Chapter 4
Personality Traits and Behavior

Traits

- Personality psych and everyday human observation are similar in that both characterize people using similar terms.
- Two important points regarding the trait approach:
  1. This approach is based on empirical research that is mostly correlational in design.
  - Trait psychologists put a lot of work into careful construction of methods, such as personality tests, for accurately measuring how people differ.
  - An ultimate criterion for any measurement of a personality trait is whether it can be used to predict behavior.
  2. It focuses exclusively on individual differences.
  - The trait approach doesn’t try to measure the degree to which a person might be more or less dominant, sociable, or nervous than anyone else.
  - This focus on comparisons is one of the great strengths of the trait approach. It can also be a weakness (remember Funder’s 1st law) because it’s prone to neglect the aspects of human psych. common to all people as well as the ways in which each person is unique.

The measurement of individual differences

- “Every man is in certain aspects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man.” —Kluckhohn and Murray
  1. Certain psychological properties and processes are universal.
  - i.e. basic needs like food, water, sex
  2. People differ, but in ways that allow individuals to be grouped.
  - i.e. people highly dominant are alike in a way to be distinguished from those more submissive
  3. Each individual is unique and can’t be meaningfully compared to anyone else.
  - i.e. genetic makeup, past experience, and view of the world are different.
- The trait approach focuses on #2 while neglecting the other two b/c it’s based on “like some other men” and assessed in broad categories of individual difference—people are their traits.

People are inconsistent

- Whatever you conclude the truth to be, there will be many exceptions.
  - i.e. person who is conscientious at work, but disorganized at home
- Personality traits aren’t the only factors that control an individual’s behavior—situations are important also.
  - Situations vary according to what people are present and what the implicit rules are.
  - If situations are so important, then what role does personality play?
- What if traits don’t exist, but people change who they are according to the situation they’re in and everybody is basically the same.
- Your perspective on these questions may depend on your age and stage in life.
- Funder proposes that people differ from each other in the degree to which they have developed a consistent personality for themselves.
The person-situation debate

• Which is more important for determining what people do, the person or the situation?
• Mischel argued in 1968 that behavior is too inconsistent from one situation to another to allow individual differences to be characterized accurately in broad personality terms
• Personality psychologists (esp. those invested in pers. assess.) disagreed
• The consistency controversy goes to the heart of how everybody thinks about people

The person-situation debate

• Two issues
  1. Does the personality of an individual transcend the immediate situation and moment and provide a consistent guide to his/her actions, or is what a person does utterly dependent on the situation he/she is in at the time?
  2. Our everyday intuitions tell us that people do have consistent personalities (we use personality-trait terms all day long) so…are common, ordinary intuitions about people fundamentally flawed, or basically correct?

The situationist argument—3 parts

1. A thorough review of the personality research literature reveals that there is a limit to how well one can predict what a person will do based on any measurement of any aspect of that person's personality, and this upper limit is a small upper limit
2. Therefore, situations are more important than personality traits in determining behavior
3. Therefore, not only is the professional practice of personality assessment a waste of time, but also everyday intuitions about people are fundamentally flawed. The trait words to describe people are not legitimately descriptive, and more generally, people tend to see others as being more consistent across situations than they really are

1. Predictability

• The situationist argument
  - The definitive test of the usefulness of a personality trait is its ability to predict behavior. If you know somebody's level or score on a trait, you should be able to forecast what the person will do in the future. There is no trait that you can use to predict someone's behavior with very much accuracy
  - The data reported in the studies Mischel reviewed were not, for the most part, taken from real life
  - Nearly all of the behavioral measurements (B data) were gathered in lab settings
  - In the research literature, predictability and consistency are indexed by a statistic called a correlation coefficient
  - Indexes the association/relationship between 2 variables (-1 to +1), such as a personality score and a behavioral measurement
  - Positive—as one variable increases, so does the other—the higher a sociability score, the more parties they like to attend
  - Negative—as one variable increases, the other decreases—the higher the shyness score, the fewer parties they like to attend
  - Mischel’s original argument was that correlations between personality and behavior, or between behavior in one situation and behavior in another, seldom exceed .30. Nisbett later revised this estimate to .40. The implication is that the correlations are small, and that personality traits are unimportant in the shaping of behavior
  - This claim about the (un)predictability of behavior hit the field of pers psych in the early 70s with quite a force
1. Predictability: the response

- Unfair literature review
  - Mischel’s review is short (only 16 pgs) and concentrates on a few studies that obtained disappointing results rather than on the—possibly more numerous—studies that obtained more impressive results
  - On the other hand, some studies are bound to find positive results on the basis of chance alone

- 40 upper limit, but this limit is a result of poor or less-than-optimal research methodology. The weak findings summarized by Mischel don’t imply that pers is unimportant, but that psychs can and must do better research
  - Could be done better by research moving out of the lab more often
  - Personality is much more likely to become relevant in situations that are real, vivid, and important to the individual in question

- Some people might be more consistent that others
  - Moderator variables could be used to identify those people
    - Snyder’s high and low self-monitors
  - Some behavior might be more consistent that others

3. Focus efforts to predict behavior or general behavioral trends, instead of actions at particular moments
  - i.e.: not try to predict whether a person will act friendly next Tues. at 3 PM, but rather try to predict how friendly the person will be on average over the next year
  - When you say someone is friendly, is it that you are trying to predict what the person will do in a specific time and place, or are you expressing a prediction of how that person will generally act over the long haul?
  - You need to know how the person will act in general across the various relevant situations of life

3 suggestions for improving pers research
1. Measure behavior in real life—not easy to assess
2. Check for moderator variables, and —may be subtle and difficult to measure
3. Predict behavioral trends rather than single acts—requires that the research make many direct observations of behavior

Predictability: the response: .40 is not small

- To be impressed (or depressed) by the situationist critique of pers traits, you must believe 2 things:
  1. A correlation of .40 represents the true, upper limit to which one can predict behavior from personality, or see consistency in behavior from one situation to another, and
  2. This upper limit is a small upper limit
- If you were to conclude that a corre of .40 is not small, then the limit wouldn’t be worrisome, and the force of the situationist critique would dissipate
  - To evaluate whether .40 is big or little, or to assess any other statistic, you need a standard of comparison

Two kinds of standards are possible: absolute and relative

1. Absolute
  - To evaluate this corre against an absolute standard, you would calculate how many correct and incorrect decisions a trait measurement with this degree of validity would yield in a hypothetical context

2. Relative
  - To evaluate this corre against a relative standard, you can compare this degree of predictability conceded for pers traits with the ability of other methods to predict behavior

Do both

Predictability: the response: .40 is not small (cont.)
Predictability: the response: .40 is not small (cont.)

- An absolute evaluation of .40 is .40, and cannot be obtained from Rosenthal and Rubin’s Binomial Effect Size Display (BESD).
  - According to the BESD, a corne of .40 means that a prediction of behavior based on a personality variable is likely to be accurate 70% of the time (assuming a chance accuracy rate of 50%).
  - 70% is far from perfect, but an employer choosing who to put through an expensive training program could save a lot of money by being able to predict with 70% accuracy who will not be a successful employee at its conclusion.
  - I.e., Company with 200 employees, but budget to train only 100 of them and 60% of them could successfully complete the program.
    - 100 selected randomly and spend $10,000 to train each one, but only 50 are successful so the company has spent $1 million to get 50 successfully trained employees ($200,000 each).
    - Selection led with .40 come and select the top 1/3 of the company on the test for training. The company will get 70 successful hires on $30 will at the cost of $1 million, but now only $93,000 per employee.
- Situationists believe that the situation, not the person, is all important in the determination of behavior. To evaluate the ability of personality traits to predict behavior, therefore, the appropriate comparison to draw would seem to be the ability of situational variables to predict behavior.

2. Situationism

2. Situationism (cont.)

- Experimental social psych does allow the effects of situations to be directly calculated.
- In the typical social psychological experiment, two (or more) separate groups of participants are placed, randomly and usually one at a time, into one or another of two (or more) different situations.
- The social psychologist measures what the participants do.
- If the average behavior of the participants who are placed in one situation or another of two (or more) different situations.
- If the average behavior of the participants who are placed in one situation or “condition” turns out to be significantly different (statistically speaking) from the average behavior of the participants placed in the other condition, then the experiment is deemed successful.

- I.e., the effect of incentives on attitude change.
  - Ask participants to make a statement they don’t believe, such as that a dull game was really interesting. Then test to see if they come to believe them afterwards—that the game was interesting. If they do, then the incentives have had an effect.

- We would want to ask how large those effects are, compared to the effects of personality variables on behavior. Social psychologists have paid little attention to the size of the situational effects they study. They have concentrated on statistical significance of the degree to which their results would not have been expected by chance. This is separate from effect size (“actual” significance) because even a small effect can have highly significant statistically if you’ve studied a large enough number of participants.
- The experimental statistics used by social psychs can be converted algebraically into correlations of the sort used by pers psychologists.
- Funder and Ozer did that with 3 prominent examples of the power of situations to shape behavior and converted the results of those studies into effect-size correlations.

2. Situationism (cont.)

- A key tenet of the sit. position is that pers doesn’t determine behavior—situations do.
- To evaluate the degree to which a behavior is affected by a personality variable, the routine practice is to compute a measure of behavior with a measure of pers.
- But how to evaluate the degree to which behavior is affected by a situational variable?
  - This question has received little attention over the years and, when addressed, was with a variance by subtraction process.
    - If a pers variable was found to corre .40 with a behavioral measurement and so explained 16% of the variance, the other 84% was assumed to be due to the situation.
  - Situationists have been willing to claim that situations are important, but not measure situational variables in a way that indicates precisely how or how much situations affect behavior.
    - One trait psychologist pointed out that “situations turn out to be powerful in the same sense as Scud missiles [the erratic weapons used by Iraq during the Persian Gulf wars] are powerful. They may have huge effects, or no effects, and such effects may occur virtually anywhere, all over the map.” (Strodtbeck)
    - Not everybody responds to the same situation in the same way.
- Pers psychologists have always focused on the size of the effects.
- The key statistic in pers research, the corre coefficient—is a measure of effect size and not statistical significance.
- The “pers coeff” of .40 is ordinarily not comparable with the effects found in social psych studies of sit variables b/c the 2 styles of research don’t use a common metric.
- The experimental statistics used by social psychs can be converted algebraically into correlations of the sort used by pers psychologists.
2. Situationism (cont.):

Funder/Ozer and 3 prominent examples of the power of situations to shape behavior converted to effect-size correlations

1. “Forced compliance” effect—Festinger and Carlsmith
   - Participants induced into telling innocent, new participants that a dull experiment was actually interesting
   - The participants were offered either $20 or $1 for doing this
   - The counterintuitive result was that the participants paid $1 actually changed their attitudes, after telling the lie, to believe that the experiment was more interesting than they’d originally thought
   - The participants paid $20 didn’t change their attitudes that the experiment was boring
   - Demonstration of cognitive dissonance
     - Participants felt dissonance as a result of saying something they didn’t believe, but a payment of $20 was sufficient to reduce their uneasy feelings
     - $1 wasn’t enough to make them feel better, however, so these participants had to change their own attitudes so their words wouldn’t be so out of line with their beliefs
   - The statistical size of this effect had seldom been reported
     - The effect of incentive on attitude change following counter-attitudinal advocacy turns out to correspond to a correlation of -.36 (- b/c more incentive leads to less change). This is a direct, statistical measure of how strongly rewards can affect attitude change

2. Bystander intervention—Darley et al.
   - Staged faked, but dramatic incidents in which participants came upon apparently distressed individuals lying helplessly in their path
   - The research was intended to find out if the participants would stop to help
   - It depended, among other things, on whether other people were present and on whether the participant was in a hurry
   - The more people present, the less likely the participant was to stop and help; the correlation indexing the size of this effect was -.38
   - Also, the greater the participant’s hurry, the less likely they were to help; the correlation indexing the size of this effect was -.39

3. Stanley Milgram’s obedience study
   - Ordered participants to give apparently painful and dangerous (but fortunately bogus) electric shocks to an innocent “victim”
   - If the participants objected, they were told “the experiment requires that you continue”
   - Milgram identified 2 variables as relevant to determining whether the participants would obey this command
     1. The isolation of the victim
        - If the victim was in the next room and couldn’t be heard protesting, or could be heard only weakly, obedience was more likely than if the victim was right in front of them
        - The correlation that reflects the size of the effect of victim isolation is .42
     2. The proximity of the experimenter
        - Obedience was more likely if the experimenter giving orders was physically present than if they gave orders over the phone or on a tape recorder
        - The correlation that reflects the size of the effect of experimenter proximity turned out to be .36

2. Situationism (cont.):

Funder/Ozer and 3 prominent examples of the power of situations to shape behavior converted to effect-size correlations

Recall that the correlation coefficient that was supposed to reflect the maximum relationship that can be obtained between pers variables and behavior is about .40

Now, compare that to the effects of situational variables on behavior as just surveyed: .36, .38, .39, .42, and .36

Two different conclusions can be drawn from these results

1. Can imply that neither pers variables nor situational variables have much of an effect on behavior. That’s not the point. These particular experiments were reanalyzed b/c they hadn’t been doubted to demonstrate a powerful, important influence of a situational variable on behavior. They are classics of social psych.

2. Rather, these situational variables are important determinants of behavior, but many pers variables are important as well. When put on a common scale for comparison, the size of the effects of the person and of the situation are much more similar than many had assumed. In this light, calling a correlation of .40 a “personality coefficient” loses some of its pejorative edge
3. Are person perceptions erroneous?

- Recall that the situationists argue that the ability of pers variables to predict behavior is limited if not nonexistent; that situations are much more important; and that people’s everyday perceptions of one another, which consist to a large degree of judgments of personality traits, are therefore largely erroneous.
- Now that we’ve dealt with the first two parts of the argument, the third falls apart of its own weight.
- The effects of pers on behavior do seem sufficient to be perceived accurately.
- Despite the situationist critique, our intuitions probably weren’t that far off base after all.

Both everyday experience and any fair reading of the research literature makes one thing clear…

- When it comes to personality, one size does not fit all.
- People really do act differently from each other.
- Even when they are all in the same situation, some individuals will be more sociable, nervous, talkative, or active than others.
- And when the situation changes, those differences will still be there.
- The 17,953 trait terms in the English language didn’t appear out of thin air, but rather ideas about pers traits are an important part of Western culture.

People are psychologically different and it’s both important and interesting to note just how
- Words arose to describe these differences, words that make us more sensitive to the differences and make it possible to talk about them.

Conclusion—persons and situations

- The evidence is overwhelming that people are psychologically different from one another, that personality traits exist, and that people’s impressions of each others’ personalities are based on much more than mere illusion.
- It’s important to be able to put the relative role of pers traits and situations into perspective.
  - Situational variables are relevant to how people will act under specific circumstances.
  - Pers traits are better for describing how people act in general.
- Consider these examples…

Consider relationships

- Every person you have a relationship with—your parents, your siblings, your friends, the people you date—is different and you will therefore and necessarily act differently with each of them to some degree.
- You might date two different people, or have six good friends, and treat no two of them in quite the same way.
- You could say that each of these people presents you with a different situation and you respond accordingly.
- At the same time, aspects of your behavior are more general and are likely to remain consistent across relationships.
- Research has shown that broad traits such as extraversion, sociability, and shyness predict how many friends you usually have overall and the degree to which, in general, you will find yourself in conflict with them.
- The most general aspect of your relationship behavior might be simply the degree to which you tend to be happy.
- 3 pers variables—a low level of negative emotionality, a high level of positive emotionality, and “constraint” —tend to predict the degree to which people enjoy happy and nonabusive relationships regardless of who the relationship is with.

Consider another example…
Conclusion—persons and situations

- Consider the world of the workplace
  - Every job is a special situation with its own requirements; some require careful attention to detail, some require mechanical skill, some require good relations with customers, etc.
  - But as the industrial psychologists have noted, some aspects of good job performance are general across almost all jobs
  - One of these is a behavioral pattern called “citizenship performance” in which the employee tries in various ways to promote the goal of the org
  - This might include behaviors such as helping to teach new employees their jobs and alleviating conflict in the workplace, being aware of problems and opportunities as they arise and trying to respond to them, and in general having the kind of good attitude that makes everything go better
  - This kind of behavior is predicted by traits such as conscientiousness, and is a boon to org perf regardless of whether the work setting is a store, factory, or an office
- Pers variables are about the psychological aspects of a person that they carry along, consistently and throughout life, from one relationship, job, and situation to the next
- People are psychologically different from each other, and these differences matter