THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY

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Summary

This article addresses the question of how personality is related to social behavior by surveying a number of theories that are prominent in contemporary personality research. The theories, and their respective research programs, are organized according to three general perspectives that characterize much of the current work on personality. These include the modern trait perspective, the cognitive perspective, and the motivational perspective. The modern trait perspective is discussed in the context of theories

pertaining to the five-factor model of basic traits, the authoritarian personality, and differences in self-monitoring. The cognitive perspective is discussed in the context of theories pertaining to self-schemas, self-guides, self-efficacy, and locus of control. The motivational perspective is discussed in the context of theories pertaining to adult attachment styles, the cognitive-affective personality system, the feedback model of self-regulation, and a number of other goal-based theories of motivation. Before surveying these more recent theories of personality, some discussion is devoted to the trait-situation debate that dominated personality research in the 1960s and 1970s. This debate influenced the shape and content of almost all the theories of personality addressed in this article. The article concludes with a discussion of several important issues that are still unresolved and should be addressed by future research in the area.

1. Introduction

One topic of interest to many social psychologists concerns the nature of the link between personality and social behavior. The growing acknowledgment among social psychologists that personality can affect social behavior is hard won and comes only after years of intense debate about the relevance of personality variables to our general understanding of social phenomena. The resolution of this debate has contributed, in no small part, to the current popularity and proliferation of theories in contemporary personality research. Much of this recent work can be classified according to one of three broad perspectives. Each perspective addresses slightly different questions about the nature of the relationship between personality and social behavior. The modern trait perspective investigates general personality factors that influence behaviors across a wide range of situations. The cognitive perspective investigates personality factors that are manifested in the way people think about themselves and the world around them. The motivational perspective investigates personality factors that are manifested in the goals and motives that underlie certain classes of behaviors. Before surveying these perspectives, it is useful to begin by reviewing the issues that first precipitated the debate over the relevance of personality factors to social behavior. Many of the issues addressed during this debate were critical in determining the current content and shape of the theories encompassed by each of the three perspectives.

2. A Brief History of the Person-Situation Debate

The debate over the role that personality variables play in social behavior began, appropriately enough, with the ideas that were first advocated by the early founders of social psychology. Kurt Lewin argued in 1935 that human behavior was determined largely by a combination of person and situation variables, with the former encompassing a variety of personality characteristics and mental processes. Gordon Allport, in 1937, elaborated further on the concept of personality by proposing a comprehensive theory of traits that described how and why people differ from each other in the motives and perceptions that contribute to their behaviors. Abraham Murray, in 1938, proposed that behaviors were most directly influenced by behavioral intentions or motives. These motives, in turn, were influenced by a combination of internal, trait-like needs and an external set of social influences. Many social psychologists that followed in the 1940s and 1950s continued to acknowledge the *potential* influence of personality variables but were inclined to focus their own research

efforts on situational factors that they suspected had a significantly larger influence on behavior. At the same time, personality researchers concentrated much of their efforts on developing measures and statistical techniques that, in principle, could help them identify the most central and basic traits of personality. Unfortunately, little discussion occurred during this period about the joint and interactive nature of the influence that traits and situational factors may have on social behavior. Instead, many social psychologists grew increasingly skeptical about the importance of personality variables. Pivotal studies by researchers such as Asch and Milgram showed surprisingly strong situational influences on behaviors but little in the way of strong or reliable personality influences. The skepticism reached a high point in 1968 following the publication of Walter Mischel's book, *Personality and Assessment*. Mischel presented a series of studies that indicated that a person's behavior was not nearly as consistent across different situations as might be expected if personality characteristics had a large and continuous impact on behavior. The book's message seemed clear, at least to many social psychologists: situational factors are the primary source of influence on social behaviors while personality factors are, at best, small and typically negligible sources of influence.

Mischel's argument, sometimes labeled situationism, did not convince many personality researchers to abandon their principal areas of investigation. The ensuing debate over the merits of this argument, however, led researchers to reevaluate and clarify their assumptions regarding the nature of the relationship between personality characteristics and social behavior. At least three distinct, alternative viewpoints about this relationship emerged over the course of the debate. They are often referred to as the modern trait perspective, the motivational perspective, and the cognitive perspective. These perspectives grew over the course of the 1980s and 1990s to encompass a wide range of diverse and highly active research programs. The major issues and most popular theories that characterize each perspective will be discussed below. The sheer volume of activity, however, necessitates some omission of ideas and potentially significant research programs. Interested readers are encouraged to pursue a more detailed and comprehensive examination of this work in the references listed in the article bibliography.

3. The Modern Trait Perspective

Following the lead of Gordon Allport, the modern trait perspective acknowledges the influence of situational factors but reaffirms the importance of studying general personality characteristics. The perspective argues that the impact of situational factors on social behavior has frequently been overstated because of the uniquely powerful situations in which behaviors have often been investigated. Moreover, it argues, the influence of general personality characteristics has often been underestimated because trait-relevant behaviors are difficult to measure and because researchers rarely look at the interactive effects of multiple personality factors. This perspective is a strong advocate of using a variety of measures to assess the influence of traits. A single measure of a specific behavior can be especially problematic because the expression of personality traits can vary in response to the unique demands of the situation. Chronic anxiety, for example, may encourage people to smoke cigarettes or tear napkins in a bar; however, a church environment does not permit such behaviors so the same trait may be

expressed in more subtle ways such as hair twisting or leg shaking. Some representatives of this perspective have gone further by suggesting that trait-relevant behaviors are best measured by ignoring the situation altogether. Instead, they suggest that trait-relevant behaviors should be aggregated across situations and reported as the frequency of occurrence within a selected time period. Examples of this approach include agencies that revoke driving licenses after people have received a number of traffic tickets in a certain time period. Individuals who have many tickets can be construed as having a trait characteristic that makes it more probable that they will engage in risky behaviors across a variety of situations; however, possession of this characteristic does not mean that a person will necessarily manifest risky behaviors in a specific situation. Other factors, both internal and external, can interact with this characteristic to produce different behaviors under different circumstances. In this regard, modern trait theories are similar to social psychological theories that focus on the general attitudes that people have toward objects. In both cases, the theories are usually more interested in predicting general behavioral tendencies than in predicting the occurrences of specific behaviors in specific situations.

Theories that comprise the modern trait perspective come in two sizes. One group, the multiple-trait theories, has typically attempted to identify the trait dimensions that are central to individual differences in human behavior. Early attempts at this endeavor include the work of Gordon Allport, Hans Eysenck, and Raymond Cattell. Currently, the dominant theory of this nature is the five-factor model of traits. A surprisingly large number of research programs have contributed to this work and a more detailed description of it is given below. The second group, sometimes referred to as single-trait theories, has typically focused on one characteristic that is suspected of having a significant influence on a wide range of behaviors. An early example of this approach is the classic work on the authoritarian personality by Adorno and his colleagues. Recent work on this theory and self-monitoring theory will be described presently.

3.1. The Five-Factor Model of Traits

One reason for the new sense of optimism in personality research is the growing consensus about the number of traits that form the fundamental building blocks of personality. Many researchers now believe that there are at least five traits central to personality. Early proponents of this model, also known as the big five theory, included Fiske, Goldberg, Tupes, and Christal. More recent advocates include Digman, McCrae, Costa, and John. The five traits are commonly labeled extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism (or emotionality), and openness to experience. The traits do not show significant patterns of statistical overlap and evidence for each trait comes from a wide range of data collection methods. In addition, the traits are consistently found, with minor label variations, across many different cultures. Each trait has implications for a wide range of behaviors but extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness appear to be the most directly related to social interactions.

Extraversion is a trait that has been identified in many theories of personality, both old and new. It appears to influence the degree to which a person is generally outspoken, talkative, spontaneous, and energetic. People high in extraversion have a tendency to search out situations in which interactions are likely to occur and they are prone to

interact in a manner that is both dominant and self-assured. People low in extraversion are generally referred to as introverts and are less likely to seek out situations in which a large number of interactions are expected to occur. This does not mean, however, that introverts are necessarily less warm or articulate than extroverts when they do participate in interactions.

Agreeableness is a relative newcomer in trait research and appears to contribute to the style in which a person typically communicates with others. It can influence the level of warmth and friendliness with which words and mannerisms are expressed. In addition, it appears to influence the degree to which people will act in a more accommodating or cooperative fashion when they interact in a group. People low in agreeableness are more prone to act in an antagonistic or hostile manner towards others. Consistent with this notion, there is evidence that they experience a higher frequency of interpersonal conflict in their relationships and are inclined to use more direct expressions of power when faced with conflict. There may be some overlap between this trait and the construct of hostility that health researchers have investigated for a number of years. People who show a high potential for hostility are often at high risk for coronary heart disease.

Conscientiousness is a characteristic that appears to influence the degree to which people approach situations with a sense of responsibility and carefulness. In social situations, this trait may be expressed as a tendency to be deliberate, neat, rule oriented, self-disciplined, and achievement oriented. People low in conscientiousness may be judged to be careless about details and less concerned about the development of long-term plans. They also may show less perseverance in the completion of tasks and experience less guilt after failing to fulfill promises. Conscientiousness may be related to achievement motivation, a motivational construct that will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this article.

Neuroticism is also known as emotionality or chronic anxiety in many research programs. Like extraversion, it has been identified as a central trait in many of the older theories of personality. Unlike extraversion, however, its contribution to social behavior is generally less direct and more difficult to evaluate in specific situations. Part of the reason for this is due to the internal manner in which the trait is typically manifested. Although people high in neuroticism are prone to experience high levels of worry or anxiety in social situations, they do not always express this characteristic in an explicit, easy-to-observe manner. Instead, the characteristic may be expressed in a way that exaggerates another characteristic. For example, a person who is high in neuroticism and extraversion may exhibit neuroticism through extremely high levels of talkativeness. Alternatively, a person who is high in neuroticism and conscientiousness may exhibit extremely high levels of neatness and planning behavior. This could explain why behavioral measures of neuroticism have generally been less reliable than the behavioral measures for the other traits. Despite this difficulty, neuroticism is regarded by many researchers as an important trait in the study of mental and physical health.

Openness to experience is the least understood and most controversial of the five traits. Some researchers conceptualize the trait as related to creativity and unconventionality.

Others conceive of it as more closely related to sensation seeking, a construct that has been extensively studied by Marvin Zuckerman. Still others view the trait as one that influences cultural sophistication and intellective involvement. This lack of consensus about the behavioral correlates of the trait makes it difficult to predict how openness to experience usually impacts on social behavior. Generally speaking, people who are high in openness to experience may be prone to seek hobbies and careers that offer opportunities for creative thinking, cultural input, and frequent changes in task activities. Too little is known, however, to speculate on how this trait can be expected to influence day-to-day interactions or the pattern of long-term interpersonal relationships. Despite the growing popularity of the five-factor model, it is not without its critics. One set of criticisms focuses on the limited set of central traits put forth by the model. A number of researchers have offered additional traits for inclusion in the model, arguing that traits such as intelligence, self-consciousness, and the ability to delay gratification should also be considered essential aspects of personality. A counter to some of this criticism has been the idea that many of the traits proposed for inclusion in the model are blends or subcomponents of the big five. A second set of criticisms has focused on the primarily descriptive nature of the five-factor model. A number of researchers believe that too little attention has been devoted to how the five traits develop or how they relate to cognitive and motivational processes. Although a growing number of studies suggest that genetics and biological systems play a significant role in all five traits, research has only recently started to explore the impact of the early environment. And, unfortunately, there is still little work to indicate how these traits interact with motivational and cognitive constructs. It is possible that traits act as outside influences on motivational and cognitive elements. Alternatively, some of these traits may be emergent constructs that arise from the unique interactions among motivational and cognitive elements. Resolving these issues are likely to be important goals in future research on the model.

3.2. Single Trait Theories

Two theories that focus primarily on a single trait characteristic, the authoritarian personality and the self-monitoring theory, have attracted much attention from social psychologists, with each responsible for generating literally thousands of studies. The authoritarian personality, a theory first proposed by Adorno and his colleagues, has recently experienced a new surge of interest following the first wave of activity in the 1950s. Self-monitoring theory, first proposed by Snyder and his colleagues, generated an extraordinary amount of research activity in the 1970s and 1980s. Both theories merit some discussion because of their direct relevance to social behavior.

3.2.1. The Authoritarian Personality

Research on the authoritarian personality was first pursued in the wake of World War II to explore the trait characteristics that might be at least partly responsible for authoritarian submissiveness and racial bigotry. Early studies reported finding predictable differences among people in a set of attitudes and beliefs that, together, seemed to form a coherent personality characteristic. People who score high on The California F Scale, a scale designed to assess this characteristic, tend to endorse conventional values, submit uncritically to authority figures, advocate severe

punishment for criminal behavior, distrust philosophical thinking, think more rigidly about supernatural forces, are fascinated with the idea of power, believe that the world is generally a wild and dangerous place, and seem to have an inordinate concern about the sexual behavior of others. High authoritarians also tend to score high on other related measures such as dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity. Moreover, they tend to show bigotry towards a variety of different racial groups. Studies of trait-relevant behaviors have found that high authoritarians tend to be submissive around authority figures but extremely dominant around subordinates. High authoritarians also have a tendency to use harsh methods of discipline with their children and tend to vote in favor of policies that limit the behavioral choices of others (e.g. alcohol consumption, abortion access). It is unclear what factors best account for the development of high authoritarianism, though punitive parenting styles and genetic contributions have not been ruled out.

3.2.2. Self-Monitoring Theory

Self-monitoring theory proposes that people differ significantly from each other in the manner in which they select standards to guide their behavior in a situation. Low self-monitors appear to conduct their behavior on the basis of internal standards that vary little from situation to situation. They are said to be low in self-monitoring because they will sometimes act in ways that appear inappropriate to others. Given the continuous use of the same internal standards, low self-monitors tend to show higher than average amounts of behavioral consistency across situations and higher than average levels of attitude-behavior consistency. In contrast, high self-monitors watch others in a situation for cues about the prevailing standards for behavior. They then monitor their behavior extensively to make sure that it matches the current standards set by others. Since these standards of behavior often change as a function of the situation and group, high self-monitors tend to show lower than average behavior consistency across situations and lower than average levels of attitude-behavior consistency. Additional research suggests that high self-monitors will pursue activities and purchase products that enable them to be more flexible in the image they attempt to convey to others. This would include having a larger and more varied selection of clothes in their wardrobe and more knowledge about how to apply cosmetics. High self-monitors also approach friendships differently from low self-monitors. High self-monitors tend to select different friends for different activities, depending on the perceived match between the qualities of the friend and the demands of the situation. Low self-monitors, on the other hand, tend to select the same friend or friends for all activities, regardless of how well the characteristics of the friend match the requirements of the situation. One criticism of this theory is that the characteristic is not necessarily a homogenous construct but may be comprised of several different traits, at least one of which is extraversion. Despite this criticism, research indicates that genetics plays a role in the development of the characteristic, though it remains unclear what contributions may also be made by early environmental factors.

4. The Cognitive Perspective

A second viewpoint that developed during the trait-situation debate reflects many ideas first proposed in 1955 by a clinical psychologist named George Kelly. These ideas did

not receive much attention from social psychologists until the 1970s when the principles of cognitive psychology, as a distinct and formal discipline, began to influence many areas of social psychology. Kelly argued that differences in behavior are due primarily to differences in how people perceive the world. People form memories and develop expectations about the world based on their prior experiences. Some of these experiences are repeated and become better organized as the memory system develops. These memories, which Kelly called personal constructs, are used by people to interpret and anticipate events and help them decide what behaviors should be expressed in a situation. For Kelly, personality is not comprised of a set of trait-like dispositions that exist apart from thoughts or behavior. Rather, personality *is* the unique set of personal constructs and thought processes people use to select and implement a behavior. One advantage of Kelly's theory, and the cognitive perspective more generally, is that it can easily explain why behaviors sometimes influence personality. If a person performs a behavior, for example, and the behavior has undesired consequences in a situation, then the person's personal constructs about the situation may change in such a way as to discourage future expressions of the behavior. A second advantage of the cognitive perspective is that it helps explain why people do not always show consistencies in their behaviors across situations. If the person uses different personal constructs to interpret two situations, then the situations are likely to be experienced differently. These different subjective experiences, in turn, can lead to the expression of different behaviors. Such a "cognitivizing" of personality, however, has been criticized by proponents of both the modern attitude perspective and the motivational perspective. Both perspectives argue that a strictly cognitive explanation of personality fails to account for many of the "hot," emotional, and motivational characteristics that seem to play a central role in personality differences. For example, the level of energy and intrinsic pleasure apparently experienced by extroverts during interpersonal interactions are not readily explained by a purely cognitive explanation. Despite these limitations, theories from the cognitive perspective have provided a number of important insights into the nature of the relationship between personality and social behavior. Contributions from some of the more popular theories in this area are discussed below.

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Biographical Sketch

Robert Fuhrman is an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas at San Antonio. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 1986 and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Ohio State University and the University of Illinois. He has served as a reviewer for *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Journal of Research in Personality, Social Cognition*, and the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. His current area of research is on the social cognitive processes and dispositional characteristics that contribute to behaviors in intimate relationships. He is also investigating the influence of these processes and characteristics on behaviors related to vehicle driving patterns.