Some Hypotheses Concerning Attempts to Separate
Situations from Personality Dispositions
http://www.personal.psu.edu/~j5j/rome.html
John A. Johnson
Pennsylvania State University, DuBois

Note: This is an extended, written version of a talk given at a symposium on personality
Making this essay available on the world wide web does not constitute publication; the
author reserves the right to submit a version of this essay as an original manuscript for

Abstract

Situations and personality dispositions are often presented as different, competing forces.
This is nonsensical because a disposition is the tendency to respond to a particular type of
situation. Furthermore, a situation cannot affect a person unless the person possesses the
disposition to respond to that situation. Some hypotheses derived from the politics and
psychology of science are proposed to account for attempts to separate situations from
personality dispositions. American psychology has been dominated by ideological
commitments to liberalism, rationalism, and individualism. These ideologies comfort
those who value progress, equal opportunity, civility, and freedom. Cognitive
behaviorism, which explains behaviors in terms of how people think about situations,
rationalizes these American ideologies and values. Cognitive behaviorism also proposes
technologies for improving the human condition (e.g., manipulating the social
environment and teaching people how to reason properly). Mischel's writings explicitly
reveal his ideological commitments and efforts to capitalize on the popularity of
cognitive behaviorism. Attribution theory and social constructivism, also entrenched in
American ideology, happily employed Mischel's critiques to denigrate personality
dispositions, which were believed to interfere with social progress, equal opportunity, and
freedom. The suppression of research employing dispositional concepts promoted the
careers of social psychologists at the expense of personality psychologists. Eventually a
counter-movement led to the fractionation of the Journal of Personality and Social
Psychology and a temporary fractionation of APA Division 8. This paper ends by
reaffirming the scientific necessity of dispositional language and the compatibility of
dispositional thinking with the values cherished by so many psychologists.
‘It would be wasteful to create pseudo-controversies that pit person against situation in order to see which is more important.’ - Walter Mischel (1973, pp. 255-256)

Despite Mischel’s warning, numerous psychologists consider situations and personality traits or dispositions to be separate forces that determine behavior. Furthermore, they believe that the magnitude of situational and personality forces can be measured and compared. The writings of Ross and Nisbett (1992) represent especially clear statements of this kind of thinking. ‘It is simply indisputable,’ write Ross and Nisbett (1992, p. 101), ‘that situational effects can be readily obtained that are far greater than any dispositional effects that have ever been reported.’

In contrast, I have explained (Johnson, 1997, 1999) why situations and personality dispositions are not forces whose magnitudes can be compared. It doesn’t matter whether one takes Hampshire’s (1953) view of dispositions as descriptive summaries of behavior patterns or Ryle’s (1949) view of dispositions as causal determinants of behavior patterns. In either case, a disposition always refers to the tendency of an object or person to behave in a certain way in the presence of a particular situation. Despite exhortations to the contrary, even the broadest personality dispositions are defined by a particular situational context. Notions like ‘context-free dispositions’ or ‘dispositions as cross-situational consistencies in behavior’ are straw conceptions constructed by trait critics.

I like to use an analogy from physics to illustrate why dispositions are always bound by a situational context (Johnson, 1999). Consider the disposition ferromagnetic as a property of certain metals like iron and nickel. To determine whether a substance is weakly or strongly ferromagnetic, we do not require the substance to show behavioral consistency across a wide variety of situations. What we require is replicable, relevant behavior (magnetic attraction and becoming magnetized) in a particular, relevant situation (a magnetic field). Analogously, we can determine whether a person is highly cooperative by observing whether the person frequently (relative to some norm) shows the relevant behavior (compliance) in the relevant situation (reasonable requests) (see Alston, 1975).

Even Walter Mischel himself recognized that temporal stability—not consistency across different situations—is the hallmark of traits in the following passage: “But the fact that behavior varies across different situations is not questioned by anyone, including classical trait theorists. More serious issues, instead, are the consistency-specificity with which the same person reacts to situations that ostensibly are relatively similar…” (Mischel, 1973, pp. 254-255). Then, oddly, he later trivializes temporal stability as something we all know and take for granted and redirects the person-situation debate back to the issue of cross-situational consistency (Mischel and Peake, 1982).

Given that dispositions are literally defined as responsiveness to particular situations, one might ask how researchers such as Ross and Nisbett could possibly regard dispositions and situations as independent forces that determine behavior. In my talk I would like to present three hypotheses that explain how this might have come about. These hypotheses are not readily amenable to rigorous testing, but may nonetheless provoke some interesting discussions.
Hypothesis 1: Using persons and situations as separate factors in ANOVA studies led to the false impression that situations and personality dispositions are separate causal factors whose magnitudes could be compared.

Early entries in the so-called person-situation debate (e.g., Endler and Hunt, 1966) treated persons as different levels of a ‘person factor’, crossed with different levels of a situational factor. In this ANOVA paradigm, proportions of variance attributed to the person factor, situation factor, and person x situation interaction were computed and compared. The size of the variance components were interpreted as representing the relative ‘power’ of persons, situations, and their interaction in determining behavior.

Golding (1975) has already noted the mathematical inappropriateness of the variance ratios used in these ANOVA studies. But there is a more fundamental error in using variance between persons to assess the causal influence of personality traits on behavior. The error is in equating the degree of measured individual differences with the amount of influence of personality traits on an individual’s behavior. A similar sort of interpretive error is made when naive students are first learning about heritability coefficients in behavior genetics. When they read that genetic variance accounts for 60 per cent of the variance in intellectual performance, they misinterpret this as ‘genes are 60 per cent responsible for each individual’s intellectual performance.’ Assigning percentages of nature-influence and nurture-influence on individuals is nonsensical; assigning percentages of personality-influence and situation-influence is equally nonsensical. And yet we have researchers who have always erred by interpreting between-persons variance as the degree of trait influence on individuals.

Hypothesis 2: Psychologists found that ANOVA studies that purported to show the insignificance of personality compared to situations were useful for career advancement.

When statements about the small amount of variance accounted for by personality traits began to appear in the 1960s, some psychologists recognized opportunities to exploit the apparent insignificance of personality to promote their own professional careers. Three exploitative strategies can be identified. The first was simply to attract attention by challenging conventional wisdom. Every ‘knew’ that personality is a real, measurable entity that influences our behavior. Therefore, any article or book that challenged this accepted view was bound to attract attention. Although Walter Mischel (1968) had other issues in mind (issues I’ll turn to in a moment) beyond career advancement when he wrote Personality and Assessment, clearly this book helped his visibility.

Numerous others used Mischel’s (1968) book as a springboard for advancing their own careers (sometimes to Mischel’s chagrin). Anthropologist Richard Shweder (1975), for example, got a fair amount of mileage out of the claim that personality consistency is a fictitious semantic construction. Mischel’s book also helped to vitalize an entire emerging paradigm in social psychology called attribution theory (Ross, 1977). Attribution theory covers a range of issues, but what these theorists dubbed as THE ‘Fundamental Attribution Error’ is the ‘general tendency to overestimate the importance of personal or
dispositional factors relative to environmental influences’ (Ross, 1977, p. 184). The overall, major thrust of attribution theory represents the second strategy in career building, which is to show just how wrong and misguided common sense can be. Goldberg (1992) describes a seeming obsession in social psychology with non-intuitive findings that disconfirm common sense. Ross (1977, pp. 212-214) himself discusses this obsession. Because ordinary people believe in personality, nonpsychologists became a target for studies on erroneous thinking.

In addition to attracting professional attention and purporting to build knowledge that transcends common sense, some psychologists also used the seeming triviality of personality to discredit personality psychologists who competed for the same space in professional journals. Ross (1977), for example, says that the ‘professional psychologist, like the intuitive psychologist, is susceptible to the fundamental attribution error’ (p. 186). Although Ross and Nisbett (1992) claim that their work had ‘little to do with [professional] personality researchers’ (p. 101) and that by discussing the ‘relative magnitudes of person versus situation effects … [they] didn’t intend to imply that social psychology is somehow more valuable or important than personality psychology’ the Mischelian bandwagon effectively halted traditional personality research for at least a decade.

When I was a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University at the end of the 1970s, Robert Hogan described to me in great detail the detrimental effect of Mischel’s following on the careers of traditional personality psychologists and the measures that were taken to overcome that chilling effect. As a starting assistant professor in 1968, Hogan himself, fresh out of Berkeley’s prestigious Institute for Personality Assessment and Research, had countless manuscript submissions returned with a simple explanation: Everyone who has read Mischel knows that personality is unimportant. Hogan persevered and survived; goodness knows how many entry-level personality psychologists perished because they could not publish.

In response to the problem, personality psychologists began having special meetings at APA conventions to discuss how to wrest back publication opportunities. Eventually they proposed a sectioning of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology to include a section devoted to traditional personality research, with the understanding that Robert Hogan would serve as inaugural editor for the section. Upon assuming editorship, Hogan intentionally ignored the page limitations set by the central APA publications office, so the personality section of JPSP quickly dwarfed the other two sections reserved for social psychologists. In a later development, personality psychologists further established their unique identity when APA Division 8 sectioned itself into a social section and a personality section. The Division later rescinded the sectioning, but the statement had been made.

Hypothesis 3: Denying the causal power of personality was reassuring for personal reasons.
Models that consider science to be a dispassionate search for truth ignore an empirical fact: Personalities of scientists affect the way they actually conduct research. In a brilliant essay, Silvan Tomkins (1964/1965) long ago pointed out that initial attraction to a psychological theory depends less on logic and evidence than on loosely organized feelings and ideas about feelings, which he called ideo-affective postures. To use Tomkins’s terms, a person will resonate (be attracted) to an ideology (any formal, organized set of fundamental, a priori presuppositions, be they scientific, political, or philosophical) if the ideology seems to verify or validate his or her ideo-affective posture. Eventually, when psychologists begin to formulate their own metatheoretical positions, they engraft idiosyncratic elements from their unique ideo-affective postures onto existing theories. Evidence for Tomkins’s insights can be found in a number of published studies (Atwood and Tomkins, 1976; Coan, 1979; Conway, 1992; Elms, 1993; Hart, 1982; Johnson, Germer, Efran, and Overton, 1988; Singer, 1971; Stolorow and Atwood, 1979).

My final hypothesis is that individuals who view situations and personality as separate forces and who deny the causal power of personality do so because they feel that trait psychology threatens their ideo-affective postures. On the other hand, situationism (“a loosely defined but widely used term referring to the positions of critics of personality assessment and research”--Shoda, 1999) resonates to the ideo-affective postures of trait critics. Just what are the ideo-affective postures of trait critics, and why do they perceive trait psychology as a threat to their deepest personal concerns and values?

A look at formal ideologies that are popular among psychologists sheds some light on their ideo-affective postures, which tend to remain diffuse and unarticulated. Note, by the way, that I am using the term ideology in Tomkins’s non-pejorative sense of any organized system of fundamental assumptions. Identifying ideo-affective postures within ideology should not be construed as an ad hominem attack or a charge of unwarranted bias. Fundamental assumptions, known as absolute presuppositions in philosophy (Collingwood, 1940) or zero-order beliefs in psychology (Bem, 1970), represent absolutely necessary starting points or givens for coherent thought and discourse, but are, themselves, beyond evidence and logic. According to Robert Hogan (1975; Hogan and Emler, 1978; Hogan and Schroeder, 1981) three ideologies to which American psychologists seem particularly susceptible are liberalism, rationalism, and individualism. I will explicate the ideo-affective postures associated with each ideology in turn, to see how these postures dispose individuals toward situationism and trait psychology.

The ideo-affective-postural heart of liberalism is a yearning for change and faith in progress. Hogan and Emler (1978) enumerate a number of beliefs held by liberals that rationalize their penchant for change. First, they regard social institutions and conventions as historical accidents, as arbitrary restrictions that can and should be swept away if they impede progress. They take seriously that portion of the Declaration of Independence that says that ‘all Men are created equal’ and believe that inequalities, injustices, and other social problems arise from unequal opportunities within society rather than any kind of innate differences in talents and capabilities. Finally, they believe
that human beings are, on the whole, reasonable and will normally act in their own self-interest when given the opportunity.

The ideo-affective-postural core of rationalism is confidence in the power of pure reason and logic. Sensory experiences and emotions are regarded as inferior ways of knowing. Hogan and Emler (1978) note that for rationalists, ‘Mathematical proof is the surest form of knowledge, mathematical reasoning is the highest exercise of intelligence’ (p. 480). This ideology is well represented in the philosophies of Plato and Descartes. Rationalism supports the portion of liberalism declaring human beings to be basically reasonable.

The ideo-affective-postural foundation of individualism is a feeling that the demands of one’s social group represent foreign intrusions that are incompatible with one’s basic nature. According to Hogan and Emler (1978), individualism presumes that each person must sacrifice aspects of his or her true nature to gain acceptance by the group. Writers as different as Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers describe society as an imposition that forces individuals to deny their true nature. Individualism often takes a rationalist interpretation of social relationships as temporary arrangements adopted after some kind of rational cost/benefit analysis. Individualism also endorses the image of solitary geniuses generating the most profound wisdom. Finally, individualism dovetails with liberalism’s dislike of group-imposed restrictions on the freedom of the individual.

Experimental social psychology shares the same assumptions as the ideological triad of liberalism, rationalism, and individualism. Social psychology is, for the most part, a type of stimulus-response (S→R) behaviorism (Hendricks, 1977). Funder (1997) observes that social psychology experiments typically place subjects randomly in different situations, measure what the subjects do, and then attribute differences in subjects’ behaviors to the environmental stimuli in the differing situations. Perhaps it is even more accurate to say that social psychology is an example of S→[O]→R behaviorism, wherein the [O] refers to cognitive processes that transform the stimuli before a behavior response (R) is emitted. Two leading social psychologists, Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett believe that two of the most important principles in psychology are:

(a) situationism (situations exert powerful and subtle effects on behavior) [and]
(b) construal (the impact of any situation depends solely on its personal subjective meaning to each individual’ (Goldberg, 1992).

Situationism reflects liberalism’s assumption that differences between people are caused by the social environment rather than innate traits, and construal corresponds to rationalism’s emphasis on reasoning. In fact, one of the most massive subdisciplines of social psychology is social cognition, which considers how people think about social interaction almost to the exclusion of how people behave in social interaction. In his historical review of the discipline, Hendricks (1977) observes that social psychologists almost always study how artificial social stimuli affect the thoughts and behaviors of single individuals rather than full-blown social interaction, because the latter is almost impossible to study in a laboratory. This is consistent with the ideology of individualism.
The preference of liberal/rationalist/individualist social psychologists for studying situations over traits is perhaps based on the fear that if innate personality traits were at the root of social problems, progress would be impossible because personality traits do not change. On the other hand, social psychologists believe that the environmental factors assumed to underlie social problems can be easily changed. The irony in this position is that social institutions are often, in fact, quite resistant to change, and that even innate personality traits can change, although personality changes tend to be small and gradual (Costa and McCrae, 1997).

Whereas an obviously situationist social psychology clearly shares liberalism’s enthusiasm for social progress, rationalism’s faith in the power of reason, and individualism’s belief in the transforming power of social interventions, Walter Mischel’s situationism is not nearly so obvious—despite loud claims to the contrary. Mischel asserts that his trait critiques ‘were not motivated by a desire to return to an atomistic behaviorism, nor to construe situations as the prime or exclusive causes of behavior’ (Mischel and Peake, 1983, p. 399). His two essays in the American Psychologist (Mischel, 1979, 1984) both begin with a denial of the charge that he believes that situations control behavior. Perhaps his most explicit denial can be found in the following passage: ‘An enduring general concern underlying [Mischel’s] research [on self-control] is to try to understand how persons can overcome ‘stimulus control’--the power of situations--and achieve increasing volitional control over their own even when faced with compelling situational pressures’ (Mischel, 1984, p. 353).

This interesting passage points, I think, to one of Mischel’s primary ideo-affective postures: a liberal, individualistic love of freedom from social restrictions. He views progress as escape from ‘stimulus control’ and ‘situational pressures’. His method for escaping stimulus control represents rationalism: ‘our findings also show that what a situation does to people depends on just how they think about it, on their ideation more than on what they are actually facing’ (Mischel, 1984, p. 353). His writings indicate that he believes that situations sometimes have power over us, but not when an actor uses his or her rationality to escape that controlling power.

Mischel’s comments about personality traits indicate that his primary objection to broad traits is their inability to characterize the freedom of individuals to choose different courses of action in different situations. ‘these widespread perceptions of [Personality and Assessment] as a situationist’s manifesto aimed at undoing the role of dispositions, were far from my intentions. … My intentions in writing that book were not to undo personality but to defend individuality and the uniqueness of each person against what I saw as the then prevalent form of clinical hostility, the tendency to use a few behavioral signs to categorize people enduringly into fixed slots on the assessor’s favorite nomothetic trait dimensions’ … (Mischel, 1979, p. 740, emphasis added). ‘Personality and Assessment … began in large part as a defense of each person’s individuality … against the then-prevailing tendency to use a few behavioral signs to assign individuals to fixed positions on the assessor’s favorite nomothetic trait dimensions’ (Mischel, 1984, p. 351, emphasis added).
So, just like Gordon Allport, Mischel endorses individualism; he wants us to appreciate the *individuality* of persons. He dislikes categorizing people into *fixed slots* or *fixed positions* that fail to describe freedom to make individual choices. Mischel also consistently denies that personality traits have the causal power to force individuals into unmodulated, unconditional patterns of behavior, except in pathological cases (Mischel and Shoda, 1994).

Those who characterize Mischel as an arch-situationist seem to have overlooked these passages, which indicate that his overwhelming concern was with free choice rather than behavioristic social engineering. Yet, despite his disavowing the situationism of the social psychologists, he did approvingly cite Ross’s (1977) anti-dispositional tract on one occasion (Mischel, 1979). Furthermore, Mischel’s (1973) use of behavioristic jargon such as ‘subjective-stimulus values’, ‘stimulus-outcome expectancies’, and ‘behavior-outcome expectancies’ as well as the label for his model, *cognitive social learning theory*, suggest that he is an S→[O]→R behaviorist. Even when the subjects in Mischel’s experiments gain self-regulatory control over their behavior, it is because the experimenter planted a particular cognitive strategy in their minds. Is Mischel more of a situationist than he himself realizes?

Ultra-rationalist cognitive psychologists such as Walter Weimer (1977) would answer in the affirmative. Weimer, while recognizing how Ulric Neisser’s (1977) book, *Cognitive Psychology*, helped kick off the cognitive revolt against behaviorism, regards Neisser’s work and all cognitive psychology based on the computer metaphor to be variants of S→[O]→R behaviorism, which itself is not significantly different from old-fashioned S→R behaviorism. The commonality among all these views is that external stimuli are conceptualized as the foundation of all action. In support of his position, Weimer points to Neisser’s (1968) own description of his book: ‘a book like this one might be called ‘Stimulus Information and Its Vicissitudes.’ As used here, the term ‘cognition’ refers to all the processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used’ (p. 4). In contrast to the ‘sensory metatheory’ of behaviorism and computer models that gives primacy to input from the environment, Weimer offers a ‘motor metatheory’ of mind, which regards the mind as an active generator. The motor metatheory underlies organismic psychologies such as Piaget’s (Johnson, Germer, Efran, and Overton, 1988).

My own view is that extreme environmentalist positions that conceptualize the source of human action as entirely within the situation fail to recognize that situations have absolutely no effect unless a person’s mind is structured to respond to the situation. Likewise, extreme motor metatheories fail to recognize that even the most active mind does not literally generate reality. Rather, the mind acts upon a physical reality that is already there. Personality dispositions, whatever their shortcomings (Weimer, 1984), at least recognize that situations and persons are equal partners in the production of human action. Finally, nothing in the concept of the personality disposition—properly conceived—leads one inevitably to either liberalism or conservatism, rationalism or empiricism, or individualism or communalism.


