


Gordon Allport (1897~1967) on Traits: Brief Summary

- ✓ For Allport, a *personal trait* or *personal disposition* 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 behavior." 
- ✓ He distinguishes the concept of *type* from *trait* by noting that a person may be said to have a *trait* but cannot be said to have a *type*. Rather, a person may fit a *type*. *Types* typically display clusters of *traits* and have been exemplified in this unit by the examples from Theophrastus and John Grisham who, in their literary characterological writing, verbally describe particular types by essentially enumerating their respective *traits*. In everyday usage, we often hear people speak of *literary types*, *athletic types*, *outdoor types*, *nerdy types*, *computer geek types*, *collegiate* or *preppy types*, and so on. In each case the person so described possesses a collection of *traits* that, in sum, produce the *type* that he or she allegedly is.
- ✓ *Common traits*, for Allport, refer to those *traits* displayed in common by nations, cultures within nations, and subcultures within nations. "*Common traits*," Allport wrote, "*are those aspects of personality in respect to which most mature people within a given culture can be compared.*"
- ✓ *Central traits* are the building blocks of personality...the kind of traits mentioned in careful letters of recommendation. *Secondary traits* are less consistent and more malleable across the life span. Personal preferences for such things as foods, political party affiliation, *etc.* are examples.
- ✓ A *cardinal trait* is so dominant in an individual that few activities of that individual cannot be traced directly back to it. Few people have such traits but those that do have occasionally had their own name come to be associated with the *trait* in question. The word *sadistic*, describing sexual cruelty, is based on a real person who behaved that way, the *Marquis de Sade*; the word *quixotic*—meaning to chase after impossible dreams—is based on the character *Don Quixote*; and, *narcissist*—describing someone in love with themselves—is based on the Greek mythological figure, *Narcissus*, who fell hopelessly in love with his own reflection in a pool.

