1 SITUATIONAL FACTORS OVERWHELM PERSONALITY WHEN PREDICTING BEHAVIOR

We start this book off with the biggest myth in all of personality psychology—the idea that situational forces overwhelm the effects of personality traits when it comes to explaining people's behavior. People who believe this idea argue that features of the situation and environment play a stronger role in determining behavior than the characteristics of the person. Taken to the extreme, proponents of this idea might even argue that personality does not exist at all, and that our perception that people have stable personalities is an illusion. This myth was so powerful and was so widely accepted that it almost destroyed the field of personality psychology as an academic discipline starting in the 1970s. Thus, this is a critical myth to address. If personality itself is a myth, then there isn't much point to the rest of the book. In addition, in addressing this myth, we set the stage for many other myths that we cover in this book. Questions about the stability of personality over the life span, for instance, necessarily build on issues regarding stability from one moment to the next, one day to the next, and one month to the next. Therefore, we will try to introduce some basic ideas about what personality is and what we should expect from people's personalities.

Great Myths of Personality, First Edition. M. Brent Donnellan and Richard E. Lucas.

Defining personality

So what is personality? As we noted in the introduction, personality focuses on the ways that people differ from one another. One widely cited definition was proposed by Gordon Allport (see 1937, 1961). Allport was a famous personality psychologist who wrote one of the first major texts on the topic, and he is often regarded as founding father of the field. According to Allport (1961, p. 28), "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine [the person's] characteristic behavior and thought." If we break this definition down into its component parts, we can identify a few key features that will be important for our discussion about personality in this book.

Most importantly, personality is "within the individual." It is something that the person carries around from situation to situation. Thus, this implies that there will be at least some form of stability over time and across situations. Note that we do not yet explain precisely what form of stability we expect to see—this will become important as we discuss the responses to the myth addressed in this chapter. Furthermore, these features that are within the individual determine that person's "characteristic behavior and thought." In an earlier version, Allport (1937, p. 48) wrote that personality determines a person's "unique adjustments to [his or her] environment." In other words, depending on their personalities, people will react differently to the same situation. This part of the definition also implies that all behaviors reflect the interaction between the person and his or her environment. Personality does not exert its effects in a vacuum. Finally, Allport notes that personality reflects a "dynamic organization" of features within the individual. This means that the different characteristics that people have may work together in a unique manner to create their reactions to the world. In other words, one personality characteristic may have a different influence on behavior depending on the other personality characteristics that the person has. Consider a person who is both anxious and highly self-controlled. How might that person react to news that he or she is at higher risk for heart disease compared to someone who is anxious but quite low in self-control?

Allport's definition suggests that knowing something about a person's personality will allow us to predict (with some degree of uncertainty) how that person will respond to a specific situation in the future. As you can imagine, this is extremely useful information. At the most basic level, if personality exists and has a reasonably important influence on behavior, then we can expect at least some consistency when we encounter the same person in the same situation on two occasions. When you choose a

person who has been kind and considerate to you in the past to be your roommate or even your spouse, you are doing so precisely because you believe this person has some stable personality characteristics that will cause them to act similarly in the future. In short, anytime you choose to interact with someone based on your expectations of how they will behave in the future, you are implicitly endorsing the idea that personalities exist and affect behavior.

As a science of human behavior, personality psychology goes even further than the ideas reflected in this belief. Personality psychologists believe that if they can begin to understand the "dynamic organization" of personality characteristics within people, they can not only expect stability across similar situations, they can also predict new behaviors in new situations based on the understanding of that person's personality characteristics (along with an understanding of the features of the new situation). This expectation explains why personality psychologists often examine the connections between specific personality traits (like conscientiousness) and theoretically relevant and practically important real-world outcomes like success in school or work (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007; Wilmot & Ones, 2019). If personality exists and has a reasonably powerful effect on behavior, then you can see why researchers might want to document the strength of any connections in a systematic fashion.

Personality and assessment

However, in the late 1960s, something happened that led people to call into question the most basic tenets of personality psychology. Specifically, Walter Mischel published an influential book called *Personality and Assessment* (Mischel, 1968). In this book, Mischel laid out a set of critiques about the state of personality research and theory at the time. It is important to understand the nature of these critiques, along with the ways that these critiques were interpreted, to understand the myth about the power and primacy of situational factors we cover here. This is also a place where some of our discussion of myths touches upon how personality research is presented in other parts of psychology.

Mischel (1968) was highly critical of "broad" personality traits, especially those that were "decontextualized" or not linked to a specific situation. When researchers talk about broad traits, they usually refer to abstract ideas that capture individual differences in a range of specific attributes that are thought to reflect a general underlying tendency.

For instance, extraversion is a broad trait that reflects not just whether you enjoy parties (a narrow tendency) but also whether you are highly active, whether you tend to experience positive emotions, whether you enjoy exciting activities, and whether you are assertive with others. Although not every person who is assertive also enjoys parties, these characteristics tend to go together to form the broad trait of extraversion. Furthermore, decontextualized traits are those that are thought to lead to the same or very similar behaviors across a wide range of contexts. The fact that people who are extraverted might be sociable at parties, at work, in the classroom, and even with a bunch of strangers means that their extraverted behavior does not depend all that much on the specific context—it is decontextualized. It is these broad, decontextualized traits that Mischel targeted with his critique (though some people took his ideas even further and argued that we should be skeptical of the idea of stable personality characteristics as a whole). Other broad traits include the Big Five attributes described in the introduction and other attributes such as aggressiveness, self-control, and shyness.

Mischel acknowledged that when people were asked to describe their personality across different situations or on different occasions, their responses were quite stable. In other words, people believed that decontextualized and cross-situationally stable personality traits existed. However, according to the research that Mischel reviewed, when psychologists actually looked at the specific behaviors that people exhibited, this behavior was not especially stable either across different situations or even in the same situation at different times. This discrepancy between what people believe about the consistency of their behavior and what they actually do across situations was an important part of this critique because it suggested that people fool themselves about how consistent they are. People might not actually know themselves at all.

What was the evidence that Mischel identified to buttress his claims about personality traits? One of the most famous studies that Mischel reviewed was conducted by Hartshorne and May (1928). In this study, researchers tested the honesty of a group of children[1] using a variety of different behavioral tests. If honesty is conceptualized as a broad trait, then it should be reflected in a range of specific behaviors. After all, these specific behaviors are thought to reflect a general tendency to be

[1] In retrospect, it might have been something of a mistake to focus on children as opposed to adults given that researchers have learned that personality in children is more of a work in progress than personality in adults. The generalizations of this classic study might say more about personality in children than personality in adolescents or adults per se.

truthful, forthcoming, and morally upstanding. For example, the children in these studies were presented with opportunities to cheat on tests, but the precise behavior that was required to cheat (like copying answers from an answer sheet vs. copying from a friend) differed. Hartshorne and May found that these dishonest behaviors were not especially stable from one situation to the next; those children who cheated in one situation were not necessarily those who cheated in a different situation. In fact, the correlations between any two behaviors were often extremely low, sometimes close to zero (meaning that you could not predict how one child would behave from his or her behavior in a different type of cheating opportunity). This and other evidence led Mischel to conclude that despite people's perception that broad traits like "honesty" exist, specific honest acts are not especially stable from one situation to the next. Instead, because behavior varied—even across subtly different situations—situations must have more power than something like a broad, decontextualized personality trait. In stark terms: There isn't much utility in thinking there is a construct like "honesty" that can be used to predict behavior.

Mischel even went so far as to suggest a maximum size for the cross-situational correlation between the same behavior in two different situations. (Note: Mischel did not conduct a systematic review, nor did he use modern meta-analytic techniques to generate a figure based on the results of many studies. Thus, this number should be interpreted cautiously). He suggested that cross-situational consistency coefficients rarely exceeded .30. This number (or "effect size") was interpreted as being very small. The reason for this evaluation has to do with a somewhat technical point about statistics. If this sort of thing tends to make your eyes glaze over, feel free to skip this next paragraph.

The statistical reason that .30 was considered tiny was that if you take the square of a correlation (i.e., you multiply the size of the correlation by itself), you get the amount of variability in an outcome that can be explained by that predictor (at least according to the conventional way that many psychologists treat correlations; but see Funder & Ozer, 2019). In this case, a correlation of .30 would mean that only 9% of the variance (.30 × .30 = .09 or 9%) in a single behavior could be explained by a person's behavior on a previous occasion. Simplistically, researchers assumed that the remaining 91% of the variance could be explained by situational factors, though this belief was never tested explicitly. In any case, this number of .30 was labeled the "personality coefficient," a derogatory label that, intentionally or not, served to diminish the importance of personality as a predictor of behavior.

Mischel (1968) was careful to note that his critique was not an attack on personality as a whole, only on the idea of broad, decontextualized traits described above. Indeed, until the time of his death in 2018, Mischel identified as a personality psychologist, and his primary goal in writing *Personality and Assessment* was to convince other personality psychologists that to understand behavior, researchers must focus on narrower psychological units. Specifically, he argued, researchers should focus on narrow cognitive and affective units (quite specific ways of thinking and feeling) that interact with specific features of situations to drive behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). For instance, some of the children in the Hartshorne and May study described earlier may have had a fear of authority or perhaps even a very specific fear of elementary school teachers. This specific fear might have prevented them from cheating on an honesty test whenever that authority figure was around (which would lead to temporal stability in the exact same situation), but it might not have affected them when they were given a different opportunity to cheat while alone or in the presence of other adults. Thus, the child might exhibit honest behavior in one situation and dishonest behavior in other situations, depending on whether this narrow cognitive/affective unit was activated. The child is not globally fearful but rather only fearful of a specific teacher.

Note that Mischel's proposed alternatives to traits did not challenge the existence of personality, the strength of personality effects, or even the stability of personality characteristics over time. Instead, it was a challenge to a specific way of doing personality research and to the lay belief that broad, decontextualized dispositions are an actual feature of human nature. However, some psychologists latched on to the idea that the belief in strong, stable, and cross-situationally consistent patterns of behavior (broad or narrow) was an illusion. This seemed to be taking the critique of personality traits much further than Mischel had proposed. For instance, Nisbett and Ross (1980) argued that "personality theorists' (and the layperson's) conviction that there are strong cross-situational consistencies in behavior may be seen as merely another instance of theory-driven covariation assessments operating in the face of contrary evidence" (p. 112). In other words, not only do lay people mistakenly believe that they have cross-situationally consistent personality traits but also that personality psychologists themselves are fooled by their own intuitions and flawed judgments. Many academic psychologists bought into Nisbett and Ross's ideas and started turning away from personality psychology as a legitimate field of research. Here is an instance of a myth about personality traits that may exist in other areas of psychology and perhaps even in textbooks for those courses.

As a result of the Nisbett and Ross critique and similar others, interest in personality research waned in the 1970s (Swann & Seyle, 2005). Many psychology departments disbanded their personality psychology programs, and research increasingly focused on social determinants of behavior, rather than internal, personality-based determinants. One interesting aspect of recent history is the fact that some of the classic studies purporting to demonstrate the overwhelming power of the situation, such as the Stanford prison experiment, are being reevaluated in light of concerns about experimenter demand effects and selection effects (e.g., Bartels, 2019; Carnahan & McFarland, 2007; Le Texier, 2019). Fortunately, personality research did not die completely during this period, and there has been a resurgence of interest in recent years (again, see Swann & Seyle, 2005). However, in the years following the publication of Mischel's (1968) book, skepticism about the utility of personality psychology increased, and research on the topic declined.

Responding to *personality and assessment*

Was this reaction in academic psychology justified? Did Mischel (1968) identify a fundamental truth that broad personality traits were limited in their predictive ability, at least when compared to the overwhelming power of the situation? Well, given that we have identified this as the most important myth of our book, it is probably clear that we believe that the answer to these questions is "No."

First, even if we accept that the personality coefficient is really .30, one could make the argument that this is really not that small at all (see also Funder & Ozer, 2019). Indeed, the very idea that it is small comes from conventions for interpreting correlations that are just that—conventions. Some very small correlations can have extremely large practical importance; and in fact, some large correlations can have almost no practical importance. Thus, falling back on the idea that the effect of personality is small simply because the average correlation has traditionally been described as "small" is not especially convincing. As just one example, Roberts et al. (2007) reviewed the literature on the power of personality traits to predict future outcomes such as mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment. Rather than just relying on their own impressions about which effect sizes are large and which are small, the authors explicitly compared effect sizes for personality to those effect sizes from other areas of research that are known to be important for these outcomes, such as socioeconomic status and intelligence. In a result that would probably be quite

surprising to critics from the 1970s, personality traits predicted many important life outcomes as well as these more widely studied characteristics. Although the sizes of these effects were actually weaker than the personality coefficient that Mischel identified, Roberts et al. clarified how these small effects can translate into important differences between people who are high or low on a specific trait.

Second, as we noted when we introduced the personality coefficient, it was often assumed that if a single personality trait correlates .30 with a behavior in a single situation (which means that only 9% of the variance in the behavior can be accounted for by differences in that trait), then 91% of the variance in the behavior must be due to features of the situation. However, this argument is flawed for a number of reasons. First, there is no reason to believe that any single behavior should be caused by just a single personality trait. Consider whether you go to parties. Should researchers be able to predict whether you go to a party this Friday night based solely on your level of extraversion? What if you had a big assignment due on Monday, and you were worried about your ability to complete it on time? Shouldn't your levels of conscientiousness and perhaps neuroticism influence whether you choose to go to the party or to stay at home and work? For just about any behavior that researchers or non-scientists might wish to predict or explain, there are plausible explanations for why multiple traits might be relevant. And if more than one trait influences the behavior, then the size of the correlation between any one trait and that behavior will be reduced, often considerably (Ahadi & Diener, 1989). Therefore, relatively small correlations between any single trait and any single behavior may simply reflect the fact that behaviors are determined by many different personality traits operating simultaneously (and in concert with features of the situation that might make certain of these traits more relevant than others).

In addition to this warning about the expectations for individual correlations, there is also empirical evidence that the remaining 91% of the variance in behavior is not clearly linked to specific situational factors. When the type of review that Mischel conducted is repeated for effects from social psychology (a field that traditionally focuses on situational influences), the effect sizes are no greater than those from personality psychology (Funder & Ozer, 1983; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). Indeed, the average correlation identified across all of social psychology was .21—quite a bit smaller than the personality coefficient identified by Mischel. Does this mean that human behavior is completely random? No, it means that behavior is complex and multiply determined and that researchers need to adjust their expectations regarding effect sizes

for single predictors. Remember, the idea that a correlation of .20 or .30 is small is based on arbitrary conventions; researchers need to go beyond these simple conventions to determine whether an effect of this size has practical significance within a particular context.

It is also clear that equating the "power of personality" with the ability of personality traits (or previous instances of behavior) to predict any single behavior at a single point in time is problematic. Think about how well a baseball player's season batting average predicts whether that player will get a hit on a specific pitch or even a single at-bat. It is often quite hard to tell good baseball batters from poor batters based on observing a few innings of baseball (see Abelson, 1985). Fans of the sport need to observe multiple at-bats to be able to tell good hitters from poor hitters. Likewise, personality emerges through patterns of behavior that people exhibit over time. In other words, people may deviate from expectations on any given occasion yet still exhibit their personality traits through aggregate behaviors observed over multiple occasions. Let's take the example of the prototypical extravert again. This person may love going to parties, but if he or she is also highly conscientious, he or she may decide to stay home one Friday night when that important paper is due (the looming deadline of the assignment is acting as a stronger situational factor than the pull of a raucous night out). The fact that this may happen reduces the researcher's ability to predict whether this person goes to a party on any night, while he or she may still go to more parties over the course of a semester than does the typical introvert. Examples such as this show that perceptions of personality may be based on behavior in the aggregate, and that people (including researchers) can only see the effects of personality through this type of aggregation (Epstein, 1979).

As a final caveat, we must acknowledge that despite our defense of the strength of personality effects, it is still possible that people place too much emphasis on their own first impressions when trying to predict how an acquaintance will behave in the future. Personality may play a critical role in determining behavior, yet people might still overestimate the effect that stable personality traits have on behavior when trying to predict how someone will act in a new situation. Questions about the extent to which people's beliefs about personality map on to the actual effects of personality have not been settled (Malle, 2006; Sabini, Siepmann, & Stein, 2001). However, to say that people overestimate the importance of personality is a far cry from arguing that personality does not exist.

Indeed, even if people's intuitions about these matters are not entirely correct, this does not mean that personality plays only a weak role in behaviors or that situational effects swamp personality effects. In the late 1960s and

early 1970s, based partly on a problematic understanding of effect sizes and their own unexamined beliefs about the power of the situation, social psychologists seized upon the idea that personality was a much weaker predictor of behavior than they expected and seemed to think this meant that situational factors were more powerful. After many decades of research examining these claims, it is now clear that this truly is a myth. To the extent that such comparisons can be quantified, personality factors and situational factors tend to come out as being on equal footing. In addition, personality characteristics are stable over time and can statistically predict consequential behaviors (see the next chapter). Thus, the intuitions that guide most people's choices of relationship and work partners—intuitions that suggest that the person who was nice and helpful in the past will continue to be so in the future—are supported by solid empirical research.

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