



Wrong and right questions about persons and situations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 9 January 2009

Keywords:

Person–situation debate
Dispositions
Appetites
Volition
Self-regulation

In science, deciding which questions to ask is all important. Asking the wrong questions leads to wheel-spinning and wasted time. Imagine if chemists had asked whether the properties of crystalline substances (such as table salt, iodine, or sand) or the properties of solvents (such as water, carbon tetrachloride, or hydrofluoric acid) contribute more to dissolving behavior. The question is wrong because the disposition toward dissolving depends equally on the structures of both the substance and the solvent. Fortunately, chemists knew to ask the right question, “What is it about the structure of substances and liquids such that in some cases dissolving occurs, and in other cases, it does not?”

Unfortunately, many psychologists who have studied persons and situations have been less adept than chemists when it comes to asking questions. In fact, the history of the person–situation debate has revolved largely around the wrong question: “Do the characteristics of persons or the properties of situations contribute more toward human behavior?” The question is wrong for precisely the same reason it would be wrong to ask whether the characteristics of solutes or solvents contribute more toward dissolving (Johnson, 1997; Johnson, 1999a). Space limitations prohibit a discussion of why psychologists have stubbornly persisted in asking the wrong question. Suffice it to say that ideological motivations are probably involved (Funder, 2006; Johnson, 1999b).

The chemistry analogy indicates that we should be asking what it is about persons and situations that leads to certain patterns of behavior. But people—unlike salt—make choices about situations. People, as evolved, living organisms, choose to enter into, manipulate, and create situations to accomplish goals (Johnson, 2001).

The question of volitional striving toward goals was actually articulated by Mischel (1984) himself, “how persons can overcome

‘stimulus control’—the power of situations—and achieve increasing volitional control over their own behavior even when faced with compelling situational pressures” (p. 353). How, indeed, can we overcome unsalutary influences of peer pressure, charismatic but malevolent leadership, and engaging but misleading advertising and propaganda?

To answer these important questions, we must remember a lesson from chemistry: The power of water to dissolve salt depends as much on the characteristics of salt as its own characteristics. The power of peer pressure, charismatic leadership, and propaganda depend on the characteristics of people, *viz. personality*. Personality predicts, for example, behavior in the Asch perceptual conformity paradigm or the Milgram obedience-to-authority situation.

Because the power of situations depends on characteristics of persons, one can reframe Mischel’s important question about volitional control in terms of a person’s feelings and motivations: “How do persons overcome ‘appetite control’—the power of internal desires—to achieve increasing volitional control over their own behavior even when faced with compelling emotional pressures” (Johnson, 2001)?

Thus, I would suggest that future research go beyond consideration of the interaction of person and situation factors in the regulation of behavior to studying the way in which conscious volition manages both external pressures (situational demands) and internal pressures (desires and appetites) in the self-regulation of behavior.

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