

Editorial: Personality and Situations

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During the last few decades the personality domain has witnessed several major controversies, including the person–situation debate and the debates on accurate reflection versus systematic distortion, on nomothetic versus idiographic approaches, on nature–nurture, etc. Within these controversies several sharp contrasts and pendulum movements have stood out.

In particular, regarding the person–situation debate, during the late sixties global personality traits have been subjected to severe criticisms as being ‘excessively crude, gross units to encompass adequately the extraordinary complexity and subtlety of the discriminations that people constantly make’ (Mischel, 1968, p. 301). In contrast with this, during the eighties, there was a clear renaissance of personality traits, culminating in an emerging consensus within a broad group of trait psychologists on the major dimensions underlying personality judgments within lexical approaches to personality: ‘Once upon a time, we had no personalities (Mischel, 1968). (...) Is it not exciting to see their return?’ (Goldberg, 1993). During the sixties and early seventies, several commentators pointed to the low cross-situational consistency of trait-relevant behaviour, as indexed by correlations across persons between scores of objectively recorded behaviours in two different situations (optionally after aggregation of the scores across different observers, different time points, and different acts belonging to the same behaviour category). Related to the former, researchers have amply documented the importance of person by situation interactions in behavioural data. In contrast, from the late seventies on, it has been replied that behaviour scores do display high stabilities (in terms of correlations across persons), if first an appropriate aggregation across situations is performed; the latter has been argued to be necessary to wash out measurement error or unreliability (Epstein, 1979).

From the nineties on, however, a new movement can be discerned: at the turn of the millennium, from quite different angles, calls can be heard for reconciliation, synthesis, and integration. As such, Magnusson and Törestad in their 1993 *Annual Review* chapter advocated the construction of a general theoretical framework for personality research, within a dynamic, holistic view of personality. Revelle, from his side, concludes his 1995 *Annual Review* chapter with the announcement that ‘what the next decade promises is an integration of (...) many separate foci’ (p. 321). Epstein (1996) simply states that ‘personality psychology should be integrative’ (p. 435), whereas Funder (1996) and the guest editors of a special issue of the *Journal of Research in Personality* are at the outlook on the beach for the ‘Big One’, that is, a

single grand theory in which the various pieces of personality psychology are assembled into an integrated whole.

In particular, the movement towards synthesis and integration also showed up in the person–situation debate. More specifically, critics of classical traits have made it clear that they, too, attach great importance to dispositional variables, including personality traits, to the extent that the latter can be linked to individual differences in intraindividual behavioural profiles across situations (Mischel, 1990; Wright and Mischel, 1987). The same authors have emphasized that they, too, attach great importance to stability and intraindividual coherence (Mischel and Shoda, 1995), a major issue being as to where this stability is to be looked for. From their part, trait psychologists, have (re)emphasized to an increasing extent that traits are not expressed uniformly in all types of situation, that is, that they can be considered ‘tendencies-in-situations’ (Coutu, 1949), which, at least implicitly, include references to ‘trait-relevant situations’ (De Raad, 1993; Johnson, 1997).

One must note that the movement towards synthesis and integration in the person–situation debate implies a number of important reconceptualizations and shifts in focus with respect to (a) the concept of trait, (b) the concept of situations, and (c) the relation between traits and behaviour (including the concept of stability). (a) Regarding traits, it has become clear that a decontextualized concept of trait is no longer the only possible one. Recognizing that traits are primarily expressed in trait-relevant behaviours that are expressed in trait-relevant situations further confronts researchers with the challenge to open the black box of traits; in doing so one should specify what the relevant situations or situational features (as well as behaviours) for a given trait are; ultimately, this may imply the challenge to clarify and elaborate the concept of trait relevance itself. (b) Regarding situations, an integrative account of personality clearly implies the need to go beyond general contexts in which behaviour occurs. Rather, situations are to be characterized in terms of their psychological features, including various subjective situation characteristics. A key task, then, in the study of any behavioural domain of interest, is the identification of situational features that are relevant for the persons whose behaviour one wants to account for. (c) The relation between traits and behaviour is clearly more complicated than in classical accounts of traits. One may wish indeed to link positions on trait dimensions to particular behavioural profiles across situations. The latter could be considered *coherent* if they can be given a meaningful psychological interpretation, for instance, in rules of the form ‘*if* such and such situational features are present *then* behaviour of such type will be performed with such a probability’ (Wright and Mischel, 1987). The link of personality traits to behavioural profiles further necessitates a reconsideration of the concept of stability: one may primarily wish each individual profile (or associated if–then rule) to be stable across different measurement occasions or time points. Such a notion of stability can be indexed in the form of an intraindividual correlation, across situations, between behaviours recorded at different time points (Mischel and Shoda, 1995).

A deep-level synthesis or integration further implies the need to go beyond a pure description of the relation between traits and behaviour-in-situations, to reveal the structural and process-related mechanisms at the basis of this relation. In this respect, various authors have emphasized the important mediating role that could be played by cognitive, affective, as well as motivational variables (Dweck, 1996; Mischel and Shoda, 1995; Pervin, 1996). This may entail the need for a novel type of dispositional

variable beyond classical traits. As an example, one may think of variables such as *hostile attribution bias*, which has been shown to play a key role in aggressive behaviour (Mischel, 1999; Vansteelandt and Van Mechelen, 1998). Hostile attribution bias refers to the tendency of a subject to encode others in situations of interpersonal frustration as purposefully aggressive, irrespective of their actual intent. It is a process-related individual difference variable as individuals are supposed to differ in hostile attribution tendency. One may plausibly assume that this individual difference variable is significantly (negatively) related to Agreeableness. As a matter of fact, it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between Factor II and hostile attribution bias more in detail, as this could reveal part of the psychological process underlying the classical trait. One may further note that hostile attribution bias is a dispositional variable that includes an explicit reference to a subjective situation characteristic (*viz.* interpersonal frustration), as well as a behavioural link of the if-then type: 'if interpersonal frustration, then attribution of hostile intention'. This if-then type rule is further assumed to be a stable individual characteristic. One may note that, compared to the if-then type rules mentioned above, the 'then part' of the rule now refers to a covert cognitive/affective variable rather than to overt behaviour.

In all this, one should not lose sight of one issue: whereas the ideas of integration and synthesis sound very promising, their conceptual as well as empirical elaboration will be an extremely difficult task. Indeed, it implies the conjunction of individual and situation, the specification of classical traits, the search for relevant situation characteristics, the search for additional relevant dispositional variables, the search for relevant mediating characteristics underlying major aspects of personality functioning, as well as the integration of all this within a comprehensive framework. Therefore, if one wants the pleas for systemic personality models not to end up in loose declarations of intent, tools, both conceptual and formal, may be highly desirable to help achieve their realization. At this point, the present special issue of the *European Journal of Personality* intends to make a contribution.

In this special issue, on a conceptual level, Ten Berge and De Raad offer a theoretical clarification of the complex relation between traits and situations, as viewed from a trait psychological perspective. In addition, they present a comprehensive review of studies on situation taxonomies; the latter may be especially relevant as a starting point for retrieving relevant situation characteristics.

Four other contributions in the special issue discuss formal models for the study of persons-in-situations. We believe such models can be particularly useful, both in specifying the complex, abstract goals of integrative approaches to personality, and in making them amenable to empirical research.

Shoda starts from an analysis of variance model to construct an impressive, unified framework for the study of behavioural consistency. This framework allows for a sharp distinction between several types of consistency and provides an elegant solution to paradoxical findings in past research on consistency and person \times situation interactions.

Steyer, Schmitt and Eid take a structural equations approach and present an overview of a very flexible framework for the study of behaviours from person-in-situations as recorded at different occasions of measurement. In particular, their framework allows for a clear distinction between (latent) states and traits.

Van Mechelen and Kiers on the one hand and Vansteelandt on the other hand discuss formal models for the analysis of person \times situation \times behaviour data, that is,

fully crossed data on the occurrence of several responses in a series of situations by a set of persons. More specifically, Van Mechelen and Kiers reconsider a classical (though largely neglected) model within the factor analysis tradition, whereas Vansteelandt presents a novel variant of a model from the item response theory family. Furthermore, both contributions illustrate the substantive relevance of the models focused on with an empirical study; in the latter studies individual difference aspects, as represented in the models, are also linked to process-related personality characteristics.

The papers are followed by comments from two discussants, John Johnson and Walter Mischel. We expressly solicited commentary from quite different viewpoints, so the reader may anticipate both applause and dissent.

We are most grateful to the discussants as well as to all authors of this special issue for their excellent contributions. We believe and hope that those can bring the dream of an integrative person–situation account of personality a little closer at hand.

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