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CHAPTER 8

ALLPORT'S TRAIT THEORY

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A Humanistic View of Personality

- “Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought” (Allport, 1961)
- **Becoming:** process involving movement toward self-realization
- **Psychophysical systems:** personality consists of both mind and body elements organized into a complex, inextricable unity

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The Theory of Traits

- **Trait theory:** conception of personality that postulates the existence of underlying dispositions or characteristics that direct behavior
 - Major concepts revolve around the different kinds of traits that are contained in the **proprium**, or self, and how they are shaped as the self continues to develop

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What Is a Trait?

- **Trait:** neuropsychic disposition that causes person to act consistently across a variety of situations
 - **Cardinal:** characteristics that serve as the motivating force for virtually all of an individual's behavior
 - **Central:** characteristics that control an individual's behavior in many situations, but are less comprehensive than cardinal traits
 - **Secondary:** peripheral characteristics that exert little control over a person's behavior
 - **Common:** dispositions shared with others
 - **Personal disposition:** traits unique to the individual

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The Proprium or Self

- **Bodily self:** feelings about oneself based on feedback from one's physical senses
- **Self-identity:** sense of self as having continuity and sameness
- **Self-esteem:** feelings about one's worth
- **Self-extension:** sense of identity with one's possessions, family, home, and country

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The Proprium or Self (cont'd.)

- **Self-image:** role played in order to win the approval of others
- **Self-as-rational coper:** awareness of oneself as someone capable of rationally formulating and utilizing strategies in order to solve problems and attain personal goals
- **Propriate striving:** motive that propels the individual toward the attainment of important, long-range goals; these drives involve an increase, rather than a decrease, in tension
- **Self-as-knower:** integrative sense of self as one who consists of many different facets

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Development of the Mature Personality

- **Functional autonomy:** process whereby a behavior that was once controlled by a basic motive comes to operate independently of that motive
- Characteristics of maturity
 - **Extension of the sense of self:** ability to participate in activities with others that go beyond striving to gratify one's own selfish needs; genuine concern for others
 - **Warm relatedness to others:** able to be intimate and compassionate in one's relationships with others

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Development of the Mature Self (cont'd.)

- Characteristics of maturity (cont'd.)
 - **Self-acceptance:** understanding and acknowledgement, not only of one's strengths, but one's weaknesses as well
 - **Realistic perception of reality:** accurate perception of the world as it actually exists
 - **Self-objectification:** ability not to take oneself too seriously
 - **Unifying philosophy of life:** development of a set of life goals and values that guide a person's behavior

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The Role of Religion as a Unifying Philosophy of Life

- **Intrinsic religious orientations:** orientations that are adopted by people to help them make sense of their experiences and to surrender themselves to a power higher than themselves
 - Individuals are oriented toward helping others and are not narcissistic
- **Extrinsic religious orientations:** orientations that are used by people for self-serving purposes
 - Primary orientation is a narcissistic focus on having their needs met

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Limitations of Allport's Views on Religiosity Differences

- Flaw: intrinsically oriented individuals can feel superior about their own religious views and subsequently harbor prejudice against outgroups
- Support: people primarily oriented toward making friendships at houses of worship are more likely to be prejudiced toward members of other religious out-groups and less psychologically mature
- The strong American individualism that Allport embraced remains a powerful and ubiquitous force even today
 - Unfortunately, it obscures our understanding of the more collectivistic or social motives of religion that creates a healthy social solidarity

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Study of Values

- Theoretical
- Economic
- Aesthetic
- Social
- Political
- Religious

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Assessment Techniques

- **Nomothetic:** approach to the study of behavior that seeks to establish laws by specifying the general relationships between variables
- **Idiographic:** approach to the study of behavior that seeks to understand the uniqueness of a specific individual through intensive investigation
 - An idiographic analysis: the letters of Jenny Gove Masterson

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Theory's Implications for Therapy

- Therapy dependent on, “Love received and love given comprise the best form of therapy”
- The task of the therapist, in Allport’s view, is to help individuals become aware of the sources of their distorted goals and to assist them in the attainment of maturity and well-being

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Evaluative Comments

- **Comprehensiveness:** moderate in scope; focus on healthy development
- **Precision and testability:** not very precise and difficult to test adequately
- **Parsimony:** too simplistic
- **Empirical validity:** empirical support is weak; few attempts made to determine validity of work
- **Heuristic value:** stimulating to personality psychologists because it forces them to bear in mind that the discipline must take into account the uniqueness of the individual
- **Applied value:** not had much impact on disciplines outside psychology; theory of self-development has proved highly useful to clinical psychologists in their treatment of patients