

Situational effects on human behaviour



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“ He is usually quiet, but when he is around his friends, he becomes exceptionally talkative.” Statements like this are actually very common. Behaviour is defined as the way in which one acts or conducts oneself, especially towards others (Oxford University Press, 2014). So what exactly determines behaviour? Is it an individual’s attitude, or the situation that the individual is in? This essay aims to argue in favour of the topic “ human behaviours are determined largely by the situations they are in.”

According to Coon and Mitterer (2012), situational determinants are external conditions that strongly influence behaviour. There are a few main types of situational determinants, the first of which are biological environmental factors. These factors should not be confused with the innate requirements and capabilities of humans. Instead, they include physiological reflexes, needs, motivation, tastes, capacities for gratification and pain as well as the degree of instability of these. Biological factors alone rarely determine any observable behaviours though. They are usually conditioned by what we call cultural tendencies: distinct learning practices of relatively segregated groups of people. Different cultures have different practices, accepted ideas about suitable behaviour and norms (Myers, 2015). These different accepted practices determine our behaviour when we are with others of a different culture. For example, when eating with a Hindu, you might eat with your hands to respect their culture instead of with utensils like you normally would. There are also less generalizable aspects in determining behaviour called situational factors. These factors play a huge role in determining behaviour. They include non-social situations, social situations and personal

situations. Non-social situations refers to the physical environment of an individual's surroundings, social situations involves the quantity, culture, personalities and mental states of the people around the individual and personal situation deals with the mind-set of the individual himself at the given point in time (Gastil, 1961). All these situational determinants work together to establish an individual's behaviour.

One famous, or infamous example of the situation determining one's behaviour is the Milgram's study. If you were asked to administer a high voltage electric shock to an innocent stranger, would you do so? Any mentally sound person would probably refuse. However, in Milgram's experiment, subjects were given instructions to administer shocks ranging from 15 to 450 volts in increasing severity when the learner, who is the experimenter's confederate, gave the wrong answers to the questions he was asked. Around 65% of the participants advanced all the way to 450 volts with some urging from the experimenter, who was playing the role of a scientist carrying out a study. The discussion of this experiment mentioned that the behaviour of the participants was attributed to human's obedience to authority, in this case the authority was the experimenter who pushed the participants to continue. This is counted as a social situational factor since the participants' behaviour was shaped by the authority figure. To further prove that the actions of the participants was due to social factors present, Milgram then varied the social conditions such as closeness and legitimacy of the experimenter in the experiment and the compliance rate ranged from 0 to 93 percent (Myers, 2015). Thus from this experiment we can see how situations play a large role in determining an individual's behaviour.

Another widely studied effect of situational factors on behaviours is the bystander apathy, or the reluctance of someone to help during an emergency when there are other onlookers around (Myers, 2015). This effect was highlighted in the murder case of Kitty Genovese. She was attacked in her house and even though her screams attracted 38 of her neighbours to check what was going on, none of them offered any assistance in the half hour it took to kill her. In an experiment done by Latane and Darley (1969), the participants were made to overhear a woman who had guided them into the room fall and hurt her ankle while they were either alone, with a friend, paired with a stranger or paired with a passive confederate. Out of the people who overheard the fall, 70% of the participants who were alone offered their assistance to the woman, at least one responded in 70% of the pair of friends, though the response rate was slower, 13% of those paired with strangers helped and only 7% of those with passive confederates responded. This large variance in results proves how much a social situational factor can affect our willingness to offer help.

One might argue that a person's attitude may also affect his or her behaviour since attitude is defined as assumptions and emotions that have the power to affect our reactions (Myers, 2015). Sure enough, a belief that something is threatening, for example smoking, may lead to us disliking it and thus acting hostile towards carrying out that action. However, most of the times, a person's attitude does not compel a person to act on it. This is demonstrated in a study done by LaPiere (1934). Out of 66 establishments that offer lodging, only 1 turned down a group of Chinese even though the general attitude of Americans towards Chinese people were negative and the

operators claimed they would turn the Chinese nationals down. Hardly any of the variation in behaviour in an actual situation can be predicted by self-described attitudes. Further studies revealed that attitudes do affect behaviours, though on a smaller scale as compared to situational factors, and they are the most effective when certain conditions are met: when other factors on our actions are minimal, when attitude is explicitly associated to the behaviour, and if our attitudes are compelling enough (Myers, 2015). If these factors are met, we are more likely to act on our beliefs. However, it is more probable that situations will play a larger role in determining behaviour since the likelihood of so many factors being met are quite small.

Furthermore, according to the cognitive dissonance theory by Festinger (1959), it is possible for behaviour to change attitudes. In a study, the participant was made to go through a series of monotonous and boring tasks in the pretext of it being an experiment. The participant was then paid to persuade the next subject to take part in the same experiment by portraying it in a positive light. After doing so, the first participant was asked to rate the experiment: whether it was interesting or if the participant had any desire to take part again. On an average, the participants rated the experiment to be more enjoyable by about 1.8 on a scale of 5 as compared to the control group who was not given instructions to persuade another participant.

Humans naturally feel uncomfortable when holding inconsistencies in our thoughts and actions, thus, when faced with one, we are likely to change our thoughts to match our actions to remove the discrepancy.

While attitude does play a small part in determining behaviour, the contrary that attitude is susceptible to changes from the way we behave also stands

true. On the other hand, as seen in the various studies, situations are highly important in deciding how a human will act. This essay thus concludes that human behaviours are indeed determined largely by the situations they are in.

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