EFFECT OF BEHAVIOR IN PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Social psychology and personality psychology have the same job: to seek to understand the meaningful, consequential, and for the most part social behaviors of daily life. Cognitive psychology examines component processes such as memory, perception, and cognition. Biological psychology seeks to understand the physical underpinnings of behavior in the anatomy, physiology, functional organization, genetic basis and evolutionary history of the nervous system. Developmental psychology explores the roots of behavior in genetics and early childhood experience, and changes across the life course. All of these fields could be viewed as foundational for the common concern of social and personality psychology, which is to understand what people do every day.   In this light, it is unsurprising that courses in social and personality psychology are among the most popular offerings on most college campuses; their subject matter is not only important, it is personally relevant and intrinsically interesting.

INTRODUCTION

Social and personality psychology began to come into their own about the same time the 1920's and 1930's through the work of many of the same people. What is surprising, in retrospect is how the two fields diverged over the subsequent decades.   Social psychology came to specialize in the study of what people have in common in particular how aspects of situations can change what people on average will do. Personality psychology came to specialize in the study of how people differ from each other psychologically and on ways to characterize and measure these differences. This little exchange illustrates the odd historical fact that although social and personality psychology were born about the same time, of the same or closely related parents, the relationship between these sibling sciences often has been uneasy, bordering at times on outright estrangement. This is unfortunate given that the two fields not only share a common goal, they offer complementary – not conflicting – methodological approaches.

At their core, social and personality psychology focus on two orthogonal main effects. One the one hand, the classic method of social psychology uses experimental designs that manipulate elements of situations to show how those elements affect what people do. On the other hand, the classic method of personality psychology uses correlation methods to assess how psychological

properties of people personality traits covary with individual differences in behavior. Arguments about whether the situational effects uncovered by social psychological research are or are not stronger than the dispositional effects uncovered by personality research dominated an important subset of the psychological literature for decades. But that is getting ahead of our story. Ordinary observation of the social world is enough to verify that people do different things in different situations and even in the same situation, different people often do different things. And those two conclusions are enough to verify that a complete understanding of why people behave the way they do naturally requires personality and social psychology to be informed by one another.

The goal of the present paper is to help to rebuild the bridge between social and personality psychology. The paper is organized into six parts. The first three parts provide a basic outline of personality psychology and an overview of some current research. Part I defines the field and Part II describes the basic conceptual and theoretical approaches to studying personality. It is proposed that, to the degree that each basic approach to personality represents empirical science, they all depend on the assessment of individual differences through behavior. This dependency puts the trait approach at the center of personality psychology. Part III discusses current research and outlines some of the ways that behavior has been used to assess personality. These include the prominent method of self- report, but also include peers' judgments and other, wider-ranging and creative techniques forobserving and measuring behavior. The last three parts deal with the competition that has characterized the relationship between personality and social psychology for the past 40 years or so. Part IV describes the intersection of personality and social psychology. It focuses on research in person perception and accurate personality judgment, and the contrast between these two traditions. Part V outlines the basis and unfortunate evolution of the estrangement between personality and social psychology, which appears to be slowly ending. Finally, Part VI offers suggestions for re- integrating these fields towards a relationship that can be become more cooperative and less competitive.

Personality can be defined as an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms hidden or not behind those patterns. The ultimate goal of personality psychology is to explain every individual from the inside out. The mission includes describing, measuring and explaining how people differ from one another uncovering the conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings that drive behavior, and predicting what people will do in the future, among other goals. But this mission has one problem: it is impossible. The complete study of the individual encompasses too many considerations at once to be feasibly pursued by investigators with human limitations of time and intelligence.

One way to make personality research more manageable is to divide it into organized chunks. Rather than trying to look at every possible aspect of personality at the same time personality research proceeds along different theoretical avenues. Some researchers examine the biologicalunderpinnings of personality others look at developmental trajectories, others examine how theenvironment affects personality, and others study how people differ in how they perceive and processinformation and still others and all of them, in some sense seek to discover and assess the basic

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psychological dimensions along which individuals differ. All of these areas of research are similar in that they focus on individual differences and patterns of behavior but are guided by different paradigmatic frameworks that specify which phenomena is the focus of attention and which mechanisms are used for explanation. The basic approaches to studying personality are biological, psychoanalytic, humanistic, learning-based, cognitive, and trait based.

Although the different approaches sometimes compete with one another for the ultimate status of explaining everything there is to know about personality, the reality is that different research questions are better addressed through different paradigmatic perspectives. For example, the principles of behaviorism can be used to explain how gambling behavior is maintained, but say nothing about why those who have gambling addictions are often unable to admit that they have a problem. In contrast, psychoanalysis has much to say about denial and other defense mechanisms, butoffers little toward understanding how the intermittent reinforcement schedule associated with gambling can make this maladaptive behavior so persistent. For this reason, it makes more sense to view each approach as useful for addressing its own key concerns, rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive alternatives.

CONCLUSION

An important agenda for future research is to return our attention to important behaviors in meaningful situations, where situational and personality variables are assessed alongside each other and treated in an equivalent manner. A catalogue of the main effect of situational variables on behavior, to place alongside the catalogue of main effects of personality variables on behavior would offer a useful contribution to psychological understanding.

It is worth pausing for a moment to realize how important an accomplishment it would be to have a map of how a wide range of personality variables affect behavior, alongside a map of how a wide range of situational variables affect behavior. This endeavor might come to be the psychological equivalent of the human genome project. This project would not itself be theoretical, but a wide ranging descriptive enterprise to gather descriptions of what people actually do in the diverse situations of their lives.

The next step, mapping the interactions between personality and situational variables, will also be necessary but difficult. Interactions only get the variance left over after the main effects of persons and situations have had their way. So as any active researcher knows, they tend to be fragile things, difficult to find and more difficult to replicate. Perhaps it is enough to ask, for the time being, for a renewed research focus on these critically important main effects, of persons and situations on behavior, about which we still know far too little. This enterprise may offer the best hope of at last reuniting the long-estranged siblings of personality and social psychology in a way that would have made their parents proud.

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