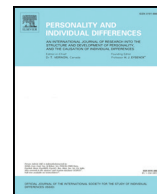




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An initial broad-level mapping of personality-situation contingencies in self-report data[☆]

Marie N. Conley, Gerard Saucier^{*}

University of Oregon, USA

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ABSTRACT

It is commonplace observation that situations can affect the expression of personality dispositions. But psychology has typically addressed this relationship in a broad, unspecific way, with little attention yet to which situations might particularly affect which dispositions. Here, our premise is that critical information might arise from examining how a range of specific situations are perceived to affect each of a range of specific personality tendencies. 500 participants completed a questionnaire in which 15 items referencing attributes were juxtaposed with each of 29 differing situations that are salient to laypersons, and patterns compared with scores on a short Big Five (plus Honesty) measure. This design enabled a preliminary mapping of basic personality-by-situation dynamics. Honesty yielded the least variance between situations, with Extraversion and Emotional Stability showing the most. Variation in each personality dimension had its own pattern of situational contingency: for example global Extraversion scores were particularly predicted by extraverted tendencies in situations involving unfamiliar others. The emergence of these patterns suggests that at least some such dimensions are relevant to and diagnosed by responses to a particular limited range of situations.

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1. Introduction

One of the goals of personality psychology is to be able to describe and predict individuals' behavior with maximum accuracy. Historically, and across a wide variety of linguistic and cultural contexts, one of the most popular and widely accepted methods for attempting to do so has been through traits (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Traits are long-lasting attributes of personality that presumably involve stability across different situations (John & Gosling, 2000). Under an extreme version of a trait theory, there would be no behavioral variation attributable to situations.

It is, however, a commonplace observation that individuals do not behave consistently regardless of where they are or whom they are with; people often vary their behavior to fit the situational context. Therefore, to understand the whole person, or to capture the patterns accurately, both situations and behavioral attributes must be accounted for (Bem & Allen, 1974; Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006; Mischel & Shoda, 2000). This paper will examine the relationship between situations and trait-variation, in the interest of developing a fuller understanding of how individual personality is exposed.

Trait models of personality assume cross-situational consistency (John & Gosling, 2000). That is, the personality terms are used in a decontextualized way and instructions for the questionnaires often ask individuals to generalize or average across situations; at issue is whether the person is outgoing, kind, etc., in general, as opposed to in one or another specific situation. Using trait factors to describe personality provides a summary of an individual's behavior more or less averaged across situations. It assumes consistent trait-behavior, e.g., individuals who are extraverted should be outgoing both at a party and if they are working at a job. It also assumes stability over time, that an individual's trait scores would remain the same at one time point as at any other time point. The interaction of situations and stability is not easily checked in studies of retest stability because the retest may involve the same averaging across situations, rather than the individual being described in a new or different situation.

In his 1968 book, *Personality and Assessment*, Walter Mischel expressed the belief that the predictive ability of traits is severely limited; that individuals vary so much from situation to situation and over time that there is no such thing as stable personality. Mischel (2004) cited studies that found that the average correlation coefficient for daily behavior across situations was about 0.14 (Newcomb, 1929), and that the assumption that rank-ordering of individuals on trait behavior would remain stable across situations was unsupported (e.g., Hartshorne & May, 1928). This perspective generated a new line of research that focused on personality as dynamic and variable rather than stable over time and place. In this perspective personality is not

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, 1227 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1227, USA.

E-mail address: gsaucier@uoregon.edu (G. Saucier).

consistent across situations, thus behavior is contingent on situational context. It was not made clear, however, which types of situations have the greatest effect on behavior overall, or on particular behavioral tendencies, or even which situation variables were most worthy of attention. (Leaving aside the point that Mischel's approach underestimated the power of aggregation.)

Much has changed, of course, in personality psychology since Mischel's 1968 book. In particular, there has been a revolution in understanding of which traits should have most priority in measurement. From the early years of psychology, a rationale for identifying the most important personality variables has been advanced: take all the words that can be used to describe other people (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Galton, 1884; Norman, 1963) and reduce them down into a few broad variables, called factors (Saucier & Goldberg, 2001). Large samples of individuals would rate themselves or others on all these personality descriptors, and then factor analysis would be used to identify which descriptors have something in common, would be given a common label, and used henceforth as key measured variables of personality.

It was out of this approach that the Big Five personality factors were developed, including Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability, as well as Intellect (Goldberg, 1990), for which prominent questionnaire versions are labeled Openness or Open-mindedness (Soto & John, 2017). The Big Five sprung from early studies of personality language in English, Dutch, and German. Ashton et al. (2004) later found that across seven different languages, a six-factor model emerged. Five of the factors resembled those of the Big Five (albeit with some moderate differences in agreeableness and in emotionality vs. emotional stability), with an additional factor they labeled Honesty-Humility. However, a sizable group of lexical studies was omitted from their analyses. Saucier (2009) conducted a study that also included languages with more inclusive variable selections and likewise found the Big Five to have one factor too few. A slightly variant sixth factor, called Honesty/Propriety, helped to account more fully for the content in common between personality terms. An up-to-date understanding of the relations of situations with trait variation should take account of the Big Five (and Big Six) model.

Fleeson (2001) found evidence partly supporting a situational perspective in the spirit of Mischel, but also partly supporting the validity of trait models. He examined Big Five-relevant behavior over 2–3 weeks and found that, while there was very low predictability hour-to-hour, when scores were averaged for the 2–3 week duration, there was very strong predictability for behavior. The Big Five trait model still explained behavior, especially when aggregated over time. Borkenau and Ostendorf (1998) suggested that perhaps the Big Five could also be used to account for intra-individual differences in behavior (i.e., differences across situations for the same individual), though this has not yet become common practice beyond the work of Fleeson.

The evidence thus far suggests that both situational context and trait factors are important when describing personality. This idea, that personality includes the interaction between traits and situations, has been increasingly salient within personality psychology in more recent years (Eigenhuis, 2010; Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015). In fact, this idea had been suggested before by researchers who worked from the theory of *interactionism* (Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Interactionism is the belief that personality is contingent on individual differences in reaction to situations rather than general trait behaviors. As an illustration, Shoda, Mischel, and Wright (1994), had counselors at a children's summer camp rate campers on several trait-like behaviors while involved in different camp activities. They found that the children's behavior patterns were best depicted as individual 'profiles,' described as 'if...then' contingencies. For example, for one child, being teased by a peer led to acting aggressively, but being praised by an adult led to acting friendly. For another, being praised by an adult led to acting aggressively, but being

warned by an adult led to acting friendly. These patterns varied between children.

These findings from Shoda et al. (1994) indicate that there may be specific patterns to the variation in individual behavior across different situations. In other words, an individual will tend to have a consistent pattern in behavior for one specific situation versus another, and individuals will vary in this pattern. The research that follows builds on a similar assumption, as well as an if-then-contingency rationale but relates a wide range of situations to contemporary models of personality structure. The major questions addressed in the research are the following. To what degree do various situations have an impact on perceived variation in various traits? Are some traits more versus less susceptible to situational influence? For a given trait, are particular situations especially prone to yield dispositional variance? And, related to the last question, is behavior variation within certain situations (but not all situations) diagnostic of individual differences in a trait dimension, as measured by a commonly used personality questionnaire?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through a university human-subjects pool. This pool consists of students from introductory psychology and linguistics classes. Participation was voluntary and for course credit. Students were given the option of choosing from several studies in which to participate or writing a paper instead.

The total original number of participants was 569. Data from 69 participants was removed ($N = 500$) because self-reports contained mostly the same repeated response or the time taken to complete the self-report was less than a pre-determined cut-off of 15 min (we suspected a priori that completion of 462 items in under 15 min would not represent entirely a serious set of responses.)

Of the remaining 500 participants, 28.6% were male and 70.8% were female. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 35 years with a mean of 19.43 ($SD = 1.84$). The majority of participants indicated their ethnicity to be non-Hispanic White (66.2%). Other participants considered themselves Asian or Asian American (12.8%), Hispanic or Latino (4.8%), Black or African American (1.8%), Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (1.0%), and American Indian or Alaska Native (0.6%). Also, 6.4% of the participants indicated they had more than one ethnic identity, and 6.0% had a different identity from those mentioned.

2.2. Measure

A 435-item questionnaire was developed in which personality-attribute indicators were systematically conditioned on situations. Twenty-nine situations were combined with two indicators each for Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and three each for Agreeableness, Open-mindedness, and Honesty/Propriety (29 situations \times 15 attribute items = 435 items). A brief questionnaire, tentatively titled 'BFI-VI,' was also included in which participants were asked to rate themselves on 15 indicators of the broad traits included in the Big Five. Note that henceforth in this article, as a clarity-preserving convention, we refer to behavioral descriptions as occurring in single items (situation-specific personality tendencies) as "attributes", behaviors as aggregated across (all 29) situations as "traits", and the Big Five plus Honesty/Propriety (i.e., Big Six) as "trait-dimensions."

For the situation-attribute questionnaire, participants were presented with a particular situation followed by a prompt, e.g., "Let's say you are shopping, how likely is it that you..." with the 15 attribute indicators presented directly below this line, e.g., "enjoy taking risks." For each attribute indicator there was a 5-point rating scale from "very unlikely" to "very likely." Each of the 29 situations was presented on one page, with ratings requested for the 15 attribute indicators. To control for order effects, the presentation order was randomized across the situations for

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