contradictory dispositions in contradictory situations; furthermore, diagnostic methods are too ill developed to enable us to discover the answer. (Pattern and Growth 366)

Allport's trait theory can be summed up through the following diagram.

Habits and attitudes are often confused with traits because of their similarities. Allport clearly defined habits and attitudes to avoid all confusion. According to Allport, a habit can function as a trait, but a trait is not always a habit. Habits are inflexible and specific in response to specific stimuli; traits are more generalized and variable in expression. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 346) A number of habits may be blended together to develop a trait; however, habits do not integrate automatically into traits. They do so when the person has some general concept or self image which leads to the fusion of the habit into a trait. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 346) Allport cites the example of a child brushing his teeth.

A young child may be regarded as forming a specific habit when he learns (with difficulty) to brush his teeth night and morning. For some years this habit may stand alone, aroused only by appropriate commands or by the appropriate environmental situation. With the passing of years, however, brushing teeth becomes not only automatic (as is the way of habits) but likewise firmly woven into a much wider system of habits, viz., a trait of personal cleanliness. . . . The adult is uncomfortable if he omits brushing the

teeth from his daily schedule, not only because a single habit is frustrated, but because the omission violates a general demand for cleanliness. (Allport, Personality 292)

Allport explained that a trait is a “ fusion of habit and endowment rather than a colligation or chain of habits alone.” (Personality 293) The transformation of habit to trait is simply when the motivation shifts from simple conditioned responses to a sheer liking of the activity as motivation. Then “ trait has become autonomous.” (Allport, Personality 293)

Allport distinguishes between a trait and an attitude in two ways. First, an attitude always has an object of reference; whereas, a trait does not direct itself specifically toward something. Second, an attitude is usually favourable or unfavourable, for or against. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 347) It involves a judgement or evaluation (pro or con), which a trait does not. (Schultz 200)

Motivation

According to Allport, the pivot of the theory of personality is the analysis of the nature of motivation. He defined motivation as any internal condition in a person that induces action or thought. (Pattern and Growth 196) Allport also believed a theory of motivation should meet four requirements: contemporaneity, pluralistic, cognitive process, and concrete uniqueness. (Schultz 201)

Contemporaneity

A theory of motivation must acknowledge the contemporaneity of motives. (Pattern and Growth 220) In other words, the importance of the present

should be stressed: " Motives leading to activity, it may be argued, are always operative at the time the activity takes place." Allport added, " That which drives, drives now." (The Use of Personal 80) Allport was aware, however, that in complex adult motives the past is, to some degree, alive in the present. He considered it, however, the task of the psychologist to discover " how much of the past is fire and how much of it is ashes." (Allport, Pattern and Growth 219) To think that the motives of mankind are essentially unchanged from birth until death seemed to Allport inadequate at best. (Pattern and Growth 203) That which once motivated, does not necessarily motivate always. It is important to realize the past is only important if it exists as a present or current motivating force, or is " dynamically active in the present." (Allport, Pattern and Growth 220)

More precisely stated, it is the unfinished structure that has this dynamic power. A finished structure is static; but a growing structure, tending toward a given direction of closure, has the capacity to subordinate the guide conduct in conformity with its movement. (Allport, Becoming 91)

Pluralistic

Allport believed that a theory of motivation must have room for multiple motives. Motivation cannot be reduced to one general phase or drive.

Some motives are transient, some recurring; some are momentary, others persistent; some unconscious, others conscious; some opportunistic, others appropriate; some tension-reducing, others tension-maintaining. Motives are so diverse in type that we find it difficult to discover the common denominator. About all we can say is that a person's motives include all that he is trying

(consciously or unconsciously, reflexly or deliberately) to do. (Pattern and Growth 221)

Simplification does not explain motivation. Neither does reducing “ its strands to the simplified model of the machine, the animal, the child, or the pathological.” (Pattern and Growth 222) A theory of motivation should allow that there may be some truth in each theory. (Pattern and Growth 221)

Cognitive Process

A theory of motivation must acknowledge the importance of the cognitive processes - e. g. planning and intention. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 222) Allport's requirement of cognitive process gives emphasis to the individual's conscious plans and intentions. These conscious intentions represent, above all else, the individual's primary mode of addressing the future. (Becoming 89) Thus, cognitive process stresses the importance of the future in the motivating process of the personality.

Allport believed that all individuals possess the power of thought and it is this thought process which leads them to form decisions. Hence, an individual's intent should be central to understanding his personality.

Allport defined intention as “ what an individual is trying to do,” and he included several features of motivation derived from the concept of intention:

The cognitive and emotive processes in personality become fused into an integral urge.

The intention, like all motivation, exists in the present, but has strong future orientation. Use of the concept helps us to trace the course of motivation as lives are actually lived—into the future and not, as most theories do, backward into the past. It tells us what sort of future a person is trying to bring about and this is the most important question we can ask about any mortal.

The term has a flavour of “ tension maintained” and thus reflects the true condition of all long range motives.

When we identify major intentions in a life we have a device for holding subsidiary trends in perspective. (Pattern and Growth 223).

Allport believed the present should be explained more in terms of the future, not the past. It is more important to identify what a person intends to do and how they are presently acting out this intention, than to look toward the past of an individual’s childhood or development.

Unfortunately the concept of intention is not prominent in current psychology. The reason is that it connotes purpose, the efficacy of conscious planning, and a “ pull” that man’s image of the future exerts on his present conduct. . . . the more favoured “ physicalistic” conception would say that he is pushed by his motives (not pulled by his intentions). Many psychologists would say that “ drives” take entire care of what we here call intention. Yet drives as such are blind. They do not allow for organization and direction by cognitive attitudes, by foresight, by cortical control. (Allport, Pattern and Growth 224)