



Lawrence A.
Pervin

Current Controversies & Issues in Personality

SECOND EDITION

**Current
Controversies
and Issues
in Personality
Second Edition**

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Exploration in the field of personality is both lively and frustrating. The questions are important and meaningful—they “touch home.” Yet, often we shy away from addressing some of the most important questions and, in our efforts to emulate the natural sciences, neglect to observe what people actually do and feel as a part of their daily lives. Personality and psychology generally struggle with the problems of being a young science; they also struggle with obtaining a correct balance between making use of people as observers of their own behavior and shying away from the pitfalls of subjectivity.

The chapters in this book cover the major issues confronting psychologists currently interested in personality research. The emphasis is on the current and controversial. Theoretical positions are considered but only in the light of their conflicting positions on a variety of issues—the nature of aggression, altruism, sex differences, and so on. Along with this emphasis on the current and controversial there is an effort to present the issues within their broader societal context; that is, to demonstrate that often issues become controversial because they are linked to broader questions of values and beliefs within the surrounding society. Thus, issues arise and change not only because of advances in the field but also because of changes within society generally.

In writing this book I have found invaluable the assistance of my son, David, who has reached the age where he can share with me his critical thoughts and evaluations from the student point of view. I also thank Libby Brusca who ensured completion of the manuscript on time.

Lawrence A. Pervin

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September, 1983

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CHAPTER 1

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**Current
Controversies
and Issues
in Personality**

General Theme

Various psychologists have taken different views on whether your behavior is determined by something in you, such as your personality, or by the situation you are in. This chapter discusses some of these conflicting views, the reasons for such differences, and the evidence in support of each position

Some Questions to Keep in Mind

- 1 *How do you view your own behavior? Do you see it as more determined by you or by the situation you are in?*
- 2 *If you behave differently in various situations, then what constitutes your personality?*
- 3 *Although you have changed considerably from the time you were a child, are there ways in which you are still the same person? What are they? How do you account for the ways you are the same and the ways in which you have changed?*
- 4 *If you describe someone's personality, to what extent are you giving an accurate picture of this individual as opposed to saying something important about yourself? Are you really attributing your own personality characteristics to him or her?*
- 5 *Is it possible to predict behavior? Your behavior? To what extent is your behavior like the weather—following a general pattern but showing many irregular changes?*

I am exactly the same person I was before, but my situation in life is different and I behave as differently as if I were another person.

S. Krim, New York Times, November 18, 1974

If we observe and reflect on our own behavior and our experience of ourselves behaving, we are struck by two conclusions. First, our behavior varies according to the situation we are in. Not only do we behave differently in the classroom than at a party, but we notice differences according to whether we are at a party with strangers or with friends, whether the party is formal or informal, whether we are only with members of our own sex or whether we are in mixed company. Second, at the same time that we are behaving differently in these situations we regard ourselves as the same person. The fact that I dress one way in school and another way while gardening, that I behave somewhat differently at a large cocktail party than at a small gathering of friends, that I talk more as a teacher and listen more as a therapist, that I am quick-tempered in some situations and patient in other situations—these variations in my behavior do not interfere with the sense that there is one person, me, involved in all of them. There is, then, the observation of both change and stability, of behaving differently and yet being the same person. Were my behavior to be the same in all situations, it would be perfectly predictable, but I and others would wonder about why I was so rigid and why I behaved so inappropriately in some situations. On the other hand, if no consistency or pattern could be observed in my behavior, then I might wonder whether I wasn't being a "phoney" much of the time or I would be bothered by feelings of depersonalization—so much change would leave me without a feeling of knowing who I am or, perhaps, without a feeling of being a person at all. Indeed, most of us have struggled with such questions from time to time, particularly in adolescence, when we focus our attention on forming an identity or when we behave in a way that is "out of character" for us and try to reconcile this behavior with what we otherwise know and believe about ourselves.

In sum, in observing our own behavior we are struck with aspects of ourselves that are different and yet the same, with a sense of stability in the face of constant variation. Such dual observations of ourselves are the norm and we are bothered when our behavior is so rigid that it is at times painfully inappropriate to the situation or so variable that we lose a sense of who we are.

The same conclusions apply to our observations of others. If I ask you to describe someone you know well, you would come up with a list of characteristics that you feel captured the personality of this individual. Yet, if you really know this person well you could undoubtedly describe situations in which his or her behavior was not in accord with the characteristics you

listed. Thus, in both the perception of our own behavior and the perception of the behavior of others we see pattern and regularity in the face of diversity and variability, and we draw conclusions about “personality characteristics” while recognizing the importance of “situational” differences. Indeed, observations of our behavior over diverse situations might also apply to our behavior over a period of time. Our behavior certainly is different in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and yet generally there is at least some sense of continuity and stability as a person—the perception of continuity and sameness over time that Erikson describes as basic to a sense of identity.

In the light of these two conclusions—that is, we can recognize consistent personality characteristics while also recognizing the variability of behavior over time and across situations—we are drawn to the quote that began this chapter and to the issue that has been a source of controversy among personality psychologists. The author of the introductory quote served as an editor from 1961 to 1965 and tells us that during this period he generally was cool, rational, and reassuring and smiled compassionately at the temperament of his writers. In his own terms, he disciplined his own needs for approval because they were irrelevant. However, there was “another self that lived a separate life” that came out when Mr. Krim himself became an author. Then Mr. Krim became aggressive and anxious about the acceptance of his writing, found it hard to relax, was blunt and demanding rather than diplomatic, and was less able than previously to be objective or to take an impersonal view. His confusion and insight were expressed as follows:

“What does it all mean?” I often ask myself with some wonder as if I were a stranger to myself. I am the same man, I smoke the same foolish cigarettes, wear approximately the same clothes, respond to the same music and movies. It means, I’m afraid that situation is more crucial than personality; at least that is so, or seems to be so, in my case. The situation you’re in determines who you are. . . . And yet, I tell you frankly that in my heart I’m exactly the same man who used to be reasonable, detached, smilingly helpful to those many egos so aggravated by their unfulfilled position in life and so much less fortunate than myself.

S. Krim, New York Times, November 18, 1974

Mr. Krim’s confusion is similar to that of many, if not most, psychologists studying personality and probably has the same basis. He recognizes both stability and change in his behavior in relation to situations and recognizes the possible importance of both his personality and the situation in determining his behavior. Yet, he seeks to account for his behavior in terms of himself or the situation. Thus, he concludes, with some hesitation, that the situation determines who you are. Although he feels that he is the same man regardless of the idiosyncratic nature of the situation, such feelings do not match the governing characteristics of the situation. As we shall see, his framing of the question as a dichotomy between personality determinants and situational

determinants is not unlike the dichotomy drawn by many psychologists. The battle and confusion within himself concerning which is more important, the person or the situation, is not unlike the battle and confusion between psychologists who emphasize the importance of person characteristics (e.g., traits, needs, and motives) and psychologists who emphasize the importance of situation characteristics (e.g., stimuli, cues, rewards, and punishments) in regulating behavior. His conclusion that the situation is more important than the personality, though he may feel the same person regardless of the situation, is not unlike the position of psychologists who argue that behavior is situationally determined and that it is only we as observers who attribute behavior to personality characteristics and dispositions (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Mischel, 1968). Thus, the first issue we are faced with is how do we assess and account for stability and change in behavior? Are the determinants of behavior in the person, in the situation, or where? Can we usefully speak of *factors inside the person* that affect behavior or should we focus our attention on *situational characteristics external to the person* and regard personality characteristics as virtual figments of our imagination—perhaps useful to us in going about our daily living but of limited scientific value?

The Dichotomy Between Internal and External Determinants of Behavior

The issue of whether to focus attention on the person or on the situation can be viewed as an aspect of a broader issue—the relative significance of internal and external determinants of behavior. In some ways there is reason to believe that the emphasis on internal or external determinants of behavior involves broad philosophical commitments in addition to rational decisions based on scientific evidence. Historically there have been cultures that have viewed behavior as caused by forces inside the individual and other cultures that have viewed behavior as caused by forces external to the individual. Plato believed that people are molded by society whereas Aristotle believed that behavior reflects the inherent nature of individuals. Hippocrates believed that people could be characterized according to their temperamental type, with temperaments being determined by the bodily functions or humors. Such a view of a relationship between bodily functioning or constitutional type and behavior found later expression in the views of Kretschmer and Sheldon. Such views can be contrasted with cultural views that place behavior under the control of the Gods or spirits. Riesman (1950) has described a change in American character from inner-directedness to outer-directedness, the former involving behavior governed by internalized goals and the latter involving behavior governed by the expectations and values of the surrounding peer group. Different societies see the causes and cures of illness as coming from within the individual or from forces in the outside world acting upon the individual.

Thus we find an internal–external dimension to be relevant to broad philosophical views concerning human nature. What then about psychology in general and personality theory in particular? Allport (1955) found this issue of whether behavior is governed from within or from without, above all others, to divide psychologists. He attributed the differences to commitment to either a Leibnitzian tradition or a Lockean tradition. In the former tradition it is the organism that is important, and causes are seen as internal to the organism, whereas in the latter tradition the organism is seen as reactive to events external to it. European schools of psychology (e.g., Gestalt psychology and Freud’s psychoanalysis) have tended to follow the Leibnitzian tradition whereas British and American schools of psychology (e.g., associationism and behaviorism) have tended to follow the Lockean tradition. While virtually all psychologists would emphasize the importance of internal and external determinants of behavior, of organism and environment, clear differences in emphasis and interpretation emerge as one considers the history of psychology, different fields within psychology, and different theorists within a field. Obviously there is both individual and environment, person and situation, nature and nurture, yet the tendency has remained to emphasize one or another set of variables. Thus, for example, Freud’s emphasis upon our being “lived” by unknown, internal forces can be contrasted with Skinner’s suggestion that “a person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him” (Skinner, 1971, p. 211).

Is it governed from without, or governed from within? Is it merely reactive or is it active, mechanically determined or in some degree spontaneous? It is on this issue, above all others, that we find psychologists dividing.

Allport, 1955, p. 6

Periodically there is a shift in emphasis from internal to external or vice versa, and occasionally a call for the study of organism-environment interactions. While the Freudian and Skinnerian views perhaps represent extremes, the balance has generally tended to be weighted in the direction of internal or external factors. Recognizing such a tendency, the personologist Henry Murray, in his *Explorations in Personality* (1938), drew a distinction between two types of psychologists—centralists and peripheralists. The centralist sees human beings as active and influenced by internal energies in virtually all spheres of activity. Activity occurs in the absence of external stimulation. While interested in overt behavior, the centralist is prepared to study, and at times infer, such intangibles as wishes, needs, impulses, desires, and intentions. Thus, although not disregarding the study of overt behavior, the centralist craves to know the internal life of the subject. Finally, there is an interest in individual differences and in the complex unity of a personality

system in which each part is dynamically related to other parts and to the whole. In contrast to the centralist, the peripheralist defines personality according to behavior and focuses attention on the external stimulus or perception of it as the origin of psychological phenomena. Attention is directed to what is observable and can be reliably measured. People are seen as inert, passive, and responsive to outer stimulation. The interest is in similarities among people and in characteristics that are true of all people.

As Murray pointed out, not every psychologist can be classified as a centralist or a peripheralist. Indeed, Murray himself tried to relate the two points of view in his own emphasis on individual-environment interaction. However, he did wish to draw attention to a fundamental difference in point of view among psychologists. As we have seen, these alternative views can have ramifications in terms of what is looked at, how it is studied, and how personality is conceptualized. Although we are focusing attention on the study of personality, the differences noted are not limited to the study of personality. The relative importance of internal and external variables has been a particularly critical issue in the field of personality research but is by no means limited to that area of research.¹ The dilemma of Mr. Krim, and the debate among personality psychologists concerning the importance of person and situation determinants, can be seen as part of a broader question that runs throughout much of psychology and is fundamental to questions concerning the nature of people. We can turn now to the recent intense debate over persons versus situations as determinants of behavior, for the light it sheds both upon the issue of internal and external determinants in general, and upon the issue of person and situational influences in personality research in particular.

The Person–Situation Issue

During the 1940s and 1950s the field of personality tended to be dominated by what have been called internal, centralist theories. Freudian psychoanalysis exercised a strong influence on the issues that received attention, the kinds of assessment devices that were used, the research that was conducted, and the kind of training clinical psychologists received. There was intense interest in the mechanisms of defense and in the effects of early experience on later behavior. The Rorschach and the Thematic Apperception Test, projective techniques associated with the psychodynamic approach, were considered a

¹The issue under consideration also appears in the field of biology. Thus consider the following statement by a biologist: “. . . it seems to me that a fundamental division in biological thinking exists between people who are primarily interested in events inside the organism and those interested in events outside. . . . We have to remember that events inside the organism and outside form connected systems and that our separation is purely a matter of convenience . . . we have to relate external and internal events, and we need to be careful that our system of organizing knowledge does not interfere with this” (Bates, 1960, p. 549).