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### ***Persons, Situations, and Person-Situation Interactions***

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Why do people do what they do? Can psychologists predict how a particular person will behave in a particular situation? Better yet, can psychologists explain *why* the person behaves that way in that situation? What people do depends both on who they are—their dispositions such as personality traits—and the situation they are in. The obviousness of this statement only highlights how odd it is that psychologists manage to find ways of disagreeing with each other over its implications. As the decades-long “person–situation debate” continues to prove (Donnellan, Lucas, & Fleeson, 2009; Fleeson & Furr, 2016; Funder, 2001; Kenrick & Funder, 1988), a surprising number of researchers appear to be personally as well as professionally invested in believing that either situations or persons have stronger effects on behavior. By focusing on person-situation interaction, rather than person-situation competition, personality psychology is moving beyond such disagreements and debate, toward a more complete understanding of why people do what they do. The purpose of this chapter is to present the idea of person-situation interaction, its conceptual roots, and the ways in which it shapes contemporary personality research and theory.

These issues are important because person-situation interaction should be a key

foundation for any personality theory that attempts to explain why a given person behaves in a given way in a given situation. Not all theories in personality psychology (or social psychology) are intended to be comprehensive in this way, and such theories might reasonably focus on concepts, processes, or phenomena that might not reflect person-situation interaction. However, person-situation interaction is an essential part of a broader understanding of why people do what they do.

By distilling and integrating contemporary approaches to person-situation interaction, we hope to direct readers' attention to some of the most promising directions in personality psychology, and stimulate new ideas that advance understanding of personality and its effects on behavior

## **CONCEPTUAL ROOTS OF PERSON-SITUATION INTERACTIONS**

As a way of understanding “why do people do what they do?” and “how can we explain *why* a person behaves in a certain way in a certain situation?,” the idea of person-situation interaction grows from two conceptual roots – one focusing on peoples' dispositions, and one focusing on situational factors.

### ***The Dispositional Roots***

The dispositional root is the understanding that a person's behavior is affected by stable qualities of that person. For example, whether a person is generally talkative or quiet is determined, in part, by some quality of that person. There is a psychological disposition that affects the person's tendency to behave in a talkative and outgoing manner – or conversely in a quiet and reserved manner.

In its traditional form, this view emphasizes dispositions that are cross-situationally broad – meaning that they affect behavior across a wide range of situations. For example, according to

John & Soto (Ch. 2 this volume), Extraversion is a personality trait reflecting the degree to which one enacts “an energetic approach to the social and material world,” and Conscientiousness reflects the degree to which one exhibits “socially proscribed impulse control that facilitates task- and goal-directed behavior” (p. XXX). This covers a lot of ground. Considering the number of situations that are part of the social and/or material world and considering that many situations involve (or could involve) task-directed and goal-directed behavior, traits such as Extraversion and Conscientiousness are seen as affecting behavior across an extremely broad range of situations.

Dispositionally-oriented research often focuses on the way individuals act differently from each other, on average, and experience different life outcomes. When focused on dispositional sources of behavior, a research project would ideally begin by measuring a person’s behavior in each of several situations and taking the average. For example, a researcher might observe an individual in several situations, measure her talkativeness in each, and compute her average talkativeness. Although how much she talks will surely vary from situation to situation, dispositionally-oriented research focuses on average tendencies, or one’s typical or general level of talkativeness across situations.

When such averages are obtained for a sample of people across one set of situations, they can be correlated with, among other things, the same persons’ behavior averaged across a *different* set of situations, or with their scores on a measure of a relevant personality disposition. The first correlation is an index of behavioral consistency, reflecting the degree to which the behavioral differences among people are consistent across sets of situations. The second reflects the association between the behavior and a specifically identified aspect of personality – the degree to which the behavioral differences among people are related to differences in a given

aspect of their personalities. Either way, the results reflect a dispositional influence on behavior. This is a standard method of research in personality psychology.

Dispositionally-focused work has generated a venerable research tradition. The foundation of this tradition is an effort to identify the important personality dispositions—prototypically seen as personality traits—that are associated with the average behaviors of individuals, calculated across situations. Many candidates for “important” dispositions are available, ranging from the 100 items of the California Q-set (e.g., Block, 2008) to the 61 items of the Inventory of the Individual Differences in the Lexicon (Wood, Nye, & Saucier, 2010), to the 11 “primary trait” scales of the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (Tellegen & Waller, 2008), to the widely used Big Five (e.g., John & Soto, Ch. 2). Some of these candidates are highly specific; others are very general and the range of available content is vast. Allport and Odbert (1936) identified 17,953 trait terms in the dictionary, and there may be almost that many instruments available in the literature for measuring personality dispositions.

After identifying relevant dispositions, researchers may go in at least two directions. One direction looks backward in time to seek origins of the dispositions. Personality psychologists have long been interested in both the environmental roots (e.g., childhood experiences) and biological roots of personality. A particularly intriguing line of research is outlining the origins of personality dispositions in patterns of early experience as they interact with genetic predispositions (e.g., Belsky & Pluess, 2013; Caspi, Hariri, Holmes, Uher, & Moffitt, 2010). A second direction looks forward in time to identify (and perhaps predict) life outcomes that eventually become associated with personality dispositions. Researchers have found that a number of important outcomes can be predicted from measures of personality gathered years

earlier, including criminal behavior, mental health, occupational success, relationship satisfaction, and physical well-being (e.g., Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006).

Dispositionally-oriented research has revealed many important facts, with two of particular relevance here. First, many personality dispositions can be distilled to a small set of fundamental traits. The Big Five framework identifies Extraversion, Neuroticism (or its converse, Emotional Stability), Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (John & Soto, Ch. 2). The HEXACO framework is similar, but adds Honesty/Humility as a sixth factor (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Any comprehensive theory of personality must account for such dispositional organization. A second fact is that broad personality characteristics, such as personality traits, matter. They predict behavioral trends and have consequential outcomes, again ranging from criminal behavior to success in occupations and relationships to—literally—the length of one’s life (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). For many outcomes, broad personality dispositions matter as much as, or more, than almost anything else, including socioeconomic status, money, or relationship quality. Any comprehensive theory of personality must find room for such dispositions.

### ***The Situational Roots***

The situational root of interactionism is the recognition that a person’s behavior is affected by attributes of the situation in which the behavior occurs. People are particularly likely to enact a given behavior in particular situations, and there’s something *about those particular situations* that triggers or elicits that behavior. For example, a situation that includes one’s friends likely elicits talkativeness and affection. A situation that includes loud music and adult beverages may elicit dancing.

Situationally-oriented research often focuses on behavioral differences across situations. Prototypically, the situations are experimental settings, though some research examines behavior in naturally-occurring situations. To examine a situational effect, researchers usually measure several individuals' behavior in each of two or more situations and take the average (across people) of the behavior in each. For example, we might put people in a relaxed, unstructured situation in which they are free to do whatever they want, and a situation that is highly structured and includes a difficult job that must be completed, and measure how talkative people are, on average, in each situation. Although some people will be more talkative than others in each situation – they won't all act exactly the same way -- the situational approach bypasses these individual differences to focus on the average person's behavior in each situation.

When such averages are obtained from a sample of people, they can be compared, usually with a statistic such as an independent groups *t*-test (if the two situations were experienced by different groups of people) or a dependent groups *t*-test (if the two situations were experienced by the same individuals). The difference in the averages from the two situations reflects a situational influence on behavior, for example demonstrating the effect of situational structure on talkativeness. This is a standard method of research in social psychology.

Like dispositionally-oriented work, situationally-oriented work also has a venerable research tradition. The foundation of this tradition is an effort to discover how people tend to respond in important ways to various experimentally-manipulated attributes of situations. This approach has served as the basis of research programs intended to test theories of social behavior and cognition, such as, self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), cognitive dissonance theory (Cooper, 2012), the “tend and befriend theory of the effect of stress on affiliative behavior (Taylor, 2012), and the “regulatory focus” theory of goal pursuit (Higgins, 2012)

And like the dispositional approach, such work reveals many important facts, with two of particular relevance for this chapter. First, situational qualities can have a significant impact on important behaviors, cognitions, and emotions (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Second and relatedly, the effects of some situational qualities may be surprising and/or beyond the awareness of those affected by them. That said, questions have recently arisen regarding the replicability of some (perhaps many) of the more surprising and counterintuitive apparent effects of situational qualities (e.g., Open Science Collaboration, 2015). Time – and further attempts at replication – will tell us which effects are indeed as well established as they once seemed. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that peoples' behavior is responsive to situational attributes, and a comprehensive theory of behavior must include and account for this fact.

### *Persons versus Situations*

Though it is indisputable that personality dispositions and situations both affect behavior, psychologists have dedicated enormous amounts of energy and emotion to a competitive view of persons and situations. When viewed as competing, dispositions and situations are implicitly conceptualized as forces pushing on behavior from different directions: Dispositions, which are properties of individual persons, push from the inside (the “meaty side” of the dermis, in Gilbert’s [1998, p. 21] memorable phrase), whereas situations push from the (“sunny”) outside. This view of dispositions and situations as competing forces has a strong, almost irresistible intuitive appeal, and, in this “person-situation debate,” many psychologists took one side or the other—generally personality psychologists emphasized the importance of dispositions, whereas social psychologists highlighted the power of situations.

Despite the hyperbole that sometimes visited the person-situation debate, it seems likely that no, or perhaps only few, researchers believed that personality truly “doesn’t exist” or that

situations truly “don’t matter.” However, researchers certainly fiercely debated which - dispositions or situations – is *more* important in driving behavior. There was particularly serious debate over whether the power of personality was sufficient to merit any scientific attention.

Research over the past several decades has produced a resolution – or at least an easing – of the person-situation debate, with several important outcomes. One outcome was a broader recognition of the power and importance of personality dispositions. Indeed, some (perhaps many) psychologists likely believe that no one currently questions the importance of personality dispositions. Unfortunately, although doubts about the relevance of personality have waned, they – and the competitive view of persons and situations – still echo within and beyond psychology.

Within psychology, one still hears arguments for the power of the situation over persons and questions about the existence of personality dispositions. Grabbing almost any “Introductory to Psychology” text from one’s bookshelf, one finds statements such as “The concept of personality demands at least some consistency in behavior across situations. But evidence suggests that cross-situational consistency in behavior may be low” (Narine, 2014, p. 400). Or, for example, one’s textbook might suggest that the certain studies reveal “the power of a bad situation to overwhelm the personalities and good upbringing of even the best and brightest among us” (Zimbardo, Johnson, & McCann, 2017, Section 11.10.1).

Beyond psychology, one can hear doubts about the power and existence of personality as well. For example, a recent movement in moral philosophy pointed to the empirical literature in psychology, and concluded that broad moral character traits do not exist, or further, that personality psychology itself was useless (e.g., Doris, 2002; Harman, 1999, 2009). For example, one philosopher suggested (much to our surprise!) that “Funder (2001) reports that personality psychology has collapsed as a serious academic subject” and that “To the extent that one is



interested in the truth and accuracy of claims about character and personality, one needs to consult social psychology, not personality psychology” (Harman, 2009, p. 237). Such conclusions generated serious attention in philosophy (Athanasoulis, 2000; Kamtekar, 2004; Miller, 2014) and elicited empirical responses in psychology (Helzer, Furr, Hawkins, Barranti, Blackie, & Fleeson, 2014; Meindl, Jayawickreme, Furr, & Fleeson, 2015). Whether these responses have influenced the subsequent philosophical discussion is not yet clear.

What is clear, though, is that echoes of the person-situation debate have crucial implications. They influence personnel and curricular decisions within departments or universities, they shape student interest, and they even can affect financial support of various areas of science, thereby affecting the researchers’ ability to reach new understandings about human functioning and to improve life. In sum, the competitive view of persons and situations still exists and still matters. To advance understanding of human behavior, researchers should continue demonstrating the power and nature of both personality dispositions and situations, while avoiding the implication that the two are competing forces.

### ***Moving Beyond Persons “versus” Situations***

There are indeed strong reasons to reject the competitive view of persons and situations. First, although the oft-used ANOVA framework appears to imply that situational forces gain power over behavior at the cost of dispositional sources, and vice versa (e.g., Leising & Igl, 2007), this “either-or” perspective is not the only – or even the best – way of analytically framing the issue. In fact, it is conceptually and empirically possible to have both robust dispositional effects *and* strong situational effects in the same data. A robust dispositional effect can be reflected in strong cross-situational consistency of behavior – where the behavioral differences among people are similar from one situation to another. For example, imagine observing Adam

and Betty in several situations, with Adam being more talkative than Betty in each. The fact that the behavioral difference between Adam and Betty is consistent across situations suggests that Adam and Betty differ in their level of a stable personality disposition (e.g., Extraversion) that affects talkativeness in each of those situations. At the same time, in the same situations, we might observe that both Adam and Betty are more talkative in situations that involve friends than in situations that involve strangers. To the degree that behavioral differences between situations (e.g., situations involving friends versus situations involving strangers) are consistent across people, this is evidence of a robust situational effect. Theoretically, it is possible for both effects to occur simultaneously – the differences among people can be highly consistent across situations, while the differences among situations are strongly consistent across people.

In fact, Funder and Colvin (1991) revealed empirically that these effects are indeed independent of each other. They examined the cross-situational consistency of 62 behaviors across two situations, as well as the degree to which each behavior changed, on average (across participants), between the same two situations. Across behaviors, the correlation between consistency and situational change was  $r = -.01$ . Only in extreme cases, therefore—where a situation is so strong that everyone acts the same, or a personality disposition (or disorder?) is so strong that someone behaves without regard to the situation he or she is in—do situations and dispositions gain power at the expense of the other. In more ordinary and common circumstances, there is plenty of behavioral variance to go around.

A second reason to reject the competitive view of persons and situations is that empirical estimates of effects have implications beyond the bounds of a research study only if the nature and range of the situational variables and of the dispositional variables are representative of each type. If only a limited range of situations is included—and what experiment is not forced to

severely restrict the range of situations it includes, compared to those that exist in the world?—and if only a limited range of individuals is included—and what study manages to include a sample of people truly representative of the population of the earth?—then the comparison of effects has little wider meaning.

Finally and most importantly, in order for either persons or situations to affect behavior, each needs the other (Johnson, 1997). Persons (and their dispositions) cannot exist outside of some sort of situation, and in a situation without people, no behavior will happen at all. This recognition leads writers such as Gilbert (1998), among others, to conclude that the traditional distinction between dispositional attributions (ascribing behavioral causality to aspects of the person) and situational attributions (ascribing it to the situation) is fundamentally incoherent.

This compelling perspective leads to some surprising conclusions. For example, the classic studies of obedience by Milgram (1974) are almost universally described as demonstrating that the power of the situation to affect behavior, relative to the influence of personal dispositions, is much greater than anyone would have expected (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). However, when the “person versus situation” distinction is put aside, Milgram’s results can reasonably be read either of two ways: (1) The situational force toward obedience (such as the experimenter saying “The experiment requires that you continue”) was (perhaps surprisingly) stronger than the situational forces toward disobedience (such as the victim’s protests). Or, (2) the dispositional forces toward obedience were (again, perhaps surprisingly) stronger than the dispositional forces toward empathy and disobedience<sup>1</sup>. On close examination, these interpretations are revealed to be equivalent. Notice, too, that neither of these equally valid (indeed, almost synonymous) interpretations pits dispositions against the situations.

## **PERSON-SITUATION INTERACTIONS**

An important outcome of the person-situation debate and of a rejection of the competitive view of persons and situations is an increased – or perhaps renewed – appreciation of the fact that persons and situations “interact” rather than operate as competitive, separate, or even simply independent forces. A person’s behavior in a particular situation arises from a non-additive combination of attributes of the person and of the situation. That is, behavior arises not simply from both person attributes *and* situation attributes, but from processes through which persons and situations shape each other’s effects on behavior. Persons shape how situations impact behavior, and situations shape how a person’s attributes impact behavior.

Personality psychology has focused considerable attention on the ways in which such interconnected, interdependent processes unfold. There are at least five specific ways in which research and theory has embraced the idea of person-situation interaction.

### ***Contextualized Person Variables***

Some researchers have embraced the idea of person-situation interaction by viewing “the person” in terms of contextually-tuned dispositions, rather than cross-situationally broad dispositions. Recall that the traditional dispositional approach tends to focus on dispositions, such as Extraversion and Conscientiousness, that are believed to affect behavior across a wide range of situations. In contrast, this approach to person-situation interaction focuses on dispositions that are believed to be much more strongly connected to specific, relatively narrow situational stimuli or cues. They tend to be defined in terms of the way that people think about, perceive, interpret, desire something in, or otherwise react to particular types of situations. Many contextualized dispositions are alternatively defined in terms of the way that people think or feel about themselves in ways that are highly responsive to specific situational cues.

For example, Carol Dweck and her colleagues (e.g., Dweck, Chiu & Hong, 1995; Rattan,

Savani, Chugh, & Dweck, 2015) suggest that a key facet of individuals' personality is their beliefs about their own (and others') psychological attributes. People who see intelligence as set, stable, and not changeable are said to have a "fixed mindset" of intelligence. In contrast, people who see intelligence as potentially unstable and changeable have a "growth mindset" of intelligence. Research suggests that such differences have important implications. When individuals are in situations that they view as diagnostic or reflective of their intelligence (e.g., working on a class project), their status as either a fixed or growth theorist can affect their goals and behavior. Moreover, these effects can be shaped by the individuals' beliefs about their actual levels of intelligence. Consider growth theorist students who believe that intelligence is changeable and not set. When required to do, say, a class project, they are theorized to have a "mastery goal" of increasing their intelligence. This goal produces behavior aimed at persisting and learning, regardless of whether the students view their level of intelligence as high or low. In contrast, consider fixed theorist students, who believe that intelligence is set. When working on a class project, they are theorized to have a "performance" goal of wanting to be judged in a way that is positive, or at least not negative. The exact nature of this goal, and subsequent behavior, hinges on the students' view of their actual levels of intelligence. Among fixed theorists, those who believe that they have *low* intelligence will likely have the goal of avoiding negative judgments (i.e., avoid being seen as having the low intelligence they see themselves as having). This goal produces "helpless" behavior such as failing to persist or avoiding challenges. Fixed theorists who believe that they have a *high* level of intelligence will have the goal of receiving positive judgments (i.e., being seen as having the high intelligence they see themselves as having).

The concepts of fixed and growth mindsets illustrate contextualized personality variables

in several ways. First, they are seen as stable attributes of a person. One's theory of intelligence (fixed or growth) is "a core assumption in [the person's] world view ... that defines the individual's reality and imparts meaning to events (p. 268, Dweck et al., 1995). Presumably such "core assumptions" are stable, and indeed evidence suggests stability over at least a 2-week period (Dweck et al., 1995). Second, reflecting the idea of person-situation interactions, their function is highly connected to particular situations or situational features. Fixed or growth mindsets of intelligence are relevant only for situations seen as requiring or revealing intellectual competence. Third, fixed and growth mindsets are relatively "narrow" constructs, in that one's theory of intelligence might differ from one's theory of morality, which itself might differ from one's theory of personality. Indeed, Dweck et al. (1995) note that "we are dealing not with a generalized cognitive style, but with domain-specific conceptual frameworks" (p. 269). Many contextualized personality variables are similarly "narrow" in one way or another

A well-known categorization of different types of contextualized personality variables is Mischel and Shoda's (1995) list of "Cognitive Affective Units" (CAUs). Their list includes: a) encodings (having to do with how people interpret themselves, their experiences, or their environment), b) expectancies and beliefs (such as fixed and growth mindsets of intelligence), c) affect (emotional reactions in a situation), d) goals and values (such as wanting to be seen in certain ways), and e) competencies and self-regulatory plans (e.g., the ability plan ways of achieving one's goals and stick to those plans). In general, contextualized personality variables, or social-cognitive variables, focus on cognition, affect, and motivation, again as illustrated by fixed and growth mindsets. A host of variables reflect this approach, including rejection sensitivity (Romero-Canyas, Anderson, Reddy, & Downey, 2009), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), perceived self-efficacy (Cervone, 1997), domain-specific social intelligence (Cantor &

Khilstrom, 1989), and self-schemas (Markus & Wurf, 1987), to name but a few.

Such variables, in a sense, reconceptualize the “person” in ways that differ from traditional conceptualizations. They are seen as being more directly tuned in to situational stimuli than are traditional cross-situationally broad dispositions. Thus, this approach builds upon the general idea of person-situation interactions by focusing on personality constructs that are, by definition and function, inherently connected to situations.

***Focus on within-person variability and patterning of behavior***

A related avenue through which researchers have explored the idea of person–situation interaction is to focus on variations of behavior *within* rather than across persons (e.g., Cervone, 2005; Fleeson, 2004; Furr, 2009; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). The idea is that every person varies his or her behavior across the situations of life, and that each person’s pattern of variation is both consistent and idiosyncratic.

Mischel and Shoda (1995) labeled this approach the *if–then* conceptualization of personality: An individual is described in terms of his or her behavioral reactions to particular situation. For example: *if* at a party *then* the person is boisterous, whereas *if* in a seminar *then* the person is studious. The collection of such patterns reflects an enduring and meaningful quality of his or her personality.

Interestingly, this illustrates a way in which personality psychology has rediscovered or at least has developed a renewed appreciation for earlier views. In 1937, Gordon Allport noted that every individual’s pattern of behavior across contexts is unique and that, for this reason, all descriptions of individuals in terms of personality traits—which tend to assume a more-or-less common if–then pattern among the people they characterize—are at least a little bit misleading. For example, someone who is high on the trait of friendliness might initiate conversation when

encountering a stranger. Although this might be true of friendly people, in general, a particular otherwise friendly person might hesitate to approach someone who reminds him of a previous, unpleasant encounter—a reaction that might be idiosyncratic to him and his personal history.

Going back even further, the classic pre-Skinnerian behaviorist John Watson (e.g., 1930) espoused a stimulus–response, or S–R, conceptualization of personality, in which a person’s behavioral repertoire was described in terms of how he or she responds to the various situations—stimuli—that he or she encounters. This pattern of response was held to be a function of his or her unique learning history, and therefore was not presumed to have any general patterning or consistency across situations. Thus, Watson believed personality was manifested in an idiosyncratic pattern of S–R pairings. However, a fundamental problem with this kind of behavioristic approach stems from its primary virtue, which is that it is completely idiographic. That is, there are as many S–R or *if–then* patterns as there are people on earth, each of which was generated by a unique learning history. While this may well be true, it is analytically daunting.

Fortunately, personality psychology has gone beyond a focus on idiosyncratic *if–then* patterns, in at least three ways. First, it has demonstrated that a variety of stable and meaningful qualities of within-person behavioral variability can be identified, including qualities that reflect personality traits (e.g., Fleeson & Law, 2015; Moskowitz & Zuroff, 2004; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994). For example, Fleeson and Law (2015) examined participants who reported their actions and feelings in a wide variety of situations. By examining each participant’s pattern of, say, Extraverted actions/feelings across all of his or her reports, Fleeson and Law were able to examine various qualities of that pattern, including its typical level (i.e., whether the person enacted a generally high or low level of Extraversion) and its variability (i.e., the degree to which the person’s Extraversion changes from one situation to another). Results revealed that



participants' level of behavioral variability was stable across time and situations – people whose behavior changed dramatically across some situations tended to have dramatic changes across other situations. Similarly, results revealed that participants' typical levels of a given behavior were highly stable across time and situations – people who tend to act highly Extraverted over some days also tend to act highly Extraverted over other days. Importantly, these stabilities were not simply a function of being in the same situations repeatedly, they were properties of people.

Such results are important in several ways. First, they demonstrate, once again, that people have robust differences in their typical behavioral levels (closely akin to a trait disposition) as well as robust situational variability. This again rejects the competitive view of persons and situations, and calls for integrated theoretical models that account for both phenomena. Second, these results reveal potentially important new situationally-oriented dispositions. For example, previous research has not frequently viewed “the degree to which a person tends to change his/her behavior from one situation to another” as a compelling facet of personality. However, this recent work suggests that such tendencies do exist – some individuals have a greater tendency to vary their behavior than do individuals, and such tendencies are stable. This reflects a way of thinking about person-situation interaction, in that it highlights a stable personality disposition that is defined by cross-situational behavioral variability.

Understanding the personality characteristics that explain such differences in peoples' variability (or skew or kurtosis, for that matter, Fleeson, 2001) is an important direction for future research.

A second and related way in which personality psychology has gone beyond a focus on idiosyncratic *if–then* patterns is by identifying consequences of behavioral variability. For example, Moskowitz and her colleagues examined the idea of behavioral “spin,” which is akin to behavioral variability and reflects “the range and extremity of a person's interpersonal behavior

around the person's typical (i.e., mean) interpersonal behavior that unfolds across situations and over time" (p. 722, Sadikaj, Rappaport, Moskowitz, Zuroff, Koestner, & Powers, 2015). They recently discovered that, among people in a romantic relationships, if one person exhibits a high degree of spin, then his or her partner experiences low relationship satisfaction. That is, extreme behavioral variability seems to have negative consequences for relationships. Apparently, people whose behavior is erratic and unpredictable are difficult to live with.

A third way in which personality psychology has gone beyond simply identifying idiosyncratic *if—then* patterns is by seeking their dispositional sources. That is, researchers are examining whether certain people are more and less likely to respond to certain classes of situations in particular ways. For example, imagine that you are at work, interacting with a coworker. Your coworker's behavior can be seen as an aspect of *your* situation – a contextual stimulus to which you might respond in a variety of ways. How do you act when your coworker is warm and agreeable – do you also act warmly and agreeably? What if she is cold and quarrelsome – do you behave coldly as well? Perhaps not surprisingly, when faced with a quarrelsome coworker, the typical person acts quarrelsomely, and when in a situation with a warm coworker, the typical person acts warmly (Yao & Moskowitz, 2015). This shows the power of one's "situation" (in this case the degree of quarrelsomeness vs. warmth of another person) on the typical person's behavior – one's behavior is partially contingent on the situation. Also perhaps not surprisingly, people who are relatively Agreeable (one of the Big Five traits) tend to act warmer than people who are relatively Disagreeable, in general, regardless of the situation. This finding shows the power of stable personality dispositions (in this case Agreeableness) on behavior across situations.

Even more interestingly, not everyone has this same pattern of responding to their

coworkers' quarrelsomeness, or at least not to the same degree. Rather, people who are relatively Agreeable are less reactive to their coworkers' behavior, as compared to people who are relatively Disagreeable. Put another way, the stable personality disposition of Agreeableness affects or moderates how people respond to a particular situational stimulus – people low on Agreeableness respond more “in kind” to their coworkers' behavior, being quarrelsome when their coworker is quarrelsome and being warm when their coworker is warm. People high on Agreeableness respond less “in kind” – their behavior is not as strongly contingent on their coworker's behavior. This moderating effect of Agreeableness is very much in the spirit of person-situation interaction, and the suite of findings reported by Yao and Moskowitz is a nice illustration of the way that meaningful “pure” situational effects, meaningful “pure” dispositional effects, and meaningful person-situation interactions can all happen together.

This third way of going beyond idiosyncratic *if–then* patterns, as illustrated by Yao and Moskowitz and others (e.g., Fleeson, 2007), also illustrates a way of reconciling a trait approach and an *if–then* approach. Rather than facing an infinite number of idiosyncratic *if–then* patterns, we might identify groupings of patterns that resemble each other sufficiently well and classify people with those patterns as similar in some way. For example, the syndrome of rejection sensitivity (e.g., Romero-Canyas et al., 2009) characterizes a person who manifests the pattern of being kind and supportive in the early stages of a relationship, but insecure and demanding in the latter stages. Perhaps other *if–then* patterns could be identified that are shared by substantial numbers of individuals, which would allow individual differences to be conceptualized in a way that takes account of within-person behavioral variance.

Again, these contemporary attempts to identify and understand groupings of *if–then* patterns resonate earlier theorizing in the field. Gordon Allport followed his discussion of the

way in which every person's pattern of behavior is unique with an admission that for psychological analysis some kind of simplification was necessary, and that was all right because "some basic modes of adjustment . . . from individual to individual are *approximately* the same" (Allport, 1937, p. 298, italics in original). Maybe one person's extraversion is different from another's in minor respects, he said in effect, but they are still similar enough that it is useful and maybe even necessary to treat them as if they were the same. Even though Allport is remembered by some as a proponent of idiographic assessment, the bottom line for him was that some patterns of behavior are common *enough* across individuals to be worth thinking of them, and assessing them, and then aggregating them, to produce measures of dispositions.

### ***Integrating traits with social/cognitive variables***

A third and related way of embracing person-situation interaction is the theoretical integration of traditional personality trait concepts (i.e., stable cross-situationally broad dispositions) with more highly contextualized psychological constructs. Personality psychologists are increasingly developing theories that merge these two sets of concepts.

For example, recent theoretical work argues that traits in general, and the Big Five in particular, are fundamentally motivational in nature. Read et al. (2010) present a motivation-based definition of traits, suggesting for example, that "the trait *helpful* can be represented in terms of a goal of helping others, plans for achieving that goal, resources needed to achieve the goal, and beliefs related to the goal (e.g., whether one's actions would actually assist the other and whether the other desired assistance)" (p. 64). Such goals, beliefs, and so on are theorized as activated in response to particular types of situational stimuli, underscoring the contextual nature of those constructs. Similarly, Denissen and Penke (2008) articulate each of the Big Five traits in terms of "stable individual differences in people's reactions to circumscribed situational cues,"

with each trait reflecting sensitivity to a certain class of situational stimuli. For example, they view Extraversion in terms of the incentive value of social interactions – extraverted people are those who see social interaction as highly rewarding. Thus, people behave outgoingly and boldly in certain types of situations (i.e., those in which social interaction is possible) that they see as potentially rewarding. Some people see those same types of situations as less rewarding. This difference, according to Denissen and Penke, is at the heart of extraversion.

Some recent theoretical work is even broader in scope, integrating traits with a wide variety of contextualized constructs (e.g., DeYoung & Weisberg, in press; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Heller, Perunovic, & Reichman, 2009; Wood, Gardner, & Harms, 2015). Fleeson and Jayawickreme's (2015) Whole Trait Theory views traits as having two parts – the underlying causal processes and the manifestations of those processes. They argue that the causal processes underlying traits are, in fact, contextualized processes such as cognition/interpretation (e.g., of situational stimuli) and goal activation/pursuit (again in response to situational stimuli). Further, they argue that these causal processes produce patterns of behavior that constitute the Big Five traits. That is, the causal processes become overlapping in ways (e.g., by becoming responsive to similar sets of situational stimuli) that lead to behavioral patterns structured in ways that can be described in terms of the Big Five.

This type of theoretical work not only holds promise for developing our understanding of core concepts in the field (i.e., traits), but it has the potential to integrate concepts that evolved from different traditions – broad, trait concepts reflecting a strong “person effect” perspective, and narrow, highly contextualized concepts emerging from a more “situationist” perspective. In that way, it may lead to and crystalize new advances in psychological theory.

### *Person Effects on Situations*

A fourth way in which researchers and theorists have explored person-situation interaction is to seek to understand how people shape situations. Personality dispositions can indirectly affect behavior by shaping the situations that people find themselves in. Years ago, Buss (1979, see also Scarr & McCartney, 1983 and Snyder & Ickes, 1985) noted two ways in which this occurs: situational *selection* and situational *evocation*. To this, we can add situation *perception* as a third mechanism by which different people experience different situations, or experience the same situation differently.

Situational selection is important because it addresses the fact that individuals do not just passively find themselves in the situations of their lives; they often actively seek and choose them (Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997). In particular, individuals may seek situations that “fit” their personality – situations that allow them to engage in the types of activities they enjoy, to have the types of experiences they value, to be in environments that they find comfortable, or to express themselves in ways that they value. Thus, while a certain kind of bar may tend to generate a situation that creates fights at closing time, only a certain kind of person chooses to go to that kind of bar in the first place. Even if everybody at the bar ends up in the fight, therefore, the psychological excuse that “the situation made me do it” is less than completely persuasive. Instead, attributes of the person and the situation he or she chose have worked in tandem.

Situational evocation refers to the ways in which an individual’s actions or even mere presence in a situation can change the situation’s dynamics. An aggressive person walking into a quiet discussion may change the situation dramatically for everyone there. What was originally a cordial conversation might become a hostile argument, with the aggressive person himself being attacked and, in turn, attacking others. Reflecting on the situation, the aggressive person might suggest that his attacks were simply a reasonable response to being attacked – again, a version of

“the situation made me do it.” However, the person created the conditions that ostensibly led to those attacks. Again, notice how the attributes of a person are not *competing* with the attributes of the situation for control of behavior; they work together to produce the final result.

Despite the importance of this conceptualization of person-situation interaction, both situational selection and evocation are understudied. In part this is because of the difficulty in empirically capturing dynamic processes such as the ways in which situations change during interactions as a function of what people do during them (see, e.g., Gottman & Bakeman, 1986). An even more important consideration is the lack of general variables for describing the psychologically important elements of situations. Although the literature of experimental social psychology contains, latently, an enormous range of information about how situations affect behavior, it is not organized in such a way as to yield insights about which aspects of situations are important for determining which behaviors, or how they do it. That is, there is no clear agreed-upon categorization of “situational variables” that represent the most fundamental ways that situations differ from each other. Such variables are necessary before research can study how situations are chosen and the ways in which they may change over time (see later section on situational assessment).

Nevertheless, important work in this area is evolving (e.g., Rauthmann, Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2015; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015). For example, Wrzus, Wagner, & Riediger (2016) recently discovered links between the Big Five personality traits and certain types of situations. For example, perhaps not surprisingly, extraverted participants reported being with friends, colleagues, and strangers more than did introverted participants. Similarly, neurotic participants reported being alone more than did emotionally stable participants. Although this work does not reveal intentional selection or evocation of situations,

it certainly suggests that such processes might be occurring, and it points future researchers in the direction of specific person-situation links.

Going beyond the relatively concrete effects of selection and evocation, many psychologists have observed that the effect of a situation depends on the person who apprehends it. For example, Mischel (1977, p. 253) commented that “any given, objective stimulus condition may have a variety of effects, depending on how the individual construes and transforms it”; Bem and Allen (1974, p. 518) wrote that “the classification of situations . . . will have to be in terms of the individual’s phenomenology, not the investigator’s”; and Allport (1937, p. 283) noted that “similarity is *personal*” (see Funder, 2006, p. 27). In shaping a particular person’s behavior in a particular situation, the person’s perception of the situation has a more direct effect on his or her behavior, than does the “objective” situation itself.

Indeed, different people might perceive the same objective situation in dramatically different ways. For example, an extravert might perceive the presence of other people at a party as exciting, whereas a shy person might perceive the presence of the very same people, doing the very same things, as threatening.

Although we can view such effects through the contemporary lens of person-situation interactions (e.g., Atherton, Schofield, Sitka, Conger, & Robins, 2016), this is exactly the kind of mechanism that is the longstanding province of personality research, as shown, for example, in Gordon Allport’s famous observation that

For some the world is a hostile place where men are evil and dangerous; for others it is a stage for fun and frolic. It may appear as a place to do one’s duty grimly; or a pasture for cultivating friendship and love. (1961, p. 266)

Allport was clear that the basis of these differences in perception was personality traits,



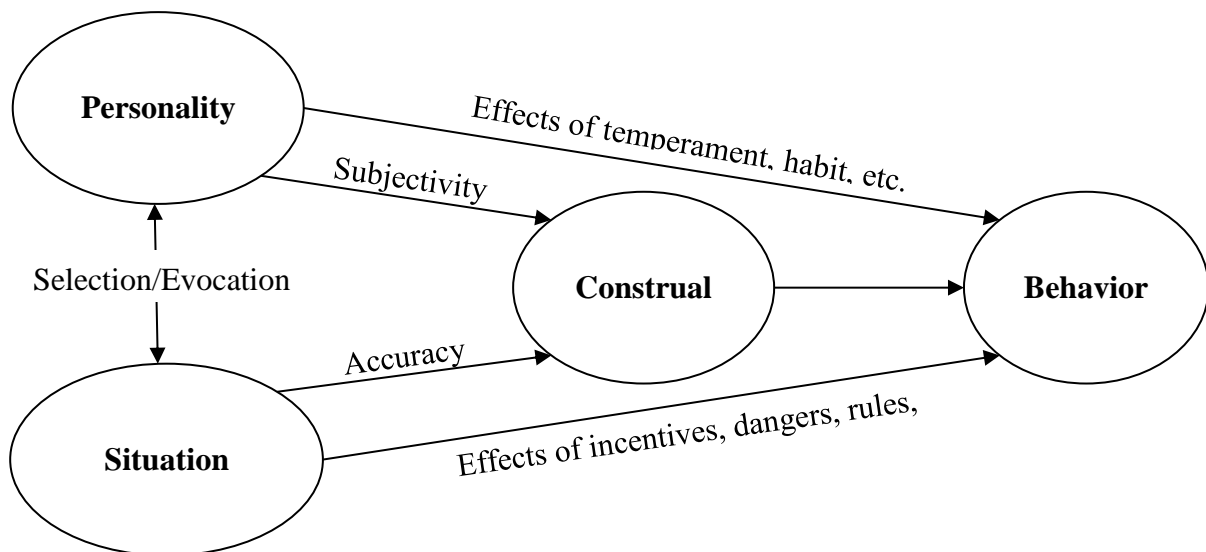
which have “the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent” (1961, p. 347). Thus, an analysis of how people perceive situations differently leads us right back to the traits that are the origins of these differences in perception and blends the analysis of situations with the analysis of dispositions. To fully understand the effects of a situation on a person’s behavior, we must understand that person’s perceptions and, more fundamentally, his or her personality.

One general cautionary point regarding the analysis of situational effects, is that it often leaves researchers unable to differentiate what the situation “actually is” from what individuals perceive it to be (Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015). The difference is between what the classic personality psychologist Henry Murray (1938) called *alpha press*, the objective situation, and *beta press*, the subjective one. The difference is important. Indeed, an individual who manifests too large of a discrepancy may be fairly said to suffer from a delusion.

Fortunately, subjective and objective conceptualizations of situational effects may not be as much at odds as is sometimes presumed. In a pair of studies, we examined the similarity between pairs of situations using both subjective and objective methods (Furr & Funder, 2004). In the first study, participants rated the degree to which two experimental situations they had actually experienced seemed (subjectively) similar, tapping what Murray might have called *beta press*. In the second study, we assessed the relative pairwise similarity of six experimental situations in terms of two aspects of objective similarity (task and participants), tapping *alpha press*. Behavior, using the Riverside Behavioral Q-sort (RBQ; Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000), was coded from videotapes in both studies. The first study found that participants who saw the two experimental situations as similar tended to be consistent in their behavior across them. The second study found that participants were more consistent in their behavior across situations that were more objectively similar. These results demonstrate the importance of both alpha and beta

press—the objective and subjective aspects of a situation—by showing that behavior is more consistent across situations to the degree that those situations are similar in either sense.

The relations between persons, situations, construal and behavior was recently summarized in the Situation Construal Model (Funder, 2016; see Figure 1). The model is interactionist, in the terms used in the present chapter, by illustrating how situations and personality affect each other in an ongoing process. It also portrays how both individual personality and objective aspects of the situation combine to produce each individual's construal of the situation, which in turn influences what he or she does. (Other pathways in the model show that some aspects of personality, such as temperament, and certain objective aspects of situations, such as rules, might affect behavior independently of individual construals.)



**Figure 1: The Situation Construal Model.**

### *The Assessment of Situations*

As we noted earlier, situationally-oriented research has generated a venerable research tradition; however, the situational variables examined in past research have not been coherently organized across different areas of situational research. Although interesting and important

effects of situational variables have been reported, the lack of organization creates difficulty when trying to systematically integrate situations with dispositional factors. What precisely about situations should researchers and theorists attend to? What are the fundamental components, dimensions, or qualities of situations that must be integrated into an interactionist theory of personality and behavior? In particular, to empirically assess a model such as the Situation Construal Model a methodology is needed to assess all three aspects of the “personality triad” (Funder, 2006); not just persons and behaviors, but situations as well.

Many creative researchers have attempted to develop situational taxonomies (e.g., Magnusson, 1971; 1981; Price & Blashfield, 1975; Van Heck, 1984), and important conceptual developments have been offered (e.g., Kelly et al., 2003; Rauthmann et al., 2014; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2002; Van Heck, Perugini, Caprara, & Froeger, 1994; Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006). Despite all of this work, however, an instrument for the psychological assessment of situations was never provided.

Fortunately, psychologists have recently offered instruments designed to fill this void (e.g., Brown, Neel, & Sherman, 2015; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016; Wagerman & Funder, 2009). The Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ, Wagerman & Funder, 2009; Funder, 2016) is one such instrument, and it is based on two theoretical principles. The first is that it seeks to describe situations at the middle or basic level likely to be easily communicated and useful for behavioral prediction and understanding. Its items are intended to be general enough to be psychologically meaningful and behaviorally relevant, but specific enough to be rated with adequate reliability.

The second principle is that the items seek to describe situational variables that are directly relevant to the expression of personality, in a manner that is as comprehensive as possible. To accomplish this, the RSQ draws from a previously developed instrument for

personality assessment, which has been widely acclaimed for its broad range: the California Adult Q-sort (CAQ; Bem & Funder, 1978; Block, 2008; McCrae, Costa, & Busch, 1986). The RSQ's items were written to describe characteristics of situations that afford the opportunity for expression of each personality characteristic in the CAQ. For example, the CAQ item "is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed" yields the RSQ item "Someone is trying to impress someone or convince someone of something." The assumption is that in a situation that is accurately described by this property, a skeptical and critical person has an excellent opportunity to act accordingly, whereas the opposite sort of person may reveal his or her gullibility.

The RSQ is proving useful for researchers, particularly those interested in understanding the separate as well as interactive effects of persons and situations. For example, one study using the RSQ found that individuals experience similar situations over time, compared to situations experienced by other people (Sherman, Nave & Funder, 2010). Moreover, behavior is more consistent across similar situations, but personality characteristics predict individual behavioral consistency even after statistically controlling for situational similarity. Similarly, researchers using the RSQ have begun to explore the nature and implications of various kinds of situational construals. In an experimental study, participants used the RSQ to describe situations portrayed on video clips. Construing a situation "distinctively" (i.e., differently from most other observers), was associated with personality attributes including Neuroticism and Openness (Todd & Funder, 2012). A larger, experimental study, which placed participants in three video-recorded three-person interactions, found that that personality is associated with how positively people construe the situations they experience, and that this positivity is associated with beneficial social outcomes, such as being liked (Morse, Sauerberger, Todd, & Funder, 2015). Similarly, a separate study found that personality traits predicted how people construed their medical visits, and more

positive construals were associated with better health outcomes (Morse, Sweeny & Legg, 2015). All these studies suggest that focusing on the good rather than the bad aspects of situations can be advantageous, although the limits to this advantage remain to be explored.

These findings reflect fundamental points regarding personality, situations, and behavior, but they had not been reported in the empirical literature before, because a method for assessing and comparing situations was previously unavailable. The RSQ and similar instruments offer psychologists new tools for pursuing important directions in personality theory and research.

### **CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE PERSON–SITUATION INTERACTION**

It is easy, perhaps too easy, to view situational and dispositional causes of behavior as locked in opposition to each other. Except in extreme cases, they are not. Dispositions and situations both have important, robust, main effects. Going beyond these main effects, dispositions and situations have powerful *interactive* effects on behavior.

But precisely how do dispositions and situations interact to determine what people do? How do people shape their environment? How does personality determine one's interpretation of situations? Which dispositions and which aspects of situations (specifically) affect which behaviors? The search for specific answers to these question, and other interactional types of questions addressed in this chapter, lays out a formidable research agenda.

Importantly, this agenda goes beyond person–situation interactions to the three interactions derived from the *personality triad* of persons, situations, and behaviors, in which any element of the triad can be conceptualized in terms of the other two (Funder, 2006; see also Bandura, 1978). Behavior can be seen as a function of the person and the situation, as discussed in this chapter. In addition, a person can be seen in terms of the behaviors he or she performs in all the situations of his or her life (cf. Mischel & Shoda, 1995), and a situation, psychologically,

can be conceptualized in terms of the behaviors that different people perform in it (cf. Bem & Funder, 1978). Another way to summarize these points is in the classic terms used by Lewin (1951): It is true, as he observed, that behavior is a function of the person and the situation, or  $B = f(P,S)$ . But it is also the case that  $P = f(B,S)$  and  $S = f(P,B)$ . Pursuing the research implied by this conception moves the field of personality psychology far beyond the competitive tug between person and situation that has characterized so much of our history. Indeed, the conception of person-situation interactions may yield important new insights into what might be the most fundamental question in psychology: why do people do what they do?

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## **NOTES**

1. The traditional interpretation, of course, is that the situational forces toward obedience (e.g., the experimenter's orders) were stronger than dispositional forces toward disobedience (e.g., the participants' tendencies to be empathic to the victim). However, it would be precisely as valid—and equivalently misguided—to conclude that the dispositional forces toward obedience (e.g., the participants' conformist personalities) were generally stronger than situational forces toward disobedience (e.g., the victim's protests).

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