Contextualizing Personality Psychology

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ABSTRACT   The issue of how to contextualize personality psychology constructively has been a longstanding dilemma. This special issue brings together personality, social, self, clinical, and cultural psychologists who have attempted to contextualize the self, personality, attachment, and cultural constructs in an integrative fashion, with a focus on broader situations, such as social roles. In this introductory essay, I describe the potential advantages of integrating traditional concepts in personality psychology with social roles and provide an overview of the contributions made to the special issue.

Personality psychologists are, of course, intimately familiar with the tension between persons and situations. Having spent many years wrestling with the apparent inconsistency of behavior across situations, personality psychologists have settled into a quiet, if not happy, resolution of the person-situation debate that haunted the field for several decades (Fleeson, 2004; Kenrick & Funder, 1983; Roberts, 2006). Most researchers accept the fact that situations are important and that any model of human nature will have to be based on an interactionist foundation (Baumeister, 1999; Funder, 2006).

But a funny thing happened on the way to the rapprochement party. Personality psychologists either forgot to define situations (Hogan & Roberts, 2000), conceptualized situations in opposition to traits, or, as Stryker (this issue) puts it, conceptualized situations in a ''curiously innocent'' way. This leads to some obvious questions.

What are situations? More importantly, what are the most critical situations for personality functioning and development? Or, in terms of a broader agenda, how does one contextualize personality psychology? There have been periodic attempts to identify taxonomies of situations using methods that are so disparate as to make integration almost impossible (see Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006, for a review). This leaves personality psychologists in a potential bind. If personality psychology is to build a science that is intrinsically interactionist in nature, what situations or contexts should we employ and at what level of analysis?

This special issue is dedicated to a group of personality psychologists who have either (1) attempted to operationalize situations in such a way as to make them more commensurate with traditional personality variables—typically, as social roles—or (2) wrestled with the concepts of situations and individual differences because their research is intrinsically grounded in contextualized models, such as those who study the interface between culture and personality (Matsumoto & Suh, this issue) or attachment dynamics in the context of romantic relationships (Fraley, this issue).

It seemed appropriate to have Sheldon Stryker begin the special issue as many of the authors in this special issue have found solace for their desire to contextualize personality directly or indirectly in a construct more often invoked in our sister field of sociology—the social role (Stryker, this issue). His essay introduces readers to identity theory and provides some sage and insightful perspectives on how sociologically defined situations might be of interest to personality psychologists.

As Stryker's work on social roles plays a central role in the research on contextualized selves and personality, I will elaborate on why the social role might be an advantageous construct for personality psychologists to employ. A social role is a "set of behavioral expectations attached to a position in an organized set of social relationships" (Stryker, this issue). A role is a position agreed upon by all parties that defines the way an individual relates to his or her social group. Social roles have a number of features that make them ideal for contextualizing traditional personality constructs such as traits. First, they are conceptualized at a breadth that is roughly equivalent to that of traits (Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004). Just as traits are tendencies to repeat patterns of behavior in response to similar situations across time (Johnson, 1997; Tellegen, 1991), roles

are conglomerations of situations that all share a common thread of expectations and behavioral signatures. For example, as long as a person is in a leadership role, such as an academic dean, the expectation is that the person should assert him- or herself, whether it is with students, faculty members, or members of the general public. One of the problems with many of the efforts to taxonomize situations has been the focus on microanalytic situations. These proximal, narrow features of social situations are too contextualized to be much good to psychologists (Craik, 1993; Funder, in press). In contrast, social roles organize situations into thematically consistent categories that are similar in breadth to personality traits. They are focused enough to capture core elements of context but not too narrow to prevent them from having broader impact.

Another advantage of using social roles as a focal point for studying situations is that they can be organized in a few dimensions or categories. Some writers have argued that most social roles can be organized around the two dimensions of *affiliation* and *power* or, in the infamous words of Freud, *love* and *work* (Hogan, 1982; Roberts, 2006). Figure 1 shows a nonrandom smattering of social roles and how they might play out in a potential multidimensional scaling along these two dimensions. Roles such as leader, supervisor, and politician are unequivocally work roles that are associated with high power. Roles such as wife, husband, and friend are clearly affiliation roles, which, of course, are associated with love. This is not to say that affiliation cannot be found at work or that power is absent from families and social networks. Being a parent is clearly both an affiliation and a power role, as is being a colleague. In turn, friendships and even marriages can be found at work. What is clear from Figure 1 is the idea that most social roles organize situations from three of the most fundamental contexts of human existence, our families, our work, and our communities, into two superordinate categories of affiliation and power. There are other types of roles and unique syntheses of different roles, but love and work are the dominant themes in social roles, and this seems most appropriate. These roles afford the opportunity to realize fundamental human needs of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and status (Hogan, 1982).

Social roles are also important because they serve as the organizing system for the situational mechanisms responsible for behavior. For example, people conform more readily when they are in roles subordinate to the persons establishing the rules (Bond & Smith,
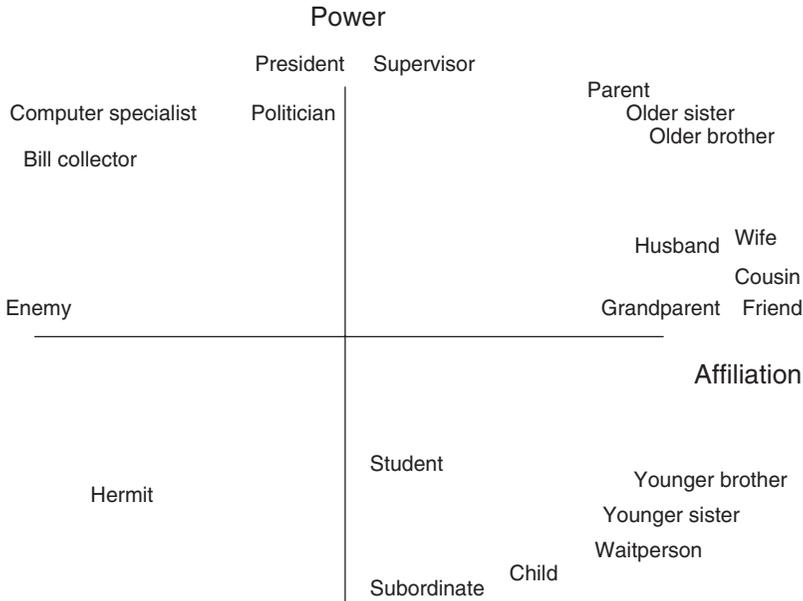
Figure 1
Hypothetical distribution of social roles in a two-dimensional space organized around love and work.

1996). Why do people conform? Because roles come with expectations for how to behave (Sarbin, 1964) and because these expectations are backed up with real contingencies (Wood & Roberts, 2006). Conforming to expectations leads to acceptance and reward. Meeting the expectations of a supervisor typically results in concrete rewards such as pay raises and promotions. Failing to conform to expectations results in punishment—lack of acceptance or outright sanctions for one's actions. Of course, failing to meet a supervisor's expectations can lead to the loss of a job.

Most importantly, from the perspective of personality psychology, the expectations and contingencies organized under the umbrella of a social role may not mesh well with a person's personality. What is a person to do when this happens? The potential discrepancy and, conversely, fit between a person and the social roles they enter serves as an organizing fulcrum for a number of fundamental issues in personality psychology. For example, why do people self-present or respond to personality inventories in a socially desirable fashion? They do not do this to please some ill-defined ''other.'' Rather,

people use self-presentational strategies in order to please specific targets who occupy specific roles. For example, job applicants inflate their Conscientiousness and Agreeableness scores because they believe that is what the employer expects of someone in that role (Levashina & Campion, 2006). It is unlikely that a person will do the same to a blind date where being an engaging and fun person is more valued. We "put our best foot forward" for specific roles—meeting a potential employer or love interest, for example. Knowing the social role a person wants to occupy should be critical for understanding the specific self-presentational strategies a person uses.

Of course, social roles may serve as focal points for personality trait development (Roberts & Wood, 2006). The most important socializing force is a social role relationship in which the expectations conflict with one's existing personality. "Growing up" can be construed as a process in which children capitulate to a series of ever-increasing expectations from parents, friends, and society at large. More concretely, socialization takes place in the context of the social roles we occupy. For example, the emerging perspective that peers play a significant role in personality development highlights the unforeseen importance of friendship roles (Harris, 1995). In terms of adult personality development, experiences within specific social roles have consistent associations with personality trait change. Being in stable marriages or marriage-like relationships is associated with increases in conscientiousness (Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Roberts & Bogg, 2004; Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). Occupying higher status work roles is associated with increases in the social dominance facet of extraversion (Roberts, 1997; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Being in satisfying and less stressful love and work roles is associated with increases in emotional stability (Roberts & Chapman, 2000; Scollon & Diener, 2006). Thus, social roles serve as the conduit of socialization. It is through acquiring and inhabiting specific social roles that personality develops (Helson, Mitchell, & Moane, 1984; Helson & Soto, 2005).

Another clear advantage of focusing on roles is that they can provide a meaningful mechanism through which culture can affect personality. Culture is often conceptualized as a monolithic structure that is pervasive throughout society (e.g., Markus, 2004). Alternatively, one can see the effect of culture on personality through (1) the roles that it provides for people to inhabit and (2) the characteristics of those roles. For example, different cultures provide different sets

of roles for the members of society. In many conservative societies, women are not afforded the opportunity to take on leadership roles in the workplace or in politics. Moreover, the nature of roles common across cultures can be defined quite differently. The meaning of "wife" in Swaziland, where polygamy is promoted, can be profoundly different from the meaning of wife in the United States or Europe.

Culture can also be construed as a role itself. This is especially true for individuals who bridge two or more cultures. Bicultural individuals can manifest personalities related to both cultures (Ramirez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2006). This can be manifested concretely in social interactions. Sons and daughters of recent immigrants most likely have strong ethnic identities at home and get to explore the culture of their new country with their friends and peers. It can also be manifested intrapsychically, as simple symbols of culture can spark cognitions specific to each culture (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Matinez, 2000). Of course, monocultural individuals can view their culture as a role too. For example, monocultural U.S. citizens can perceive what it means to them to be an American, which may include rejecting or accepting their existing culture.

The most common way for understanding roles is in the construction of identity and the self. First, people often freely identify roles as components of their self-concept. For example, when asked to list answers to the question "Who am I?" people inevitably provide a mix of classic personality trait terms (e.g., shy) and social roles (e.g., "waiter"; Grossack, 1960). Therefore, social roles are key components of who we are and thus our personalities. Of course, social roles are also used by others to ascribe characteristics to us. Anyone who has made the transition from "apprentice" (e.g., graduate student) to "expert" (e.g., assistant professor) can attest to the fact that the change in title brings with it a disproportionate change in the level of respect and regard afforded by one's students—this despite the fact that little or no true gain in knowledge and expertise has occurred in the transition.

Finally, the fact that people possess multiple roles invites the insight that we are not so monolithic in our self-perceptions as traditional trait models might indicate and typical personality trait assessments dictate (Woods, this issue). People are intrinsically capable of organizing their self-perceptions into categories (Linville,

1987), and these categories often correspond closely to social roles (Ogilvie, 1987). Sociologists refer to this blending of role and self-perception as a role identity (Stryker, this issue). Numerous studies have validated the idea of role identities, showing that people see themselves as related, but systematically different, people across their roles (Donahue & Harary, 1998; Heller, this issue; Roberts & Donahue, 1994). Moreover, identifying the plurality of role identities typical to each individual captures the fact that people experience conflict between different aspects of themselves, such as between their work and family identities.

The fact that people see themselves as different across role identities invites one of the most common ways of utilizing role-identify information—assessing the extent to which individuals integrate or differentiate their self-perceptions across roles (Diehl & Hay, this issue: LaGuardia & Ryan, this issue; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, this issue). The integration-differentiation spectrum was originally thought to be linked to adjustment, in opposite directions depending on one's theoretical perspective. Some thought that being differentiated would provide a buffer against the vicissitudes of life and therefore bring better adjustment (Linville, 1987). Others thought that the ability to integrate oneself across social roles would be a sign of intrapsychic coherence that would bring better adjustment (for review see Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). The prevailing evidence supports the conclusion that to be integrated is the preferable alternative (Campbell, Assanand, & DiPaula, 2003).

Directly confronting the issue of how to contextualize personality raises some interesting and fundamental questions for personality psychologists that are addressed in the articles of this special issue. First and foremost, introducing the idea of contextualizing personality makes one confront the definition and measurement of personality traits. Traits are typically assumed to be cross-situationally stable patterns of behavior or, more accurately, tendencies to repeat patterns of behavior in response to similar situations across time (Johnson, 1997; Tellegen, 1991). Despite the intrinsic contextualized nature of personality traits, the measurement of situations is typically tossed unceremoniously into the black box of the personality trait inventory. We know that personality trait items are contextualized (Werner & Pervin, 1986; Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002), but we do not know how well or in what way. Making the context explicit invites the opportunity to measure traits in an openly

contextualized fashion, which in turn makes us confront the concept of personality traits in more detail, as Peck, Wood, Heller, and Watson do in this special issue. It also invites more process-oriented perspectives on both the self and personality traits as described by Showers and Zeigler-Hill.

Contextualizing personality also raises issues of levels of analysis. What is the optimal level of analysis in which to examine the intersection of personality and context? What are the other potential levels in a model of humans and social context, and how do we organize these different levels. Should we work from the top down or bottom up? These issues are confronted by Peck, Wood, and Fraley (this issue). Heller and Watson take these issues one step further and identify a number of different ways of contextualizing personality assessments and the potential strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Of course, cultural psychologists are clearly oriented toward understanding similarities and differences in broad social contexts. Having experienced firsthand the conceptual challenges of integrating persons and cultures, cultural psychologists are uniquely positioned to provide insights on the nature of the contextualized self. To this end, both Matsumoto and Suh provide theoretical models that integrate culture, social situations, and the constructs typically entertained in personality psychology, such as emotions and traits.

Finally, contextualizing personality dovetails with the notion that people develop a multiplicity of selves in their day-to-day interactions. These selves can be highly similar, situationally specific, and more or less a reflection of their authentic self or some imperative drawn from the social milieu. Several of the authors in this special issue address how individuals organize their personalities around social contexts and how this relates to psychological adjustment, age, motivation, and concepts drawn from self-determination theory (Diehl, this issue; LaGuardia & Ryan, this issue; Showers & Virgil-Hill, this issue).

In conclusion, I hope that you find the articles in this special issue useful and illuminating. Fully integrating contexts and traditional approaches to personality psychology is conceptually and methodologically challenging. Nonetheless, the synergy has the potential for unique payoffs for scientific work in psychology, as the authors of this special issue demonstrate.

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