Personality: Limit One per Customer

David G. Serfass, Nicolas A. Brown, Ashley Bell Jones,
Daniel E. Lopez-Chavez, & Ryne A. Sherman

Florida Atlantic University

Authors’ Note

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Ryne A. Sherman, Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton, FL 33431. Email: rsherm13@fau.edu.
Abstract

Contextualized theories of personality claim that people possess different personalities depending on their current context (i.e., situation). These approaches confuse behavior, which is context specific, with personality, which is not. Dunlop’s (this issue) extension of contextualized personality to include goals and life narratives similarly obfuscates this issue. While it may be of interest to examine momentary behavior in relation to context specific goals and narratives, there is only one personality per person. The scientific and practical utility of personality is its ability to predict behavior across a variety of situations.
Psychologists have made numerous attempts to contextualize personality. As noted by Dunlop (this issue), this often involves having a person complete a trait inventory for each of several roles (e.g., Donahue & Harary, 1998; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Sheldon & Elliot, 2000; Wood & Roberts, 2006). Other attempts to contextualize personality suggest that personality consists of some unknown (or unlimited) number of interactions between the person and the situations he or she encounters (e.g., Mischel, 2009; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994; Wright & Mischel, 1987). An even more recently developed view suggests that personality is the entire density distribution of one’s behavior across the many situations one encounters (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, in press).

Unfortunately, all contextualized conceptions of personality obfuscate the issue of personality because they equate personality with behavior. That is, someone who behaves differently in different roles is said to have a different personality for each role. Someone who behaves differently in different situations is said to have different personalities for each situation (e.g., Mischel & Shoda, 1995), or, in an alternative view, the entire set of behaviors across all situations is said to be explained by a single trait (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, in press).

There are two proximal and one distal problem with these interpretations of personality. The first proximal problem is that these conceptualizations are empirically indefensible. The data overwhelmingly show that personality trait measures robustly predict typical behavior across a variety of roles (Donahue & Harary, 1998; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Wood & Roberts, 2006) and situations (Ching et al., 2014; Church et al., 2013; Fleeson, 2007; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Judge, Simon, Hurst, & Kelley, 2014; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, in press). Second, by inextricably linking personality and behavior components of the “personality
triad” (Funder, 2006), contextualized conceptions of personality either (a) make personality
disappear altogether by calling it momentary behavior or (b) make behavior disappear altogether
by suggesting that people have a personality for every role or situation.

However, the root of the problem with contextualized personality theories lies not with
contextualization per se. Indeed, and as was noted many years ago (Allport, 1937; Murray,
1938), behavior is clearly contextualized (Ching et al., 2014; Church et al., 2013; Donahue &
Colvin, 1991; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Sherman et al., in press;
Wood & Roberts, 2006; Zayas & Shoda, 2009). Instead the distal problem with contextualized
personality is that it confuses personality on the outside with personality on the inside (Hogan,
2007; Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996). Personality on the outside is the sum of your behavior
across all of your situations (Buss & Craik, 1983; Hogan, 1983; Wood, Gardner, & Harms,
2015). It is the ‘you’ that everyone else knows (i.e., reputation; Hogan, 1983) and that you can
learn about yourself by watching others’ reactions to you (Bollich, Johannet, Vazire, 2011;
Cooley, 1902; Hogan, 1983; Hogan & Blickle, 2013). Personality on the inside (i.e., motives,
values, preferences), is the ‘you’ that you know (i.e., identity) and take with you wherever you
go.

Personality on the outside (i.e., behavior) is caused by the joint influence of personality
on the inside and situations (Fleeson, 2007; Sherman et al., in press). Such an understanding
makes two points. First, it provides a parsimonious explanation for behavioral consistency: you
always bring your own motives, values, preferences with you wherever you go. Second, your
behavior at a specific point in time is partially dependent upon your current situation.
Recent work has identified a sensible set of situation characteristics that are useful for predicting momentary behavior (Rauthmann et al., 2014; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010; Sherman et al., in press; Wagerman & Funder, 2009). Moreover, situation characteristics subsume the litany of haphazardly used terms to describe contexts including rules, norms, expectations, roles, agendas, and affordances. For example, the three roles used by Donahue and Harary (1998) were work, romantic partner, and friend. Roles are situation classes and generally less useful than characteristics for behavioral prediction (Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, in press). Fortunately, situation characteristics from the DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al., 2014) framework can be mapped onto these roles. Work roles are characterized by high Duty (i.e., a job needs to be done), romantic roles are characterized by high Mating (i.e., a potential romantic partner is present), and friendship roles are characterized by Sociality (i.e., close personal relationships are present or have the potential to develop).

Dunlop’s (this issue) take on contextualized personality incorporates McAdams’ (1995) three levels of personality – traits, goals, and life narratives – into the contextualization, distinguishing it from other contextualized views that focus exclusively on traits. Unfortunately, this broader conceptualization of personality is still a contextualized one and, as such, suffers from the same problems that plague other contextualized views. Situation characteristics indicate goal affordances (Neuberg, Kenrick, & Schaller, 2010; Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006), so of course goals are contextualized. Likewise, situation characteristics undoubtedly shape momentary self-conceptions (i.e., narratives). However, the fact that people have different goals or narratives in different situations is not evidence of contextualized motives or identities any more than variability in behavior is evidence of contextualized personality. Indeed, people have
consistent goals and narratives across contexts (Dunlop, Walker, & Weins, 2013), pointing to individual differences in underlying motivational systems and identities.

In sum, while it may be of interest to examine momentary behavior in relation to context specific goals and narratives, the scientific and practical utility of personality is its ability to predict behavior across a variety of situations. As such, contextualized approaches to personality – the notion that we have different personalities for each situation – effectively make personality meaningless.
EJP Commentary Dunlop

**References**


