The Best Way to Think About Situations: Process and Reality, Yea; Circularity, Nay

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Abstract: I examine how the authors apparently derived their Process and Reality Principles from the critical realism underlying Funder’s (1995) Realistic Accuracy Model to elegantly explain the interwovenness of persons and situation and to resolve the objective and subjective views of situations. However, I question whether heeding the Circularity Principle is useful for predicting what people will do in a situation. Copyright © 2015 European Association of Personality Psychology.

The first sentence of Rauthmann, Sherman, and Funder’s article (2015) reads, ‘The person and the situation at any given moment are inextricably interwoven.’ I could not agree more (Johnson, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2009). What I would like to do here is explain why I think that two of their core principles (Process and Reality) respect their interwoven nature, while the third (Circularity) might be a pointless attempt to separate situations from personality.

Their three core principles were apparently derived from an analysis of the longstanding philosophical debate between objectivism and subjectivism. Situation research to date has failed to bridge the divide between objectivism and subjectivism and has therefore remained insular, non-cumulative and non-integrative. Mainstream personality psychology, on the other hand, has resolved the debate by adopting the position of critical realism found in the natural sciences.
(Funder, 1995). Consequently, situation research might also benefit from adopting this approach used so successfully by personality psychology.

The position of critical realism found in the natural sciences (not to be confused with the dialectical critical realism of sociology) holds that objects of study have objective realities apart from our attempts to know those realities; therefore, if people have different judgments of reality, some will be closer to the truth than others. However, given the elusive nature of objective reality, no one can ever be absolutely certain of possessing the truth. The best we can do in personality research is to average multiple measurements of personality (assessing reliability by the degree of convergence) and then explore the construct validity of our averaged measurements by seeing if they predict other observations deemed relevant by theory.

Research on person perception goes even further than employing these basic principles of reliability and validity. Funder’s (1995) Realistic Accuracy Model has identified specific stages in the process of perceiving personality and what can go wrong in each stage. To form an accurate judgment of a target person, the target must first of all make available a sufficient number of behavioural cues that are relevant to the personality trait being judged. Next, the judge must detect those cues and use them appropriately to form an accurate judgment. The failure of the target to make enough relevant cues available or the judge to detect and use the cues properly will result in an idiosyncratic, inaccurate judgment.

Rauthmann et al. propose that we use the same strategy to conceptualize the objective and subjective natures of situations. Critical realism tells us that situations have objective realities that are never known for certain. Their Processing Principle asserts that there is a process (analogous to the process of perceiving persons) that creates a psychologically meaningful mental representation from the cues in an objective environment. Their Reality Principle states that, to the degree that relevant cues are available in an objective situation (physical stratum) and are detected and used the same way by all perceivers, we have what Rauthmann et al. call the ‘consensual stratum’. Differences in the availability of relevant cues or detection and use of cues create an ‘idiosyncratic stratum’.

The Processing and Reality Principles therefore can therefore be seen as applications of Funder’s (1995) Realistic Accuracy Model of person perception to situation perception. But their third core principle—the Circularity Principle—diverges from practices in personality judgment research. Personality psychologists have suggested that the most accurate assessment of personality is usually the average judgment of persons who are well-acquainted with the target (Hofstee, 1994). By analogy, the most accurate assessment of a situation would be the average judgment of persons who are well-acquainted with the situation. But the Circularity Principle holds that measuring situations by the research participants’ judgments of the situation is undesirable because those judgments would be circular and tautological, blurring the personality of the participants with characteristics of the situation (e.g. calling a situation ‘exciting’ if participants feel excited in the situation). The Rauthmann et al. Approximation Corollary advises us to assess situations using at least two rating sources (e.g. confederates or lab raters) rather than just participants. But is it really necessary or even desirable to define situations apart from the persons in them?

In personality research, we use multiple judges to triangulate as best we can on the actual personality characteristics of the people we are studying. We do this because we believe that a person’s objectively real personality characteristics (not just their self-perceptions) have real-life consequences. We can predict, for example, profound differences in the life patterns of those who are high or low on authoritarian impulses—regardless of whether the authoritarians perceive themselves as authoritarian.

But in contrast to objective personality, objective situations alone (e.g. the number of emails in an inbox) cannot predict or explain an individual’s behaviour (e.g. whether someone will respond to a stack of emails). If predicting and explaining behaviour is our goal, we need to know the individual’s perception of the physical stratum, which will inevitably be influenced by the individual’s personality (e.g. his or her degree of conscientiousness). The person and the situation at any given moment are inextricably intertwined.

Whether or not Circularity is something to be avoided depends on our research goals. If our goal is to predict behaviour, and it is an individual’s subjective perception of a situation (however idiosyncratic) that determines behaviour rather than the objective situation, what we want to measure and place in our regression equation is the individual’s perception, not outside judgments of the objective situation. In this case, Circularity is desirable. Only if our research goal is to study how the same objective situation is perceived differently across individuals would we be interested in a non-Circular definition of the situation. At the same time, we would additionally need to measure each individual’s perceptions, so Circularity will never be avoided completely.

Let’s Not Search Just Where the Light Is Good

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Abstract: Understanding how situations impact behaviour and ultimately personality presents many challenges. Rauthmann et al. have outlined the difficulties well, and they offer many thoughtful ideas for addressing them. But I...