UNIT 2 ALLPORT'S TRAIT THEORY OF PERSONALITY

Structure

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Gordon Allport's theory is considered to be one of the more scientific theories which has put forward the concept of traits in understanding personality. He takes the biological approach to an extent and mentions about how children are born with reflexes and as they use the reflexes continuously, how in course of time these reflexes become a habit and how habits by indulging in them continuously turn into traits, which are relatively permanent entities in the individual and which are reflected in the individual's many behaviours in many different situations. Allport's theory puts forward the new idea of functional autonomy in which he says a particular behaviour indulged in initially for some specific purpose, becomes the constant behaviour in the individual in couse of time. For instance, a person who initially goes to a hill station because the doctor advised, later on goes to the hill station every year as it gives him a satisfaction and his urge gets fulfilled. Allport's theory is considered humanistic ion one sense and personalistic in another sense. He combines the opposites in his theory such as objectivity and subjectivity , rationality and irrationality etc. In this unit we will be studying definition and Structure of Personality as conceived by Allport, his ideas about traits, the types of traits and personal dispositions, etc. We will also be considering the dynamics of personality and how traits help in making a person behave in a certain way. We will deal with the concept of Proprium and functional autonomy which are two important concepts of Allport's theory.

2.1   OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

l   Define Allport's theory of personality;

l   Describe Alport's concept of trait and the theory of personality;

l   Delineate the dynamics of personality as mentioned by Allport;

l   Explain the structure of personality;

l   Differentiate between traits and types;

l   List out the various traits of personality; and

l   Evaluate the theory of personality by Allport.

2.2   STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY

Allport considered the structure of personality into three parts, viz., (i) definition of personality,(ii) personality traits, and (iii) proprium. Let us consider in details each of these in the following section.

2.2.1   Definition of Personality

According to Allport, personality is the dynamic organisation within the individual of those psycho-physical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment. Allport, (1938). This definition has put forward many aspects and let us look at these aspects.

i) Psychophysical Systems

Personality is a system that has both psychological and physical aspects, which interact between themselves. The interacting factors include at the physiological level the endocrine system and the various glands in the system. As for the interacting factors in the psychological aspects these include, traits, emotions, intellect, temperament, character and motives. All these interact with the physiological aspects and contribute to the personality development and behaviour.

ii) Dynamic Organisation

Different elements of psychological system are independent but function in an interlocking manner with physiological and other systems and amongst themselves and are subject to change. However this change can take place in a gradual manner over a long period of time.

iii) Unique Adjustment to Environment

Every individual is characterised by a dynamic organisation of psychological traits that makes his adjustment. The reason for this is that experiences of every person are unique and therefore their reaction to the environment is also unique. It is well known that the identical twins though are from the same fertilized egg, do show considerable variations in their behaviour because of such unique aspects within them.

2.2.2   Traits or Dispositions

According to Allport traits constitute the basic unit of individual's personality. He defined traits as the predisposition to respond and react in the same or similar

manner to stimuli in the environment. According to him, there are two types of traits (i) Common traits (ii) Personal traits or dispositions. Some of the important characteristics of traits are as given below:

ı Traits are not theoretical structures or constructs but are real and found within the individual.

ı Traits guide and direct behaviour and enable the individual to behave in a particular manner.

ı Traits are verified empirically.

ı Different traits are not absolutely independent of each other but have overlapping functions,

ı Stable traits can also change over time.

i) Common traits

We all are aware that persons belonging to a certain country or a community within a society behave similarly in a number of situations. They will hold the same view points and behave in like manner as others. This is so because cultural factors play a very significant role in the development of personality. Keeping this in view, Allport gave considerable importance to this factor and he stated that within any particular culture, there are certain behaviours that are commonly obtained **as** part of that culture and everyone in that culture recognises the same and even can label them. As for instance, greeting with a hand shake by the Europeans and greeting with a namaste by Indians. You can also obtain common behaviours in terms of eating, marriage ceremonies and many rituals that they follow.

Common traits can be considered abstractions which reflect social values and social mores. These traits originate from social pressure on members to behave in a particular manner. Allport did not attach much importance to common traits as they are only surface manifestations. In our culture, we commonly differentiate between introverts and extraverts or modern and traditional behaviours. We also know what we mean by traditional or modern, but a person from a different culture may not have heard about these terms in the same way as we are thinking or visualizing. Thus for them these words will have no meaning or value. Thus their behaviours will be different from that of ours.

ii) Personal traits or dispositions

Allport was of the view that personal disposition is something unique to the individual and this disposition makes him behave consistently in the same way in a number of situations that are similar. He said that it is a generalised neuropsychic structure that is unique to the individual concerned and this makes for the difference in the behaviours of many individuals even though they may face the same situation. For example, in a TV programme when a sad scene is shown one person cries, another turns the other way from the TV not wanting to see the scene, and the third criticizes the scene as most unreasonable and unrealistic. These three different reactions are typically due to the personal disposition of the three different individuals.

In his own words, Allport defined this personal disposition as "a generalized neuropsychic structure, unique to the individual, with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide consistent or equivalent forms of adaptive and stylistic behaviour." (Allport, 1938)

Let us now see what are the important features of the above definition of personal disposition:

1) A personal disposition produces equivalences in function and meaning between various perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and actions that are not necessarily equivalent in the natural world, or in anyone else's mind. Personal dispositions have also been termed as morphological traits.

2) Personal dispositions guide and motivate a person's specific acts of adjustment.

3) Personal dispositions are important as they reflect the structure and organisation of personality.

Initially Allport used the word trait for personal characteristics but later he substituted the word dispositions for traits and usage of traits was reserved for common traits. A person with the personal disposition of fear of certain phenomenon, as for example fear of speaking in public, may consider all persons who hesitate to speak in public as similar to himself and respond to them in the same way. But according to Allport it must be kept in mind that one person may be basically an introvert and may not want to talk in public, another may have no idea about the language and so may not want to talk in public and yet the third person may find the topic uninteresting and so may not want to talk in public. Hence the individual concerned will have to interact with them differently and not in the same manner as he would respond to a person like him who is afraid of talking in public. Thus the personal dispositions are concrete, can be easily recognised and they are invariably consistent.

Allport believes that traits are essentially unique to each individual, as for example, one person's "fear of speaking in public for instance may not be the same for two different individuals, as mentioned above. If one has to understand the person and his behaviour, it is important to study the individual in detail and in depth. This can be done by interviewing the person, or observing the person or analysing his speeches and writings to get a clear view of what is making the person afraid to speak in public. This method was termed as the idiographic method by Allport.

Also Allport categorized the personal dispositions into three groups, viz.,

i) cardinal traits

ii) central traits and

iii) secondary traits.

Let us see how these traits are explained by Allport.

i) Cardinal traits

These are central to the individual and these traits manifest themselves in almost all situations and in the individual's very personality. For instance if we take compassion as a cardinal trait in one person, you will see that this compassion is manifested in almost all aspects of the individual's behaviour, as for instance, if he sees a child begging, he will offer her some eatable or money. Such a person may also join many NGOs that are dealing with orphans and destitutes so as to help these needy persons. He would also write in newspapers and magazines about the conditions of such people and call for help and assistance to be given to them. So his behaviour will be reflecting this unique disposition of compassion in almost all aspects of his behaviour.

Thus Cardinal traits have an overwhelming influence on the behaviour of the individual in that they guide and direct almost all types of behaviour of the person. These traits are at the very core of the personality. These are considered as building blocks of

the individual's personality. When you describe someone, you are likely to use words that refer to these central traits: aristocratic, street smart, timid, aggressive, arrogant etc. According to Allport each individual has about 5 to 10 such cardinal traits in them. One of these is indeed dominant while others do dominate but do not have the over riding influence on the person's behaviour. Through such traits one can define the personality of the individual concerned. These central traits reveal the structure and organisation of personality.

ii) Secondary traits

These are not overwhelming like the cardinal traits but it can be reflected or seen in the various preferences and attitudes of the individual concerned. These to an extent are specific to situations, that is, for instance showing a disdainful attitude towards a particular community person. These are rather too general and are not as consistent as the cardinal traits. They can also change in certain special situations. For example the negative disdainful attitude may not be obvious when the person is with others who are in favour of that community person and his contributions.

Self Assessment Questions

1) Define Allport's theory of personality.

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2) What are the unique features of Allprort's theory of personality?

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3) Define traits and indicate how are they formed.

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4) Distinguish between common traits or common dispositions and personal dispositions.

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5) How are cardinal traits unique and what are the important aspects of a cardinal trait? Give suitable examples.

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6) What are secondary traits and how do they differ from cardinal traits? In what way they give a clue to the individual's personality?

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2.2.3 The Proprium

Allport clarified that personality is not bundle of unrelated traits but they are traits in a personality which have between them a consistency, unity and integration. This implies that the personality has a clear organisation and structure and also is governed by certain important principles. This entire orgnisation was called by Allport as the Proprium.

Let us see what is proprium. According to Allport, proprium is the highest in the personality structure which consists of all aspects of personality which bring about inward unity and consistency in the personality of the individual. These aspects together in the proprium govern the entire organisation of personality. The proprium contains within it dynamic and manifests itself in almost all aspects of human behaviour.

Let us see how this Proprium develops. According to Allport it develops through sevens stages and these stages are given below:

i) Sense of body

ii) Self-identity

iii) Self-esteem

iv) Self-extension

v) Self-image

vi) Rational coping

vii) Propriate striving

An individual develops through the above sevens stages. In the beginning the child is a bundle of living being, and as it grows and develops many sensations develop and the child is able to understand its own body organs and many other aspects related to self. As the child continues to grow many other aspects emerge wherein the child is able to differentiate between his own body and the other things in the environment. From a sense of whole, the child is able to differentiate the parts . Let us take these one by one and discuss:

i) **Sense of body: (First 2 years of life)**

As pointed out earlier, the child in the beginning stages has no idea about which is his body and which is that of another. Even a pillow is part of himself. As he experiences over a period of time, when the pillow is taken away by the mother, he realises that it is not part of his body. This idea of the sense of one's own body develops as a result of experiences that the child goes through in its interaction with the environment. Allport went ahead and said that the aspects the child experiences as the most essential and which is warm and central and which gives him comfort are the most central aspects of his experience.

The sense of body has boundaries, that is, we all feel the pain, touch and many other sensations including movement, etc. which all contribute to our becoming

aware of our own selves. Allport had a favorite demonstration of this aspect of self: Imagine spitting saliva into a cup - and then drinking it down! What's the problem? It's the same stuff you swallow all day long! But, of course, it has gone out from your bodily self and become, thereby, foreign to you.

ii) Self identity

Another aspect that develops during the first two years is what Allport called as Self identity. In course of his experience, the child is able to become aware that pillow is not himself and mother is not himself but the pillow can be brought to him and that he is separate from the pillow. This kind of realisation through experience continues on and the person is able to develop a sense of his own self called as self identity. This self awareness leads to the recognition of oneself as having a past, present and a future. The person is able to see himself as a separate entity who is separate from the pillow, from the mother and various others in his environment. This differentiation of the self from the whole is an important aspect of the development of self identity. Every individual has a name and a family and this identity is entirely the individual's own.

iii) Self esteem (2 to 4 years of age)

This aspect develops in the individual around the age of two to four years. The child is able to move around now and is able to accomplish many things that he never used to in the past due to the non maturation of many of the organ systems. As the child is growing and many of his organs are maturing he is able to make many movements both refined and non refined and is able to reach his goals, as for instance to fetch a toy from another corner of the room etc. As the child experiences many achievements and accomplishments he feels good about himself, becomes more confident and tries to do things like climbing the stairs and reaching the rooms on the first floor etc. He is able to control also many of his reflexes in terms of controlling his bowel and bladder. All these are appreciated by the caregivers and the child feels good about himself and thus develops a good concept about himself that he is capable and is appreciated. Thus he develops self esteem which is positive. On the other hand if the experiences were in the negative direction the self esteem would also have been negative.

iv) Self extension: (4 to 6 years)

The extension to one self develops between four to six years of age. There are many things in the environment which are supplementary and complementary to the growth and development of the individual. The individual is able to understand that Mr. X and Ms. Y are his parents. They are his own. He lives in a place which again is his own, he has a room in which he studies and does a lot of things including listening to music etc. and these are all his own. Thus there is an extension of self here into many things in the environment which all are identified with himself. Some people as they grow up may even identify themselves with being a sportsman, an athlete or a swimmer etc. Some belong to a group or a clan or a gang and identify themselves with the same. Some identify themselves with an occupation such as being a psychologist or a doctor or a lawyer. Thus there is self extension into many aspects of the environment .

v) Self Image (4 to 6 years)

Self image means, the self of the person as others see it. It is a mirroring of one's image by others. The impression that the individual makes on others by looks, clothes,

behaviour etc. In addition other aspects of self that are important include the social esteem or status one enjoys in the society and in the social circle . It also includes the person's sexual identity. Many times the ideal self and self image may not be the same. While one may have an ideal image in mind as for example one wants to be like Amitab Bachhan in looks and beahviour, the actual image may not be anywhere near it. In some cases others may consider the individual as resembling someone in looks and behaviour, but the person concerned may consider his self image as different. Thus there couyld be a discrepancy in the self image and what others think about the person.

vi) **Rational coping (6-12 years)**

As the individual grows up and his personality develops he is able to have higher cognitive functioning with increase in his thinking abilities, decision making and memory capacities. These in turn help the individual to make decisions on many matters related to that age level. The person is able to now think rationally on many issues and is able to understand the pros and cons and takes relatively more appropriate decisions as compared to the earlier age levels. He puts in efforts to understand things and is able to accomplish far more tasks than before. This ability to cope with many life related situations rationally is an important development that takes place during these years.

vii) **Proprium**

Every individual has to finally take charge of his life. The individual has to be responsible for his thinking, actions and behaviours. After the varied experience in life the individual is able to look back on his goals, achievements and accomplishments, and then say now is the time he would try to spend on activities that gives him internal satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment. This is almost akin to that of self actualisation as put forward by Maslow, though in a number of ways it is different. The propriate striving starts only after the age of 12 years and the individual is able to clearly identify his goals, what his future plans are and in which direction would he like to move and what is the purpose of his life etc. He is able to now say that he is the man in charge of his life and would like to do things as he wishes and desires. In all this ofcourse the person acts rationally and logically.

2.3   DYNAMICS OF PERSONALITY

What are the various factors underlying the functioning of an individual's personality is a question that needs to be answered if one has to understand the personality of an individual. In Allport's theory he has put forward three basic concepts as underlying dynamics of personality and these are (i) Functional Autonomy (ii) Conscious and Unconscious Motivation (iii) Psychological Maturity.

Allport described personality dynamics in terms of functional autonomy, conscious and unconscious motivation and psychological maturity**.** These dynamics are being explained below:

2.3.1 Functional Autonomy

Allport did not 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**: Your motives today are independent (autonomous) of their origins. In other words the means employed for the attainment of a goal are now themselves a

goal. For example, a person develops and inculcate discipline and hardwork in his life to become rich and famous. But even after becoming rich and famous he continues to live with discipline and hardwork. Actually discipline and hardwork are no longer the means for being rich and famous but they have replaced the goal of being rich and famous in that discipline and hard work by themselves are goals. What is now is more important tha what was in the past or what is going to be in the future. A person may have been persuaded by parents to become a lawyer , but as the individual practiced law, it was so interesting and so satisfying, that there was no need for the parents persuasion any more, being a lawyer and practicing law by itself has become a goal for this individual. The shys of becoming a lawyer or why you like the lawyer profession have all n o meaning now, what is important is that you are a lawyer now and practicing law.

Types of functional autonomy: There are two types of functional autonomy , viz., i) Perseverative functional autonomy and (ii) Propriate functional autonomy. Let us see what these two types of functional autonomy are:

i) Perseverative functional autonomy

This refers to various behaviours in which a person continues to indulge. These behaviours really have no purpose at the present moment yet, we continue to indulge in these behaviours. To give an example, a person develops the habit of drinking alcohol because he was having a problem and was tense and wanted to relieve the tension. In course of time this habit of drinking continues even though there may be no more tensions and drinking really serves no purpose.

This kind of behaviour in which a person indulges because of sheer habit is called the perseverative functional autonomy. Similarly a person must have been told by his doctor to play tennis in the evenings for 2 hours so as to reduce weight and cholesterol. As time pass by even though the person's weight has reduced and the cholesterol content also come down to normal, the person continues to go for tennis for two hours every day.

ii) **Propriate functional autonomy** on the other hand refers to the values that the person holds. This comes about as a result of socialisation and childrearing practices in which parents incorporate values of honesty, hard work, diligence, generosity, compassion etc. in children through both rewards and punishment. The children internalise the values as they want to be appreciated and rewarded and also want to avoid punishment. Thus these behaviours become internalised as value systems in the individual. Such persons when they do anything against these values that he or she holds, feel guilty and thus go back to their values as they hold them. This process of these behaviours becoming a value of an individual is called by Allport as Propriate functional autonomy.

Based on these ideas, Allport with his colleagues devised a scale called Allport-Vernon Scale of values.

Proporiate functional autonomy is controlled by three principles and these are (a) Principle of organising (b) Principle of mastery (c) Principle of propriate patterning. Let us elaborate these below:

a) **Principle of organising:** Here the organising refers to the organising of one's energy into different activities. According to Propriate functional autonomy, the energy is organised into many novel and creative activities which are productive and not in activities which are non productive.

b) **Principle of Mastery** and competence refers to the person's efforts to satisfy his needs at a higher cognitive levels and higher levels of satisfaction. He therefore not only masters and competently deals with various situations, he also continues to refine and enrich whatever he is doing. This gives satisfaction to the individual at the highest level. This is another important principle of propriate functional autonomy.

c) **Principle of propriate patterning:** Self is most important in the proprium of an individual. This self consists of all perceptual and cognitive processes of the individual's higher level cognitive functions. In other words the various cognitive functions are organised around this self. Since every behaviour cannot be explained by functional autonomy principles many of these patterning if understood can explain a person's behaviour.

The behaviours which can be explained by functional autonomy of motives are given below:

l   Behaviours originating from biological drives

l   Reflex actions

l   Constitutional elements

l   Habits

l   Any behaviour abandoned or not done due to lack of reinforcement

l   Behaviours of a person which represent conflicts in childhood.

l   Behaviours related to repressed desires in childhood

l   Sublimations

Allport and his colleagues also categorized values as per the contents of the values. For instance a scientist values the truth and so the value was termed as theoretical. A businessperson may value usefulness or utility aspects and he called these values as the economic value. Given below are the classification of values by Allport and his colleagues.

1) **the theoretical** – a scientist, for example, values truth.

2) **the economic** – a business person may value usefulness.

3) **the aesthetic** – an artist naturally values beauty.

4) **the social** – a nurse may have a strong love of people.

5) **the political** – a politician may value power.

6) **the religious** – a monk or nun probably values unity.

Most of us, of course, have several of these values at more moderate levels, plus we may value one or two of these quite negatively. There are modern tests used for helping children find their careers that have very similar dimensions.

Proporiate functional autonomy is controlled by three principles:

i)   Principle of organising the energy level tells that an individual invests his remaining energy in novel, useful and productive works.

ii) Principle of mastery and competence reveals that person tries to satisfy his need at higher levels of satisfaction. He does not stop after making some achievement but continues to refine and enrich his proficiency and grow further.

iii) Principle of propriate patterning. It reveals that all the propriate motives are not independent but woven around the self. An individual organises all his perceptual and cognitive processes around this self.

2.3.2   Conscious and Unconscious Motivation

Allport in his theory laid emphasis on conscious motivation stating that an adult individual is fully aware of what he is doing. But he also gave due recognition to the concept of unconscious motivation. Infact all the conscious motivations are somehow influenced by desires hidden in the unconscious. He refuted Freud's claim that ego does not have energy of its own and personality is controlled by the unconscious. Allport claimed that a mature normal adult's personality is fully in control of the conscious.

2.3.3   Psychological Maturity

If you have a well-developed proprium and a rich, adaptive set of dispositions, you have attained psychological maturity, Allport's term for mental health. He lists seven characteristics:

1)   Specific, enduring **extensions of self**, i.e. Involvement.

2)   Dependable techniques for **warm relating** to others (e.g. trust, empathy, genuineness, tolerance...).

3)   **Emotional security** and self-acceptance.

4)   Habits of **realistic perception** (as opposed to defensiveness).

5)   **Problem-centeredness**, and the development of problem-solving skills.

6)   **Self-objectification** - insight into one's own behaviour, the ability to laugh at oneself, etc.

7)   A unifying **philosophy of life**, including a particular value orientation, differentiated religious sentiment, and a personalised conscience.

2.4   EVALUATION OF ALLPORT'S THEORY

A careful analysis of the theory reveals certain merits and demerits which are:

Merits

Allport developed his personality theory in academic settings instead of psychoanalytic settings. For this reason this theory gained much importance and recognition among   academic psychologists.

According to Allport present and future are more important in understating personality than past of an individual. Motivations and behaviour of an individual can be better understood by present and future. This characteristic of Alllport's theory helps understand the structure of personality more scientifically.

Allport's idiographic approach to personality research is quite praise worthy as it aids understanding and detailed analysis of personality.

Allport made an important contribution to the field of psychology through his explaination of personality in terms of traits.

Demerits

Feist criticized Allport's theory saying that it is grounded more in philosophical speculations and common sense than in scientific research.

Psychoanalysts objected to Allport's concept of proprium which puts more emphasis of present and future and ignores his past. They say that such ignore of past hinders

complete understanding of personality. Past events and experiences that went into the shaping of present personality can't be totally delinked from the present personality.

Allport's theory describes the functionally autonomous motives of a psychologically healthy person but motive of children, psychotics and neurotics do not find any mention in his theory. Allport in his theory failed to explain their behaviour.

Allport in his theory does not mention how an original motive develops into a functionally autonomous motive. For example, discipline and hard work which originally acted as means to get rich and famous become functionally autonomous once the person is rich and famous. Thus it is difficult to predict which motive of childhood develops into autonomous motive during adulthood.

Critics also point to the idiographic approach taken to the personality taken by Allport. According to them nomothetic approach which requires study of several persons at the same time and subjecting the data so gathered to statistical analysis is the only right method for studying personality.

Allport's theory is based only on the study of normal and psychologically healthy persons and does not take account of neurotics and others. This fact limits its applicability.

Some of the concepts in Allport's theory do not lend themselves to empirical testing. For example, functional autonomy is a concept that can't be manipulated in experimental conditions.

Psychologists also refute Allport's claim of discontinuity in the personality of children and adults and normal and abnormal.

Further Allport do not make mention of the impact of social factor on personality.

Self Assessment Questions

What are the characteristics of a psychologically mature person?

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2.5   LET US SUM UP

Allport is one of those theorists who was so right about so many things that his ideas have simply passed on into the spirit of the times. His theory is one of the first humanistic theories, and would influence many others, including Kelly, Maslow, and Rogers. One unfortunate aspect of his theory is his original use of the word trait, which brought down the wrath of a number of situationally oriented behaviourists who would have been much more open to his theory if they had bothered to understand it. But that has always been a weakness of psychology in general and personality in particular: Ignorance of the past and the theories and research of others.

In the present unit we studied Allport's theory of personality. We studied about his definition of personality and his views about the basic nature of personality. A discussion took place on the concept of proprium, its meaning and the principles it operates upon. Allport regarded traits as the building blocks of personality and mentioned two types of them namely – common traits and personal dispositions or traits. Personal traits were further subdivided into cardinal, central and secondary traits. We studied dynamics of personality and within it we introduced ourselves to the concepts of functional autonomy, the principles upon which it operates, conscious and unconscious motivation and psychological maturity. In the end we made an evaluation of Allport's theory in the light of criticism done by various psychologists.

2.6   UNIT END QUESTIONS

1)   Discuss in detail the concept of personality as propounded by Allport.

2)   Discuss the structure and dynamics of personality as mentioned by Allport.

3)   Critically evaluate Allport's theory.

2.7   SUGGESTED READINGS

Hall, Calvin S. and Lindzey, A (1978). *Theories of Personality.* John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey.

Dan, P. McAdams (2008). *The Person: An Introduction to the Science of Personality Psychology.* John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey.