CHAPTER 10: PERSON-SITUATION INTERACTIONIST ASPECTS OF PERSONALITY

This unique chapter attempts to provide an objective overview of the greatest controversy in personality psychology: if personality is stable, why do behaviors vary so much?By using Lewin, Allport, Murray, and Sullivan to lay the groundwork, the influential ideas of the interactionists are made more sensible and comprehensible to students. The work of Mischel is also thoroughly discussed. Also, by this point in the course, students should be ready to think in a critical and sophisticated manner about personality, and should be able to realize the important influences of both the situation and personality.

Person-situation interactionist approaches endeavor to take into account the many ways personality is realized in or unfolds in or interacts with the situational context. Although many of the most modern notions about personality are presented in this chapter, it is important to recognize that they derive from and are closely tied to the other seven basic aspects of personality considered in the book. This chapter is also a good place for the instructor to introduce his or her own favorite modern theories or notions about personality. Students may, at this point, be urged to start formulating their own models, which may be informed by those theories to which they have already been exposed.

Possible Lecture Outline

1. Few people are totally honest or dishonest. How can we explain these inconsistencies in behavior through a lens of personality theories? Doesn’t personality suppose that behaviors are consistent across different situations?
   1. Lewin’s equation: B = f (P, E) (behavior is a function of personality and environment)
   2. Allport believed we have consistent patterns in predispositions, but behavior manifests uniquely in each situation.
   3. Murray posited internal “needs” and external “press,” which work in concert.
2. Henry Stack Sullivan
   1. Importance of “chumship” and adolescent psychosocial threats of loneliness, isolation, rejection
      1. Psychological health is determined to a large degree by the reactions of others.
      2. Example of “metalheads” is used to demonstrate how even fringe culture participation does not necessarily predict problematic outcomes later in life
   2. We experience similar social situations over and over.
      1. Drew on G. H. Mead’s ideas of the “social self” and Sapir’s views of the importance of culture
   3. We become different people in different situations; the situation elicits the personality (note the “illusion of individuality,” which describes belief in just one personality).
3. Motivation and Goals: Henry Murray
   1. Murray is considered a primary founder of the interactionist approach to personality.
   2. His theory combined ideas of unconscious motivations with those of environmental pressures and traits.
   3. Spoke about systems: dynamic influences with feedback
   4. Because he focused on the richness of life and saw personality as a dynamic process, he called his theory a “personological system.”
      1. Internal needs and motivations
      2. Environmental press
   5. Typical combinations of needs and presses termed “thema”
      1. Measured with the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)
   6. The work of McAdams provides a modern example of Murray’s influence.
      1. Studies the “whole person” through biographies—narrative approach
      2. Intimacy motive: the need to share oneself with others in an intimate way
4. Other Influences on Murray’s Approach
   1. Lewin’s contemporaneous causation: behavior is caused at that moment as a function of a variety of influences.
   2. The ideas of behaviorists, such as Skinner, were adapted by Murray as he incorporated situational influences into his theory.
   3. Humanistic notions of internal motivations toward creativity and self-fulfillment
5. Modern Interactionist Approaches: Walter Mischel
   1. Mischel’s 1968 argument is that behavior varies so much by situation that the concept of personality traits makes little sense.
      1. Correlations of behavior with personality or of behavior across situations are generally .30 or less.
         1. Assumes a simple model of the personality-behavior relationship
         2. Assumes that a correlation of .30 is “small”
   2. More recently, Mischel has looked at individual differences in meanings people give to stimuli and reinforcements (called “strategies”).
      1. Competencies: abilities and knowledge
      2. Encoding strategies: schemas and mechanisms used to encode information
      3. Expectancies: what we expect to happen in response to our efforts/behaviors
      4. Plans: personality variables encompassing our intentions for our actions
6. Other Modern Developments from the Interactionist Perspective
   1. Validity of traits
      1. Attribution theories: theories that examine the ways in which individuals draw inferences about others’ behaviors
      2. Accuracy or inaccuracy of attributions rests on many factors
   2. The power of situations: sometimes they are so powerful that they override personality effects (e.g., reactions to a fire in a crowded theater)
   3. Trait relevance
      1. All traits may not be equally relevant to all people.
   4. Consistency within situations and the problem of how to classify situations: Where would we expect behavioral consistency?
   5. Consistency averaged across situations—“aggregation”
      1. Reliability issues: Is one sample behavior a reliable indicator of personality?
      2. Appropriateness of situation for being associated with particular trait
      3. Averaging cross-situational behaviors helps to deal with both of these issues.
   6. Mirror neuron system
      1. Fires in response to the observed actions and states of others in ways that mirror the firing in response to our own actions and states
      2. Evidence for the centrality of social interaction in human evolution
      3. Related to empathy, possibly autism
   7. Personal vs. social situations; personal vs. social selves
      1. Field independence: characteristic which enables one to judge an object, disregarding background influences (in social situations, such a person may act more independently)
      2. Field dependence: characteristic which forces one to rely on background influences to make judgments (in social situations, such a person may conform to situational demands)
      3. Low self-monitoring (less sensitive to reactions and expectations of others, so may show more consistent behavior across situations) vs. high self-monitoring (more sensitive to social influence that varies across situations, thus more difficult to see personality)
      4. Social identity vs. personal identity
   8. Seeking and creating situations
      1. We seek situations that reinforce self-conceptions, making for greater personality consistency.
      2. Consistency also results in part from our conscious efforts.
      3. Some situations are “stronger” and exert greater influence than “weak” situations.
   9. Time: longitudinal data necessary to understand how personality develops over time
      1. Block and Block’s longitudinal study at Berkeley
      2. Caspi’s study of the “life course” and the individual’s creation of the life course through choosing environments in which to live and through interpreting situations
      3. Recent research suggests good (but not perfect) personality stability across adulthood: “cumulative continuity.”
      4. Terman’s Life-Cycle Study
   10. Readiness
       1. Each experience has its effects in the context of previous experience.
       2. We are more affected by certain environments at certain times in our lives.
       3. Both of these concepts come into play in Lorenz’s ideas of “critical periods” and “imprinting.”
          1. Lorenz’s ideas focused on critical developmental periods, but we may also imagine more transient “critical periods” or times of readiness (based on circadian rhythms, etc.).
   11. Circumplex model
       1. Affiliation dimension of warmth and harmony versus rejection and hostility
       2. Assertiveness dimension of dominance and task-orientation versus submission and deference
       3. Combine into a two-dimensional circle

Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics, and Projects

1. Have each person in the class describe a recent situation in which he or she made a personality attribution about a stranger based on his or her behavior. Have classmates come up with alternative explanations for the behavior.

2. Give the class a brief scenario such as, “You are at the beach alone, planning to read and relax, when suddenly you see a group of friends.” Have class members write down what they would do. Then have them discuss the reasons they made those choices—those behaviors. How might an outside observer interpret their behavior?

3. Have students identify strong situations—situations in which they believe the personality of the individual has little chance to shine through. Next have them identify weak situations—situations in which the person has a lot of behavioral latitude. Discuss whether or not we take the strength of the situation into account as we should when evaluating the behavior of others.

4. Discuss the ways in which personality may affect the environments we choose, and how these environments may in turn strengthen the personality characteristics that lead us to choose the environment in the first place. To what degree is it possible to change personality by changing environments?

5. Have the class list possible situations that may facilitate personality change (examples may include going away to college, joining the military, and getting married). Encourage students to discuss how a drastic life transition like moving away from home for the first time can influence personality.

6. Re-create a person-situation debate in your classroom. Assign students to form two different teams; one will defend the importance of personality in determining behavior, and the other will defend the importance of the situation in determining behavior. Give students time to prepare their arguments, and be prepared to offer evidence from modern research to compliment their arguments.

7. Have students keep a journal of their behaviors in the same situation across different days (for example, their behavior in your personality class for a week). Do they see consistency or inconsistency in their behaviors? For students who find consistency in their behaviors, is it because the situation considered is a “strong” situation? Do their findings lend support to the importance of personality?

8. The “Sharpen Your Thinking” box in this chapter discusses a situational model of juvenile delinquency. Ask the students to reflect on their own adolescent behavior and to select some incident in their own lives wherein they violated some norm or rule due to a strong situational influence. Then have the students meet in small groups to discuss one another’s experiences and to think about what specific situational influences might have made the incident more (or less) extreme.

Recommended Outside Readings

Caspi, A., Roberts, B. W., & Shiner, R. L. (2005). Personality development: Stability and change. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *56*, 453–484.

de Rivera, J. (Ed.). (1976). *Field theory as human-science: Contributions of Lewin’s Berlin group*. New York: Gardner Press.

Funder, D. C. (2008). Personalities, Situations, and Person-Situation Interactions. In O. P. John R. W. Robins & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Funder, D. C. (1983). The “consistency” controversy and the accuracy of personality judgments. *Journal of Personality*, *48*, 473–493.

Funder, D. C., & Ozer, D. J. (1983). Behavior as a function of the situation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *44*, 107–112.

Iacoboni, M. (2009). Imitation, empathy, and mirror neurons. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *60*, 653–670.

Kenrick, D. T., & Funder, D. C. (1988). Profiting from controversy: Lessons from the person–situation debate. *American Psychologist*, *43*, 23–34.

McAdams, D. P. (1988). Biography, narrative, and lives: An introduction. *Journal of Personality*, *56*, 1–18.

Mischel, W. (1977). On the future of personality assessment. *American Psychologist*, *32*, 246–254.

Mischel, W. (1990). Personality dispositions revisited and revised: A view after three decades. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research*. New York: Guilford.

Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Swann, W. B. & Seyle, C. (2005). Personality psychology’s comeback and its emerging symbiosis with social psychology*. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *31*, 155–165.

Films / Videos

*Discovering Psychology: The Power of the Situation*. (1990). <http://www.learner.org/series/discoveringpsychology/19/e19expand.html>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/17381836>. Looks at how situational forces can change beliefs and behavior; examines the social psychological point of view, but doesn’t say much about personality.

*Henry A. Murray*. (1966). 77 minutes. <http://mediasales.psu.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=50022>. Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/76964392>. Henry A. Murray was filmed explaining how he developed the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and discussing the idea of “personology.”

*Little Girl Lost: A Troubled Adolescent*. (1993). Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/317348503>. The story of a young girl’s (Joanne Shaver) life and early death at the age of 17. She came from a seemingly average family but became involved in a life of drugs, running away, and prostitution. Provides a good basis for discussion of the role of environment vs. person in determining behavior.