

# Moving Personality Beyond the Person-Situation Debate

## The Challenge and the Opportunity of Within-Person Variability

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**ABSTRACT**—*The person-situation debate is coming to an end because both sides of the debate have turned out to be right. With respect to momentary behaviors, the situation side is right: Traits do not predict, describe, or influence behavior very strongly; the typical individual's behavior is highly variable; and a process approach is needed to explain that variability. With respect to trends (e.g., a person's typical way of acting), however, the person side of the debate is right: Traits predict and describe behavior very well over long stretches of time, behavior is highly stable, and a trait approach is needed to explain differences between people. Thus, proponents of both sides are right and should continue to conduct fruitful research, and both viewpoints are necessary for a full understanding of personality. The next exciting steps in personality psychology will include integrating these two approaches in the same research paradigm.*

**KEYWORDS**—*intraindividual variability; personality; person-situation debate; interactionism; behavior*

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How can we talk about the way a person typically acts if that way is always changing? The same person acts very differently on different occasions, and this simple fact has been one of the greatest challenges for personality psychologists to incorporate into the concept of personality. Indeed, initial empirical confirmations of this variability created strong reactions among psychologists, leading many to conclude that traits do not exist, people do not differ from each other, and there is no need for the study of personality. The purpose of this article is to organize and interpret the implications of such within-person variability for the study of personality. In particular, I describe my recent contributions to the growing consensus among experts that within-person variability is not a threat but an opportunity, that the stagnant person-situation debate is at an end, and that exciting new research directions lie ahead in personality psychology.

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### THE CHALLENGE OF WITHIN-PERSON VARIABILITY AND THE PERSON-SITUATION DEBATE

Because so much depends on this variability, it is important to establish just how differently the same person does act on different occasions. To the extent that the typical person acts similarly on different occasions, except for some normal adaptation to momentary circumstances, we need a science of traits, of individual differences in how people act. To the extent that the typical person does not act the same on different occasions (within-person variation), traits do not describe behavior, and rather than a science of traits we need a science that explains behavior variation across occasions.

The initial evidence on this question was ambiguous enough to ignite the person-situation debate. Table 1 describes the issues in the debate that have implications for (a) whether traits are useful for describing how a person acts, without referring to the situation in which he or she is acting, and (b) where personality researchers should focus their efforts. The person argument is that, because behavior is determined in large part by a person's traits, a given individual will act similarly much of the time, except for some reasonable adaptation to changing circumstances. Such stability of behavior makes it easy and useful to describe a person in terms of general traits. For example, if someone acts extraverted most of the time, it is useful and meaningful to describe him or her as extraverted. Thus, the scientific study of personality can make an important contribution by investigating the structure of individual differences—that is, by identifying which traits exist, how they correlate with each other, and how they predict important life outcomes, such as happiness, marital satisfaction, and longevity.

In contrast, the situation argument is that, because the immediate situation is the primary determinant of behavior, a given individual will act very differently on different occasions. When a person who is acting extraverted at a party subsequently goes to a seminar, for example, he or she will likely start acting introverted. Such within-person variability diminishes the usefulness of labeling a person as having a particular trait; it would be rather pointless to describe as extraverted someone who acts introverted and extraverted about equally often. Rather, the more that the same person acts differently

**TABLE 1**  
*The Person-Situation Debate*

Issue of contention	Person position	Situation position
Central cause of behavior	Person	Situation
Similarity of multiple behaviors of one individual	Similar	Variable
Usefulness of describing an individual's way of acting	Useful	Not useful
Existence of traits	Traits exist	Traits do not exist (but personality might)
Appropriate focus of study	Structure of differences between people, correlations among differences	Process: reactions to situations, psychological functioning

on different occasions, the more it is incumbent upon psychologists to explain why that is the case, employing variables that vary within a person and across occasions. That is, psychologists should study the processes by which people perceive situations and react to them.

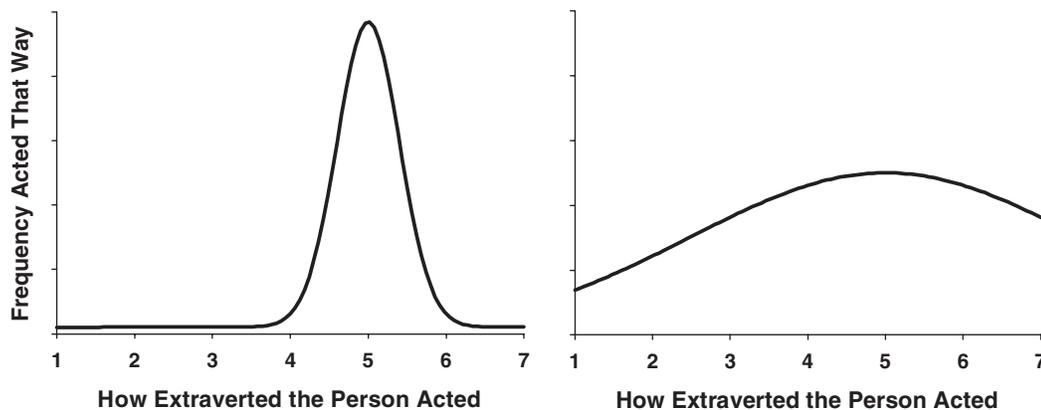
A compromise position is known as *interactionism* (Magnusson & Endler, 1977; Mischel & Peake, 1983), because interactionists agree with situationists that the situation is primary and that psychologists should study the processes whereby people react to changing situations, but they also hypothesize that personality does exist. They propose that personality consists of differences between individuals in how they react to situations, rather than in general ways of acting (traits). The value of interactionism—and of situationism—is enhanced to the extent that there is within-person variability in behavior to explain.

#### OBTAINING DISTRIBUTIONS OF BEHAVIOR

The *density-distributions* approach to determining how differently the typical person acts on different occasions (Fleeson, 2001) builds on several previous approaches (e.g., Buss & Craik, 1983; Epstein, 1979; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994). It involves observing people as they conduct their daily lives and measuring a

large number of their behaviors in a manner that allows their similarity to be assessed. For example, participants may carry personal data assistants with them for a few weeks and record their current behavior several times a day by rating, on a scale of 1 to 7, how well their behavior is described by each of five traits: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect. These five traits are chosen because evidence suggests that these are the best candidates for broad personality traits, if any such traits in fact exist (e.g., Goldberg, 1992). Over time, each participant's ratings will reveal a frequency distribution on each trait, showing how many times that participant acted at each level of that trait.

Figure 1 shows two possible distributions that might be obtained in such a study. Small amounts of within-person variability, as on the left, mean that the person acts similarly on different occasions and that traits would accurately describe how the person acts. For example, it would be accurate to describe the person depicted in the left panel of the figure as moderately extraverted. Higher amounts of within-person variability, as presented on the right side of the figure, mean that the person acts very differently from occasion to occasion. The more that actual distributions are like the right panel of the figure, the less useful is applying a trait label to a person because the label becomes a less accurate description of how the person acts. Clearly, describing



**Fig. 1.** Within-person variability in behavior. Each graph shows the number of times a hypothetical person acted at each level of extraversion. The distribution on the left would support a person view of personality; it would be accurate to describe the person whose behavior is graphed as moderately extraverted. In contrast, the distribution on the right would support a situation view of personality; it would not be particularly useful to label the person whose behavior is graphed on the right as extraverted.

the person whose behavior is depicted in the right panel as extraverted would be accurate only on occasion.

### EVIDENCE FOR THE SITUATION POSITION: PEOPLE ACT VERY DIFFERENTLY ON DIFFERENT OCCASIONS

The black bars in Figure 2 show how variable the behavior of a typical person was in a typical study (the measure of variability is the within-person standard deviation of behavior across occasions). To evaluate how large these amounts of variation are, standards for comparison are needed. Emotion is one such standard that is used because emotion is commonly believed to vary so much that people primarily conceive of it as a temporary state rather than as a stable trait. Figure 2 shows that the amount of within-person variability in personality is just as large as the within-person variability in emotion (i.e., positive affect, or happiness, and negative affect, or distress).

A second standard for comparison is how much people differ from each other. The gray bars in Figure 2 represent this standard, showing the standard deviation across individuals' average ways of acting. The smaller size of the gray bars than the black bars in the figure means that the amount that one typical person varied in behavior was more than the amount that individuals differed from each other. Thus, the pattern in the right side of Figure 1 is much closer to the truth for a typical person than the pattern on the left side is: The same person changes his or her behavior quite rapidly and frequently, presumably in response to changing situations. I have now found this pattern in several different studies using several different methodologies.

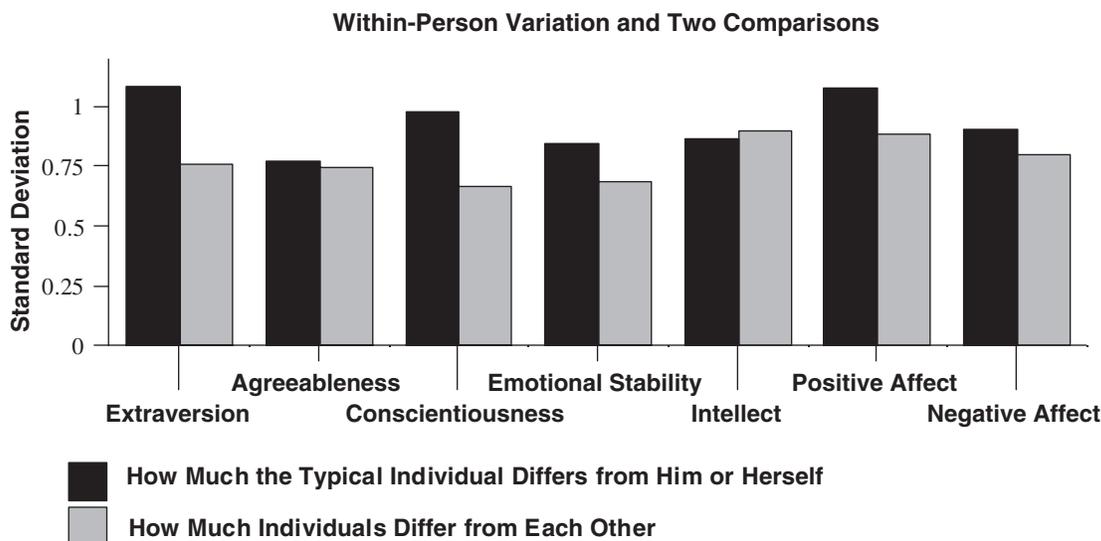
Although this within-person variance is large and presumably due to individuals adapting to situations, it is possible that individuals adapt such that they nonetheless maintain their relative position compared with others in the same situations. For example, although an extraverted person may talk less in a seminar than at a party, he or she

may at least remain talkative in comparison to others in the seminar. The way researchers have tested this possibility is by correlating behavior in one situation with behavior in a different situation. Mischel (1968) reviewed several studies that did so, including the classic studies of moral character by Hartshorne and May (1928), and consistently found correlations no higher than about .3 to .4. Such correlations mean that, when adapting to circumstances, people maintain their relative positions only to a limited degree. For example, the most talkative individuals at a party are not likely to be the most talkative individuals in a seminar.

The evidence I have summarized thus far makes a powerful case for the situationist side of the person-situation debate. The variability in behavior within one person is at least as great as the variability in behavior across a group of people. Consequently, it may seem pointless to develop trait concepts or to study personality psychology. It is important, rather, to study psychological processes that might explain the large amount of within-person variability. Most likely, these processes will be found to involve reactions to specific situations.

### EVIDENCE FOR THE PERSON POSITION: PEOPLE ACT VERY SIMILARLY FROM ONE WEEK TO ANOTHER

Although individuals are highly variable in their behavior, Epstein (1979) and other researchers proposed that people may differ in the central point around which they vary. Therefore, when I decided to look for behavioral similarity across occasions, or stability, I studied central points and their stability (Fleeson, 2001). The first step in testing whether individuals have different central points and whether these points are stable is to divide each person's data into equal time periods, such as Week 1 and Week 2. The average for each participant on each trait is calculated for each of the time periods and describes the central point of that person's behaviors in that time period.



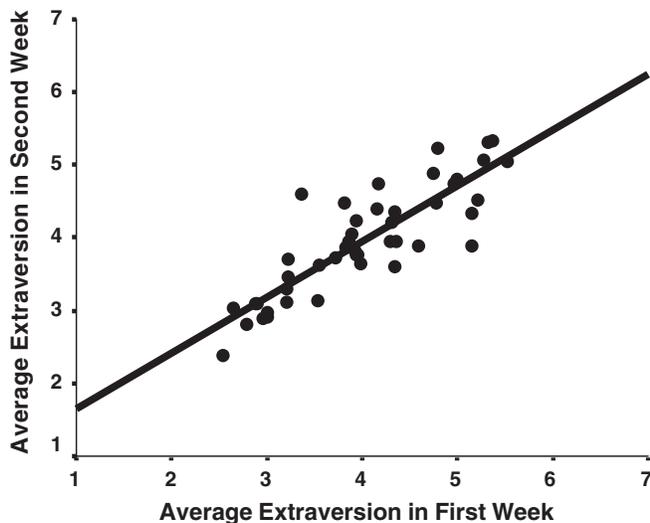
**Fig. 2.** Within- and between-person variability in behavior and affect. The typical person's behavior differs as much from occasion to occasion as does his or her emotion, and more than the amount people differ from each other on average. From "Towards a Structure- and Process-Integrated View of Personality: Traits as Density Distributions of States," by W. Fleeson, 2001, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, p. 1015. Copyright 2001 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

Figure 3 shows a typical scatter plot in which each participant's extraversion central point during one week of a study is graphed as a function of his or her extraversion central point during another week. As this example shows, different people have different central points, but two central points from the same person are not only similar to but almost identical to each other.

Scatter plots that look like the one shown in Figure 3 were found for each trait. Such scatter plots have two implications. First, they mean that one person's central points from several different time periods will be very similar to each other, forming a distribution similar to that seen in the left side of Figure 1. Second, they also mean that the position of one person's central points relative to the central points of other people will be maintained almost perfectly from one time period to another. In fact, correlations on relative position of central points at different times are typically around .9, among the highest correlations in psychology (Fleeson, 2001). Other researchers have found similar results with various measures of behavior, and the validity of the results is not a matter of dispute (e.g., Mischel & Peake, 1983). The implication of these results is that the person side of the person-situation debate is also correct: A person's behaviors are very similar to each other when considered as averages across larger periods of time, such as weeks. Trait terms are valuable for describing how people act in everyday life, and trait psychology is needed to understand these behavioral differences between individuals.

#### HOW BOTH SIDES CAN BE CORRECT

Thus, the empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that both sides of the person-situation debate are correct and that an individual's personality may usefully be conceived as a distribution of behaviors rather than as one level of behavior. Generally, everyone routinely acts



**Fig. 3.** Stability in behavior over time. Each point in this graph represents one person's average level of extraversion in 2 different weeks. How people act on average in one week is highly similar to how they act on average in another week.

in a wide range of ways on a given dimension of behavior, yet different people's ranges of behaviors are centered on different portions of the dimension, and each individual's center remains very stable across large periods of time. The persuasive evidence that both the situation and the person sides of the debate are correct means that both the process and the trait approaches are needed to explain personality, and that there is no need for continued animosity. A person's momentary behaviors can indeed vary widely (as in the right side of Fig. 1), so when trying to describe and predict how a person is acting at any given moment, researchers should investigate psychological processes involving responses to situations. A person's averages over longer stretches of time are nonetheless very similar to each other (as in the left side of Fig. 1), so when trying to describe and predict how an individual acts on average, researchers should use traits. The person side has conceded that traits are not very useful for predicting momentary behavior, and the situation side has conceded that traits are very useful for predicting and describing a person's average behavior in a larger time period. There is no longer any need for debate because large within-person variability and the sensitivity of behavior to situations are not a threat to the viability of traits, and the power of traits is not a threat to the need to explain the considerable amount of within-person behavioral variability. It is time for the study of personality to go forward with both approaches.

#### MOVING FORWARD: THE OPPORTUNITY OF WITHIN-PERSON VARIABILITY

The end of the person-situation debate creates a bright future for personality psychology. There are at least three directions in which this field is likely to generate exciting new advances. First, personality psychologists should use traits without apology. In fact, an impressive list of trait correlates is accumulating, showing that traits are among the strongest predictors of happiness, distress, career success, marital satisfaction, and even longevity, among other important life outcomes. New correlates, unfettered by doubts of the validity of traits, are likely to add further evidence that personality is critical to the length and quality of life. However, personality psychologists need to embrace a new, advanced understanding of traits, realizing that people tend to demonstrate significant flexibility in their behavior and that traits are best used for predicting trends. Second, because traits cannot explain why a person acts differently on different occasions, personality psychologists need to explain the manifestation of a trait in momentary behavior and to discover the empirical reach of interactionism. Such work would generate a rich characterization of the distinctions people make between situations and would lead to a deep integration of the process and trait viewpoints (McCrae & Costa, 2003; Shoda et al., 1994).

Finally, other parameters of behavioral distributions may turn out to be new kinds of personality variables (Larsen, 1989; Nesselrode, 1991). For example, individuals differ reliably in how variable their behavior is (Fleeson, 2001). Is being variable a sign of flexibility, a warning sign of incoherent responding to situations, or neither?

It is not possible to predict how personality psychology will proceed in the coming years. However, this is an exciting time to be a personality psychologist, unshackled by doubts about the value of one's field and encouraged by the promise of future productive integration of opposing viewpoints.

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