

Separating Personality and Situation

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Abstract: Rauthmann et al. outline useful aspects of a potential paradigm for the psychology of situations, but potential anomalies remain. There is little clarity about which mental states can or cannot be situational variables, and the force of situational cues in everyday psychology seems underestimated. Moreover, if person and situation variables are to be kept separate, it seems problematic that many measures of personality have items stating situational contingencies, which leads further to this question: to fit within a psychology-of-situations framework, must personality measures be clear of situation-referencing content? Copyright © 2015 European Association of Personality Psychology.

Rauthmann, Sherman, and Funder (2015) delineate a useful framework for the psychology of situations. Indeed, this seems the best approximation to a complete 'paradigm' for this domain yet proposed. The term 'paradigm' implies consensual acceptance across a whole broad field of inquiry, but we mean a more limited sense, as in 'mini-paradigm' or 'proposed framework'. In Kuhn's (1962) framework, paradigms organize and stimulate research. Their greatest challenge comes from 'anomalies'—findings or observed phenomena that appear not to fit it. We observe a few potential anomalies in the Rauthmann et al. framework. Dealing with them—by revising the framework, switching to a better framework or showing they are not truly anomalous—will advance the science.

We begin with a pair of anomalies that lend themselves to quick characterization, before proceeding to one that demands much more explanation.

First, the Rauthmann et al. State Corollary to the Circulatory Principle stipulates that to separate person and situation variables clearly, situations 'cannot be defined by ongoing mental or behavioral states of persons' (their Table 3). However, their framework requires a crucial tenet that the psychology of situations hinges heavily on the processing of situational information, that is, an individual's

interpretation of a situation. This interpretation, arguably a belief about a situation, is itself a mental state. Thus, the framework seems to differentiate acceptable mental states (e.g. interpretations) that are part of the situation from unacceptable ones (moods, emotions and states of arousal) that are not. Assuming only cognitions are acceptable, which ones?

Second, the framework stresses not cues but characteristics, that is, dimensional attributes on which situations vary, more than classes that are commonly accepted as descriptions of situations (such as 'at work', 'at home' or 'with my family'). Rauthmann et al. persuasively argue for the merits of a characteristics-based approach but seem to miss the potential importance of such cue classes in folk psychology. Saucier, Bel-Bahar, and Fernandez (2007) found unexpected regularities in how respondents completed if-then conditionals when the 'then' was high or low levels of a common person-descriptive attribute. Cues like work, home, family and friends were mentioned with high frequency, as were (unacceptable?) affective-state cues such as 'in a bad mood'. The framework might better account for these strong, perhaps consensual tendencies among laypersons, and whether they arise based on cultures, heuristics, biases or some more objective reality.

But our main focus here is another anomaly. Rauthmann et al. argue that contributions of person and situation should be kept separate, so their distinct contributions can be isolated. This argument has subtly interesting relations with strategies of personality-test construction. Jackson (1971) suggested that questionnaire items be constructed by applying an identified trait tendency to each of a diverse range of situations, so that an overall true score for the domain would consist of personality tendencies averaged across many situations. Taken further, Jackson's approach suggests a unique way of isolating person and situation effects. For example, if each of 10 traits is systematically varied within the items across 10 situations, the resulting 100 items would have a fully crossed set of traits and situations that could be decomposed into trait and situation variance. However, no previous personality inventory seems to have taken this item-matrix conception to the extreme of crossing all traits with all situations.

Instead, contingencies end up being applied in a more scattershot manner. Many commonly used Big Five measures feature items that reference situational contingencies, thus perhaps confounding personality and situation. For example, the commonly used IPIP-50 inventory for the Big Five (Goldberg, 1999) includes an Extraversion scale on which 1/5 of the items mention 'party' situations, another mentions strangers and many of the items on the scale (e.g. 'starts conversations') imply situations of dealing with unfamiliar people. Its Conscientiousness scale has items referring to duties, chores, work and dealing with one's belongings. On its Intellect scale, 1/5 of the items essentially reference the situation of exposure to 'abstract ideas'. The analogous Openness scale on the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992) contains two items referencing reactions to the situation of being exposed to poetry. A prominent six-factor inventory (e.g. HEXACO-PI; Ashton & Lee, 2009) does the same in some items: Openness items reference situations in which art or music are salient, Agreeableness items situations in which someone else does

something unpleasant and Honesty items situations where one wants something from another or could get away with a crime; Emotionality items reference various dangerous or difficult situations.

What about the California Adult Q-Sort (CAQ), which Rauthmann et al. recommend as the personality measure that best harmonizes with their Riverside Situational Q-Sort? Even there, items are prone to introduce situational cues into personality descriptions. Various CAQ items mention particular ways of reacting to criticism or an interpersonal slight, frustration and adversity, minor frustrations, being under stress or trauma, humour (from others), domination (by others) and what might be construed as a demand (by others). Other items reference tendencies to interpret situations in a particular manner (e.g. complicatedly, or in sexual terms) and thus concern situation-judgment tendencies specifically.

Our point: separation of person and situation components is incomplete in current personality measures, presenting a source of circularity in the Rauthmann et al. paradigm. How might it be resolved? Perhaps by demonstrating that such item-confounds pose no problem, or by adjusting the framework to account for some confounds between person and situation variables. A more threatening possibility is that personality dimensions are inherently situationally contingent, each concerning a reaction to a particular class of situations; for example, what if levels of Extraversion were mainly a person's reaction to situations saturated with strangers, or levels of Conscientiousness mainly about high-duty situations? If this is even at least partly the case, a more fundamental reorientation may be needed. But not an impossible one: items that refer simply to one's level of enthusiasm, anxiety, relaxation, kindness, planfulness or curiosity seem less contingent on particular situations. Does an adequate situation-psychology paradigm demand our use of entirely non-situational personality measures? We leave this question to the field.