

the role of situational forces in shaping specific behaviors, but they emphasize the utility of traits as predictors of important behavioral trends and outcomes such as psychological well-being, physical health, social relationships, occupational performance, and political attitudes (e.g., Costa and McCrae 1998; Ozer and Benet-Martinez 2006). Other theorists reconceptualize personality in terms other than “traits.” For example, the social-cognitive approach emphasizes the importance of cognitive characteristics affecting the way people process information about social situations. From this perspective, cognitive personality characteristics such as one’s expectations, beliefs, or self-concept are indeed stable, but different situations trigger different aspects of the cognitive system, leading to variability in behavior (Mischel and Shoda 1995). Finally, some theorists recognize the need for greater attention to the psychological nature of social situations (Funder 2005).

The person-situation debate was a challenging yet ultimately constructive argument for personality psychology (Fleeson 2004). By forcing psychologists to think carefully about the links between behavior, personality, and situations, the person-situation debate was a catalyst for a deeper appreciation of the importance of personality and for a more sophisticated understanding of why people do what they do.

SEE ALSO *Personality; Schemas; Trait Theory*

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PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

Perspective-taking—viewing the world from something other than one’s habitual vantage point—covers a broad range from the literal to metaphorical. One can literally take a visual perspective by physically positioning oneself and gazing in a particular direction, often replicating another person’s physical position and directional gaze in an attempt to see what that person sees (e.g., “Stand here and you can see the tower between the hills”). Alternatively, one can imagine a particular visual perspective (e.g., “These steps must look very tall to someone as short as a toddler”) or mentally construct a visual perspective (e.g., “Let’s see ... facing east, I can see the house, so if I were to face west, I would see the street”). However, perspective-taking often goes beyond the visual, referring to attempts to adopt an overall mindset that differs from one’s default mindset (“Imagine what the rabbi must have thought when the caterers brought out all those trays of ham!” or “I can see your point—you could have used more time to prepare”).

A cornerstone of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget’s (1896–1980) theory of cognitive development was that human infants have just one perspective—their own. They are profoundly egocentric: unable to even comprehend that someone else may have a different mental experience from their own and thus unable to take another person’s perspective. As young children develop, they not only learn that other perspectives exist, but also how to take those perspectives and use them. Children who can recognize that other people have their own minds and can thus have other perspectives are said to have developed a *theory of mind*. In a typically developing child, a coherent theory of mind emerges between ages three and five (although rudiments of this skill, such as following another person’s gaze to understand what he or she is looking at, appear earlier). Theory of mind and perspective-taking deficits are among the hallmark symptoms of autism, a psychological disorder that usually appears early in life (other psychological disorders or brain injuries can also produce perspective-taking deficits).

Some scholars have argued that a true understanding of theory of mind may be unique to the human species. However, even for adult humans, perspective-taking requires effort and presents a challenge. Easy or perfectly accurate perspective-taking is hindered by the “other

minds problem”—that is, we can never know from a first-person perspective exactly how things are perceived by another person with another mind.

Perspective-taking has a variety of social implications. In both children and adults, perspective-taking is associated with greater empathy, prosocial behavior, and more favorable treatment of the person (or group) whose perspective is taken. The exact mechanism by which perspective-taking produces these outcomes is debated, with a variety of options proposed, including suppression of the usual “self”-ish perspective, a heightened desire to help the other person, attempts to relieve negative feelings aroused by perceiving another person in distress, and the cognitive merging of one’s representation of the self with that of the person whose perspective is being taken. Research consistently demonstrates that instructing people to take the perspective of another person in need leads to increased feelings of compassion and empathy and often results in offers to help the person whose perspective was taken. However, perspective-taking can also be used for malevolent purposes (e.g., anticipating a rival’s next move and taking steps to thwart it).

Since Piaget’s day, developmental researchers (e.g., Janet Astington, Simon Baron-Cohen, John Flavell, Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, Joseph Perner, and Henry Wellman) have continued to ask questions about perspective-taking and its relationship to other aspects of human development. Social psychologists have also pursued perspective-taking and its effects on social behavior (notably Daniel Batson’s work on links between perspective-taking and altruistic behavior, and William Ickes’s work on adults’ accuracy in guessing others’ thoughts). Most recently, neuroscientists (e.g., Jean Decety) have used brain-imaging techniques to explore perspective-taking.

SEE ALSO *Empathy; Piaget, Jean; Role Theory; Theory of Mind*

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PERSUASION

Every day we are exposed to hundreds of attempts to change our opinions. Consider how often you come

across an advertisement—in a magazine or newspaper, on television, the radio, or a Web site. But marketers are not the only ones trying to influence us. Family members, religious leaders, politicians, and friends all try to convince us to do things, agree with them, or support their cause. Although persuasive attempts are pervasive, they are not always successful.

Persuasion can be defined as an active attempt by a person, group, or entity (such as a corporation), usually through some form of communication, to change a person’s mind. Although we use the term *mind* here, often what we are referring to are attitudes or opinions. Persuasion has been a central focus of the social psychology literature at least since the mid-twentieth century—perhaps because persuasive attempts are so common. Furthermore, if attitudes can be changed, behavior can be changed as well.

THE MESSAGE LEARNING APPROACH

In the 1940s a group of researchers led by the psychologist Carl Hovland (1912–1961) at Yale University spearheaded a comprehensive program of research on persuasion. The catalogue of persuasive factors that they examined is now referred to as the *message learning approach*. The Yale group also proposed a sequence for the process of persuasion: in order for persuasion to occur, a person needs to be exposed to the persuasive message, as well as pay attention to, comprehend, accept or yield to, and remember the message. Although more recent researchers have argued that not all of these steps are absolutely necessary (particularly remembering the message), this basic process has been supported in numerous studies.

The Yale group also found that the source of the persuasive communication is an important determinant of success. The expertise and trustworthiness of the source are critical. For example, in an advertisement for basketball shoes, a professional athlete may be an expert but may not be trustworthy because he is being paid to sell the shoes. Thus the advertisement may not be effective. The attractiveness of the source is also important. This is why clothing advertisers use attractive models in their advertisements. The implicit message is: “If you buy these clothes, you will look good too.” Furthermore, the more you like someone and the more you are attracted to that person, the more likely you are to buy the product he or she is selling.

Characteristics of the persuasive message have also been explored. Factors that have been found to influence persuasion include: a one-sided versus a two-sided message (i.e., providing one or both sides of an argument); the order of messages; the comprehensibility of the message