

The arguments around the person- situation



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There have been a lot of controversies over the person-situation debate over the years and continually going on within personality psychology. The person side of the debate argues that people are different and that their differences will be depended on the given context. On the other hand, situation suggests that people are the same regardless of the given context. Whether the situation one is in or whether the traits one has are affecting the way people behave is the purpose of the argument. The essay will outline key arguments for the debate; explain what they or might suggest about equality and freewill, and self-determination and individual responsibility. Finally, conclusion on where and why I stand on the person-situation debate and whether it is or can be resolve will be discussed. Throughout this essay studies, such as twin studies and theorists, such as Mischel will be used to back up arguments in support or oppose of the person-situation debate.

Situation

To understand what the person-situation debate is about, the two parts must first be understood separately, the situation one interacts in and the traits one have. Situationalism argues that people are all equal and that it's the social environment one lives in that affect their outcomes in life. Emde and Hewitt (as cited by Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2005) have argued that the individual different over a life time are influenced by environmental experiences. In addition, there have been arguments on culture, social class, family and peers which may affect individuals' behaviours. Cervone and Pervin (1995) have cited (Kitayama and Markus) who argued that culture one is in can institutionalized and sanctioned patterns of learnt behaviours, rituals and beliefs. Also the social class that one is associated with can have

an effect on behaviour, family environment has also been argued to have different effect, this can be seen in the example of siblings, Jang et al, Krueger et al (as cited by Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2005) argued that the siblings are resemble in their altruism and pro-social behaviour in part because of the rearing environment they share. Research by Redon et al (as cited by) has shown that on average two same sex individuals will be 99.9% identical. Other research have argued that situation can be thought about and described in terms of the individual performing it in, which is then seen in an equation of $S = f(B, P)$. Throughout the debate of person-situation, there has been an outcome of fundamental attribution error, which is argued to be when there are tendencies to underestimate the power of situation affecting human behaviour and overemphasize personality traits (Buss). The power of the situation is argued to change behaviour in important ways, including minor aspects of the situation one indulgent in. Situationists see situations as having major impact on the individual behaviours that they have come to suggest that a situation without people in it has no psychological meaning (ref).

Furthermore, Social cognitive theorists argues that human thought process should be the center of personality because cognition develops in social contexts, that people acquire their thoughts about themselves and the world through social interaction. The ways in which people come to judge other people, the way they discriminate among objects and the way they interpret the context. Mischel, Mischel and Peake (as cited by Mischel, Shoda and Mendoza-Dento) have suggested that individual's behaviour on any dimension varies consistently across different types of situations people's

behaviours varies from situation to situation, arguing that this reflects the human capability to discriminate between different situations and to vary actions in accord with different opportunities, constraints, rules and norms present in different circumstances. This can be seen in an example of situations that afford talkativeness evoke talkative, agreeable, intimate and socially skilled behaviours (Funder, 2004). So it can be seen that most people behaviour in the way they view the situation, for example, thanksgiving or Christmas, people might express thankfulness and happy emotions, or home and the school environment. (ref) It has also been argued that important aspects of situations lie in the eye of the beholder, which the person in the situation and how they interpreted it, as Allport wrote 'similarity is personal' and that basic modes of adjustments are the approximately the same from one individual to another. (ref) Mischel presented that situations can be view as if.... then signatures in the person perception, where a perceiver associate a trait with a set of motives, they will expect it to be manifested in a stable pattern of differential response to situations. Originally, the person-situation debate started with the 'pure traits' model , which state that people show powerful, unmodulated consistencies in their behaviour across time and diverse situations (Funder, 2009).

Person

On the other hand, there is the person side of the debate which unlike situation argues the opposite, that behaviours are an outcome of innate traits. This makes a strong emphasis on the differences between individuals and how these differences vary across situations. Although people differ from

each other, they also differ with themselves, in the sense that every individual varies how he or she acts and feels, to some degree, depending upon the situations in their lives (Funder, 2009). John and Srivastava (as cited by Penke, Denissen and Miller, 2007) have argued that personality traits are regarded by evolutionary psychologists as generally stable and temperamental in nature. Traditional approach on the other hand, views personality traits as characterising people in terms of their average behaviours across the situations of their lives (Funder, 2009). An experiment that is in support of the person side of the debate is that which was conducted by Ciani, Veronese, Capiluppi and Sartori in 2007 (cited by Penke, Denissen and Miller, 2007) compared Italians coast-dwellers to Italians living off the coast on three small island groups. They found individuals from families that have lived on the small islands for at least 20 generations were lower in extraversion and openness to experience, they suggest that the change is more on genetic level. It has also been recognized that the heritability coefficient indexes also effects of interaction between genes and environments, in the sense when the effect on a person of exposure to a particular environment is conditional upon their genotype (Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2005).

Furthermore, Bouchard and Loehlin, (as cited in Caspi, Roberts and Shiner, 2007) argued that all personality traits show moderate genetic influence. Behavioural genetics research has uncovered increasingly reliable and robust evidence that genetic factors substantially influence personality traits. Moreover, contemporary appraisal research has shown that not only how people appraise their circumstances, but also how specific appraisals are

associated with emotional experience is subject to individual differences (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, De Boeck, & Ceulemans, 2007). The key aspect of traditional research is that it ignores behavioural variation due to situation, as five factor theories argues that traits are not affected by social factors. Critics of personality psychology have suggested that the only way to view stability of characteristics within an individual that contribute to behaviour, it is best to not include situational factors. Studies have proven to show behavioural impact on an individual regardless of the situation, this is best illustrate by the twin studies, by Eysenck found that heredity does account for some differences in extraversion and Minnesota study of twins reared apart, found that monozygotic twins reared apart were similar to those reared together (Bouchard, 1990). Bouchard et al concluded that genetic differences affect psychological differences largely indirectly, by influencing the environment of the child. Higgins (as cited in Cervone and Pervin, 2010) uses a good example to depict the way people view the same situation, he uses to college students both wanting an A in the course they are enrolled but one is anxious about the class while the other uses depression to describe his feelings.

Equality, freewill, self-determination and individual responsibility

The person side of the debate argues that a person-centered approach might be seen as favoring values such as a belief that a free will resides in the capacity to be true to oneself regardless of the situation one is in and that an important purpose in life is to develop a consistent self that seeks to take control of one's own destiny rather than remain a pawn of external forces

(Funder, 2006). Individuals have the free will to do what they like, in that sense, Lambert (2008) argues that people can choose their situations, they are free to choose their jobs, friends, leisure time and even activities they participate in. This then links to self-determination, which allows the individual to have the free will to choose those choices as the agent of their own personality, to have freedom based on their own beliefs that is not affected by social factors.

This would further suggest that each individual has a determination for a certain goal they like to achieve, they may need to have high self-efficacy and to regularly push themselves. For example, a university student who is determined to finish their degree and achieve good marks, might always be studying, is motivated to learn more on certain topics, will hardly go out, might finish their assignments before the due dates, be punctual and might do extra research. The personality side of the debate would suggest that individual responsibility is when the individual is taken to be in charge for his or her own behaviour and account on all levels that he or she is responsible for the decisions they make in a certain situation. Whereas, it is argued that individuals are different, this would suggest that the way in which an individual perceives a situation would be how they handle the matter. This would suggest that no one is accountable for anyone's mistakes, as people get older, they must learn to be responsible for their own behaviours and choices. An example of this would be an individual that lives on their own, they are responsible for paying their bills, doing their washing and feeding themselves, in that situation they are their own people, no one can do that for them, unless otherwise.

Furthermore, the situationists begun with a belief of human equality, that everyone is equal and that what make people different from each other is the environment they live in, for example, Western world and first world countries will differ in their environmental situations. This argument suggests that everyone is equal before the law, that as part of society there are some norms that we all abide by. People select situations as well as are shaped by them; the capacity to choose the type of situation that one will encounter is seen by social cognitive theorists as a critical element of people's capacity to be active agents who influence the course of their own development (Cervone and Pervin, 2010). Additionally, situationists suggested that one enjoys free will only when they can cast of the shackles of the selfhood and invent oneself anew in every situation they encounters and even ideologies of victimization that anyone does is his or her fault because behaviour is really caused by society, media and parental mistakes (Funder, 2006). Which might be seen as individuals having the freedom to express themselves and having the freedom of speech in a given situation? Nothing is forceful and that the situation one is in will be influence by their free will, whether they want to be their or not. Self determination in the eye of the situationists might be seen as how determine one is to get out of a certain situation, the willingness for an individual to work hard and start something new for themselves. A good example of self determination might be how a poor person wanting to get out of that situation, will work extra hard to get to their achievement. Self responsibility in the view of the situationists might be seen as how individuals take responsibilities for the way they behaviour in a situation and how they take it into account. This would then sort of link the self-determination, whereas the individual is responsible for the life

situations, how determine they are can account for the changes they make and how to make. The efficacy they have will only determine how responsible they are in a situation and how they are actually viewing the situation they are in, whether bad or good.

In conclusion, both the situation and the person side of the debate have strong arguments for why the other should be preferred over the other, however, I cannot simply choose which one is stronger or weaker, though situation have been view to also be weak in proving behaviour. I believe that both the traits one possess and the situation one is in have a strong outcome of the behaviour of an individual. As Bandura (cited in Cervone and Pervin, 2010) has argued that the personality, behaviour and the environment must be seen as mutually influencing each other. This view is somewhat more reasonable to me, however, I think that situation and personality cross each other out and that you cannot really have one without the other, thus behaviour occurs. I strongly think that the situation we abide in have big impact on how we behaviour but also who we are 'rational, irrational beings' have an affect on our behaviour.

Furthermore, I do not think that person-situation debate is resolved and I do not think it will be anytime soon, as there will also be the opposing arguments on which side is right and which is wrong. Unless, personality theories can put aside their differences and work together on the fact that individual behavioural outcomes are both due to situation and the personality of that individual, and not simply one over the other, will this debate be resolved.

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