

## Gordon Allport's Trait Theory

In attempting to formulate an account of personality, Allport rejected the notion that what constitutes personality can in any way be traced back to, or attributed to, innate physiological processes (as McCrae and Costa have been doing). As he argued, as Leont'ev (1978) would later, newborns lack a personality (and the personality traits which have yet to form).

Only the rudiments of that “which is highest and most excellent in man” are given at birth. The fully fashioned social and moral being, the developed adult personality, waits upon the process of growth. The nature of growth is the critical problem for the psychology of personality. For above all else it must know how the biological organism it finds at birth becomes transformed into the adult person able to take his place in the highly complex social activities of the civilized world surrounding him. (Allport, 1937, p. 101)

The psychology of personality has to be a post-instinctive formation.

According to Allport, “the course of individuality is one of greater and greater divergence from the relatively standard pattern of infancy. The dynamic substructures of which a personality is composed are unique integrations formed in the individual course of experience and heredity” (1937, p. 245). Whatever innate conditions may be present at birth, over the course of development and subsequent experience, they are transformed by learning; their motivational force is recast, possibly inhibited or transformed. The *fetish of the genetic method* which searches for the origin of the present in the past requires elimination. The adult is functionally independent of the infant. In the course of adaptation to current conditions the individual becomes socialized and civilized, and the group's standards are introcepted. The outer (possibly alien) is transformed into the inner (which is consistent with Vygotsky's 1981 *general genetic method of cultural development*). This meant that “since personality is largely a matter of the introception and modification of social conventions, customs and codes, it is instructive to know to what cultural stimuli and models the individual is exposed in the course of his development” (Allport, 1937, p. 371). This applied equally to personality traits.

In attempting to identify a unit of analysis in the assessment of personality, Allport, as was just noted, rejected any kind of natural endowment as being in any way adequate or sufficient. From the start these innate endowments or temperament were subject to the forces of learning or classical conditioning and were, in the processes, transformed. A reflexive response is transferred to a neutral stimulus. Over subsequent learning experiences the same and similar conditioned responses form into habits, or systems of integrated conditioned responses, which are stereotyped responses that are called up under similar recurring situations. To be serviceable for survival, in Allport's judgment, the personality unit had to be *stable* and *flexible*. To survive it was necessary to learn to behave in response to varied stimuli that are perceived as similar and to adapt to novel conditions. Such demands could not be met by habits. Habits were an inflexible type of response that were evoked by a narrow range of stimulus conditions, in particular situations.

In the hustle and bustle of the human realm of active engagement, particularly in highly complex sociocultural environments, incapacity to respond readily to novelty would not be functionally useful. Malleability was called for. Allport's preferred unit, therefore, was based on the innate endowment being transformed into habits by conditioning, and, subsequently, the fusion of habits, having the same adaptive significance, into a higher-order system of organization—traits. Once formed, traits were functionally independent of their composite

habits. They ceased being mechanical responses to immediate conditions and, instead, took up an autonomous, directive function in engaging the environment. The stimulus, in this and other developments, as Allport determined, was dethroned. As the developing child passes through new social situations (e.g., home and school) new adaptations and new traits could form. What adaptations are made and the personality that will form depend upon the nature of the social network that the person has to adapt to. This bears upon the issue of *national character* and is taken up in Allport's notion of the *common trait*.

As traits are adaptations to the conditions of one's existence it stands to reason that having to adapt to the same conditions can result in similar adjustments and, ultimately, similar traits. To the degree that conditions are shared among people, and to the degree that they endure pressure in the direction of culturally approved norms, one can expect similarities in the development of personal traits. Culture, furthermore, generally prescribes acceptable methods and goals in child-rearing. There are pressures within a culture that promote the formation of traits that are basic and common which, by adulthood, may approximate a *national character*. As Allport conceived of them, *common traits* are traits that are shared to different degrees by many people and reflect "*those aspects of personality in respect to which most people within a given culture can be profitably compared*" (Allport, 1961, p. 340, emphasis in the original). Cultural similarities, it should be emphasized, do not necessitate or imply group stereotypes. They are comparable adjustments. No two people have exactly the same traits.

Variability exists in the cultural conditions that one can be exposed to and in the style of parenting. Heterogeneity rather than homogeneity is the mark of modern cultures due to a multiplicity of values, beliefs, attitudes, practices, and so on, which will promote the non-uniformity of personalities. There are, on the other hand, cultures that are quite homogeneous and it is to one of these—the Hutterite brethren—that we turn to next in order to concretize Allport's trait theory and demonstrate a possible basis for notions of *national character*.

### ***Hutterite Personality Formation***

The Hutterites formed in the 16th century and their values and child-rearing practices are based on the traditions which stem from that period (Hostetler, 1970). The world, the Hutterites are taught, is dualistic in nature and its carnal side should be subdued while the spiritual side should be developed. That is the goal of Hutterite socialization. In order for this to be achieved, the individual will had to be broken and individuality suppressed, while self-denial, surrender and subservience to the colony, and obedience to authority should be developed (Hostetler and Huntington, 1967, 1968).

The similarities, over time and across colonies, in the goals and methods of socialization result in a personality that is rather uniform (a *national character*):

A successfully socialized Hutterite gets along well with others, is submissive, and obedient to the rules and regulations of the colony, and is a hard-working responsible individual. An adult Hutterite must never display anger nor precipitate quarrels. Intensity and imagination are not admired; rather, quiet willingness coupled with hard work are considered desirable qualities. The constant pruning which adapts each individual to the group results in minimizing of differences and a muting of emotional expression. The elimination of extremes and the imposition of a strict order enable members to find satisfaction in the "narrow way" that leads to salvation. (Hostetler and Huntington, 1968, p. 351)

Such uniformity is achieved through a clearly defined system of childrearing which utilizes the tools of punishment and reward coupled with socially defined age gradations and age-defined responsibilities.

From the beginning, House Children (0–3 years) are placed under communal care. The intent is to detach them from their parents and to establish a bond to the broader community so that the child will come to respond positively to the whole colony (Hostetler and Huntington, 1968). The child shifts from periods of active stimulation to periods of inactivity during religious observances. She or he comes to learn that colony life and colony schedules take precedence over the needs of the individual. Religious training begins with consumption of solid food and the recitation of prayers by care-givers. When sufficient understanding is displayed (combing hair, hitting back, or generally responding badly) discipline is introduced. From that point on discipline is swift and without explanation for not sharing, making noise and disturbing adults, getting in the way, quarrelling, lying, and so on. Punishment for children ranges from strapping to shaming but work is never a punishment since it must become a pleasure for the adult, and never are food or other privileges withheld. Immediately after punishment, forgiving and forgetting are the norm since human failings are inevitable and not the fault of the individual (Hostetler, 1974). Obedience, submission, dependence on, and identification with, the group, and the dissolution of individualism and self-development, are the aim.

The Kindergarten Child (age 3–6) is considered useless and willful and their baby-like behavior will not be tolerated (Hostetler and Huntington, 1968). They are mostly excluded from colony life and the goals of their socialization at this stage are the breaking of the child's stubborn will. There is a minimization of individuality and self-involvement and an emphasis on establishing bonds with one's peers, and inculcating respect for authority. The child must accept a restricted environment and passively accept frustration. The process continues with School Children (age 6–15) who must learn to accept punishment without anger or resistance, appropriate the values of the colony and obey without questioning. The child must accept that work is pleasurable and come to identify with peers. The children are taught to work together, to identify with each other, and to depend on each other. Group praise and group punishment are introduced. Overall the process results in some common traits of personality, e.g., submissiveness and obedience, in the adult Hutterite and this, I submit, is consistent with Allport's theory of common traits. Consider the case of submissiveness.

While there is no direct evidence of the formation of submission to others in any particular Hutterite, I think that it is possible to surmise the course it may take, given the nature of the child-rearing process, and to do so from the perspective of Allport's trait formation theory. Let us therefore consider the means by which conditioned behaviors may form into habits and how relatively comparable adaptive habits may amalgamate as the trait of submissiveness.

The habit of not arguing may result from punishing quarrelling, dissenting, and disagreeing and from reinforcing compliance, agreeableness, and going along. A lack of self-assertion may come from rewarding servility, deference, submitting, and cooperation while punishing defiance, insolence, blustering, resistance, or obstinacy. The habit of not questioning can result from punishing questioning, doubting, challenging, and the like, while reinforcing assenting, accepting, and acquiescence behaviors. Resignation can result from punishing complaints, struggling, and resisting, and rewarding docility, repenting, and apologizing. All four habits are roughly comparable habits that fit into the submissive tendencies of resignation to authority and a lack of self-assertion. Now, if such a trait was so formed it

would become directive in the future. So, for instance, when they begin to attend public school, in a schoolhouse maintained in and by the colony, they can be expected to be immediately deferent, in this new situation, to their new teacher. Admittedly this is not based on any concrete observations but I am disinclined to believe that my speculations are greatly amiss.

Hutterite child-rearing practices have been around for close to five hundred years and have proven effective as a means of developing the ideal, modal Hutterite personality. By that I do not mean exact replicas but a common tendency, a collection of common traits. Hutterite society does not partake of modern social change, given their preference for their ancestral, agrarian collectivism. They prefer a life of greater simplicity over the individualistic, social Darwinian competitiveness, of capitalist economies, and the accompanying complexity of industrial society. The brethren have thus remained a relatively insulated community of believers who largely share in common values. Not all Hutterites accept the colony ways, however. Some defect to the surrounding cultures and adopt non-Hutterite behaviors, adapting to the new conditions, and establishing non-Hutterite personality characteristics. For those who stay—the majority—one can expect the development of the modal personality, as just described, in conformity with the community ideals.

That such modal personalities or stable national characters are possible should not lead us to some false conclusions. Hutterite society has remained stable for centuries and has operated within the framework of a relatively simple social structure. Such a stable social structure, which was an adaptation to a lifestyle from five hundred ago, likely supports the development of a stable and fairly uniform national character. Complex societies, however, as Inkeles (1997) has argued, that are continually evolving and increasing in their complexity, are less likely to support a universal national character. Social complexity, regionalism, ethnicity, social class, education, etc. are likely to result in a greater diffusion of traits and less conformity. Complex industrial societies may be multi-modal because of the multitude of opportunities and the diversity of occupations that individual members can adapt to. Multifariousness of opportunity is unlikely to support homogeneity of national character.

## References

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