

Psychology Lecture 11  
The person-situation debate

What determines behaviour?

- Do underlying psychological dispositions (traits) determine behaviour?
- Does the situation/environment determine behaviour?

The character of person-based explanations

- In Milgram's experiment only 60% of the participants went to the extreme shock. Those people who chose not to could have been psychologically qualitatively different. This is an example of personality perspective - some evidence that despite the power of the situation, individual differences in personality were revealed.
- People can behave consistently over time. Only a minority will display significantly higher levels of aggression in general, and in specific situations. This is a normative perspective - certain people are more talkative, aggressive, sociable etc. in all situations.
- Researchers have only recently tried to establish connections between basic psychological dimensions of personality.
- Do psychological constructs affect behaviour?

Personality consistency and prediction of behaviour

- Personality traits are pretty stable over time, and can predict behaviour in a variety of situations.
- Personality traits correlate quite highly.
- There is quite a low correlation between trait measures and theoretically relevant behaviours.

The character of situational explanations

- Assumes that variability in human behaviour is due more to differences between situations than to differences between individuals; that different individuals will respond in very similar ways to the same situation; that changing the situation will result in significant changes in the individual's behaviour.
- Milgram's research on obedience could be used to argue that most people administered severe or close to severe shocks. Evidence for situationist argument.
- In an Asch-type study the number of confederates affected the probability of participants conforming.

Example 1: Zimbardo's prison experiment

- During golden age of social psychology (1960s) Zimbardo tried to determine extent to which situations are more important than personalities in determining behaviour.
- This wasn't based on a theory; he wasn't testing a specific hypothesis.
- Turned psychology department basement into prison and then placed ads in paper for participants. Personality measures looked at - they wanted people who were psychologically normal/healthy. They didn't want anyone who was particularly sadistic. Of 75 people, they selected 24 people.
- 12 randomly assigned as prison guards - to oversee the behaviour of prisoners, to enforce certain rules. 12 were randomly assigned to be prisoners - stuck in prison cells at mercy of guards.
- Rather than being an objective scientist in this situation, Zimbardo decided to be the prison warden, giving instructions to the guards.
- How does prison environment affect people's behaviour?
- This turned out to be a very dramatic experiment.
- Sambaed had engaged with local police office, which agreed to participate in this study. Real police officers came to 12 participants' home and arrested them in public. Took them to police station, took mugshots, gave them prison ID etc. Took them to fake prison in Stamford psychology department. Changed their clothes, chained them. Zimbardo wanted prisoners to never forget the fact that they were prisoners.
- Guards were given uniform and badges.
- Very quickly the situation began to get out of hand. Prisoners started to express frustration with each other; they started to rebel. The guards tried to come up with ways to contain behaviour; they came up with psychological tactics to manipulate and to manage the prisoners' behaviours.

- They came up with a privileged prisoner cell for the best-behaved prisoner; better food etc. At one point the guards stopped all others eating apart from the privileged prisoners. They stopped allowing the prisoners to use the toilet; they had to use buckets. They blindfolded them and put them in solitary confinement. They kept them from sleeping at night.
- In one incident, a prisoner (#8612) suffered from acute emotional disturbance. In spite of all this, the guards thought the prisoner was faking it, and so further abuse and ostracised him. That wasn't effective, and so they tried to convince the prisoner to become an informant. Around this time, some prisoners had tried to rebel against the guards' instructions.
- They had a visiting day, with parents coming to visit. A mother became tearful, concerned and upset by the way her son was behaving. She had never seen her son behave in this way.
- It was supposed to last for two weeks, and ended up lasting only six days. This was because a woman was assigned the task of conducting interviews with the prisoners, and she realised just how horrific everything had gotten and how badly the prisoners were being treated. She told Zimbardo that he had to stop the experiment because of the severity of the situation.
- Data: video and audio recordings for content analysis (commands, questions, threats, resistance).
- Results: None of personality variables predicted any of the participants' behaviours. But those prisoners who were rated as most authoritarian were most likely to stay in the prison.
- Different types of guards: those who were good; those who were nice to the prisoners; those who were sadistic and creative in coming up with ways to punish and harm prisoners.
- Guards: aggressive commands, threats, escalated harassment over time.
- Prisoners: passive, withdrawn, conversations dominated by prison topics.
- That Zimbardo was the warden and was unethical called into question his judgment. So it was never published and was not really accepted into mainstream psychology. But it is still a very famous study.
- Zimbardo continues to argue today that personality is a fiction. Personality does not show how people behave. In his view, anyone is capable of committing harmful acts against other people if they find themselves in these situations. The guards should not be held accountable for their actions; anybody in that situation would have done what those guards did. We should convict or try the creators of these situations instead.
- There are so many examples in our lives where we actively seek out situations; in psychological studies people are assigned situations. Real life does not correlate with the lab.
- The ad said specifically to participate in a study on prison life. The people who responded may have responded favourably to the prison aspect of this in particular. Haslam and Reicher omitted 'prison life' from their advert and found that the respondents, in a personality test, rated much differently in narcissism, sadism, aggression etc.

#### Example 2: Anderson's (1989) temperature and aggression research

- It's been assumed for centuries that temperature (heat, in particular) causes heightened aggressive behaviour. More riots and more crimes are committed on hotter days.
- Craig Anderson found that aggressive crimes peak in the summer.
- Limitation of naturalistic studies: no control over extraneous factors (different historical settlement patterns e.g. more poverty and more black people in the south east US).
- No clear, compelling evidence in hot room/ cold room punishment experiment. In a hot room, the heat is the salient thing. The heat could confound the situation, so it may lose ecological validity.
- Rooms being hot is different from geographical places being hot.
- Also experimented with violent video games, and heavy music with violent lyrics. He found these people were more likely to be aggressive.
- Need to consider the factor of self-selection. When people are exposed to more violent things, we need to take on board the fact that not everybody chooses to be in these situations in everyday life. To what extent do people who enjoy being exposed to violence show different tendencies than people who do not?