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## The Social Psychology of Personality

Lewis R. Goldberg

University of Oregon  
and

Oregon Research Institute

### I

Story of the Marquis de Lantenac in *Quatre-vingt-treize*. The ship of the Vendeeiens is sailing through a storm off the Breton coast. Suddenly a cannon slips its moorings, and as the ship pitches and rolls it begins a mad race from rail to rail, an immense beast smashing larboard and starboard. A cannoneer (alas, the very one whose negligence had left the cannon improperly secured) seizes a chain and with unparalleled courage flings himself at the monster, which nearly crushes him, but he stops it, bolts it fast, leads it back to its stall, saving the ship, the crew, the mission. With sublime liturgy, the fearsome Lantenac musters all the men on deck, praises the cannoneer's heroism, takes an impressive medal from around his own neck and puts it on the man, embraces him, and the crew makes the welkin ring with its hurrahs.

Then stern Lantenac, reminding the honored sailor that he was responsible for the danger in the first place, orders him to be shot. (Eco, 1988/1989, p. 195)

In the Foreword to the series in which Ross and Nisbett's book is the first entry, Philip Zimbardo described the book as "a broad overview of social psychology, required reading for all those who claim an interest in psychology's social side" (p. xii). In the words of the authors it was designed as a

textbook "for the serious student of social psychology" (p. xiv). Ironically, however, this is a book about personality. Indeed, the subject matter will certainly baffle those students who have come to believe that the discipline of social psychology is located between personality psychology (with its focus on single individuals) and sociology (with its focus on classes, races, and other large groups); such students will be left wondering why the traditional subject matter of social psychology, social interactions and social relationships (including the study of small groups), is never discussed here at all.

Instead, students will realize that to Ross and Nisbett the most important issues in social psychology all concern personality "dispositions"—whether they exist and how they are perceived. In chapters 2 through 5, a series of arguments are advanced to prove that they don't exist. In chapter 6, the authors demolish those arguments, thereby revealing their actual beliefs in personality coherence and consistency. Specifically, chapters 2 through 5 constitute 118 pages of personality demolition; chapter 6 includes a mere 24 pages of personality resurrection.

Not only has the subject matter of personality enveloped the field of social psychology, but some of its most basic assumptions—"the predictability and coherence of behavior" (p. 24)—have triumphed as well: ". . . we now believe

that the predictability of everyday life is, for the most part, real" (p. 7). Reading this book is like watching one of the Rocky movies: The overmatched Dispositionist Kid, in spite of a game fight, is mercilessly battered round after round by his overpowering Antidimensionist opponent, only to rise up off the floor in the final round to deliver one killing final blow, thus winning the round, the fight, the power and glory.

However, perhaps the greatest irony lies in what has been left out of the social psychology of personality, including one of the most traditional topics in social psychology, the measurement of attitudes. The authors brazenly assert:

After over half a century of research, there is no "classic" dispositionist demonstration to rival Asch's conformity experiments, or Milgram's obedience experiments, or Freedman and Fraser's foot-in-the-door experiments, or even Newcomb's field study of social influence at Bennington. That is to say, there are no famous studies in which stable personality attributes, either as measured by the investigator or as revealed in the record of past behavior, have proved to be markedly better predictors of behavior than academicians or even laypeople had anticipated. (pp. 94-95)

Phooey! One does not have to venture out of classical social psychology to find superb "dispositionist demonstrations" of the sort that are not supposed to exist: In the domain of attitudes, the stable personality attribute of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as measured by Altemeyer's (1981, 1988) scale regularly produces correlations in the .40 to .50 range against a wide variety of relevant criterion indices, including mean shock level in the Milgram paradigm (Altemeyer, 1981, pp. 199-202); other examples of broad attitudes "measured by the investigator" include Machiavellianism (e.g., Christie & Geis, 1970) and conservatism (e.g., Wilson, 1973). And, when one turns to dispositions "revealed in the record of past behavior," one need only consider the venerable studies of the prediction of delinquency by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck (e.g., 1970, 1972). Unfortunately, none of this work is even cited, much less discussed.

Discussed instead are many of the classic studies in social psychology, which are characterized by the authors as "empirical parables." In contrast to other social psychologists who have deplored the period "during the 1960s and 1970s when social psychology was badly infected with too-cute experiments based on too-cute ideas with too-cute titles that ultimately produced little insight and no theory" (Schneider, 1991, p. 530), Ross and Nisbett clearly adore these studies:

The tradition here is simple. Pick a generic situation; then identify and manipulate a situational or contextual variable that intuition or past research leads you to believe will make a difference (ideally, a variable whose impact you think most laypeople, or even most of your peers, somehow fail to appreciate), and see what happens. Sometimes, of course, you will be wrong and your manipulation won't "work." But often the situational variable makes quite a bit of difference. Occasionally, in fact, it makes nearly all the difference, and information about traits and individual differences that other people thought all-important proves all but trivial. If so, you have contributed a situationist classic destined to become part of our field's intellectual legacy. Such empirical parables are important because they illustrate the degree to which

ordinary men and women are apt to be mistaken about the power of the situation—the power of particular situational features, and the power of situations in general. (p. 4)

This nakedly atheoretical stance toward the selection of research topics and independent variables might seem embarrassing, if not even crass, to investigators in other scientific disciplines. Can you envision the chemist teaching his or her students to pick any old chemical, mix it with any old other chemical (ideally one that most of their peers somehow fail to appreciate—perhaps because it has the wrong smell?), and see what happens. Science should be made of sterner stuff.

## II

When I was ten, I asked my parents to subscribe to a weekly magazine that was publishing comic-strip versions of the great classics of literature. My father, not because he was stingy, but because he was suspicious of comic strips, tried to beg off. "The purpose of this magazine," I pontificated, quoting the ad, "is to educate the reader in an entertaining way." "The purpose of your magazine," my father replied without looking up from his paper, "is the purpose of every magazine: to sell as many copies as it can."

That day I began to be incredulous. Or, rather, I regretted having been credulous. I regretted having allowed myself to be borne away by a passion of the mind. . . .

Not that the incredulous person doesn't believe in anything. It's just that he doesn't believe in everything. Or he believes in one thing at a time. He believes a second thing only if it somehow follows from the first thing. . . . If two things don't fit, but you believe both of them, thinking that somewhere, hidden, there must be a third thing that connects them, that's credulity. (Eco, 1988/1989, p. 43)

Ross and Nisbett are certainly credulous folks: They believe in many things at the same time. What they believe in most strongly are three basic principles: (a) situationism (situations exert powerful and subtle effects on behavior), (b) construal (the impact of any situation depends solely on its personal subjective meaning to each individual), and (c) tension systems (individuals must be understood as systems in a state of tension). The authors' devotion to this "conceptual tripod on which our field rests" (p. 13) is complete and unwavering, and this holy trinity becomes a highly repetitive theme throughout the book. Yet, serious students may note that two of the principles are mutually inconsistent, whereas the third is vacuous.

In the hands of Ross and Nisbett, situations turn out to be "powerful" in the same sense as Scud missiles are powerful: They may have huge effects, or no effects, and such effects may occur virtually anywhere, all over the map. When a situation produces a powerful effect, it demonstrates the "power" of situations. When one proves to be a dud, it illustrates the "subtlety" of situations, and the operation of *channel factors*, Kurt Lewin's term for "apparently minor but actually important details of the situation" (Ross & Nisbett, p. 10). The phrase "apparently minor but actually important" can be translated into plain English: We haven't the foggiest idea why that did or didn't work. For example, in their major section on channel factors, the authors state:

When we find an apparently small situational circumstance producing a big behavioral effect, we are justified in suspecting we have identified a channel factor, that is, a stimulus or a response pathway that serves to elicit or sustain behavioral intentions with particular intensity or stability. (p. 46)

Oh?

Ross and Nisbett take great pains to distinguish their version of situationism from that associated with Skinner and other radical behaviorists: To behaviorists, it is the objective situation that influences behavior, whereas to Ross and Nisbett it is an individual's subjective construal that produces all the effect. This principle of construal "ironically, is one that challenges the theoretical and practical value of the doctrine of situationism" (p. 11). True: Not only does it erase the usefulness of the principle of situational power, but it introduces the boogey man called personality.

### III

I would say that the ideal reader of a collection of this sort would be a Rosicrucian adept, and therefore an expert in magiam, in necromantiam, in astrologiam, in geomantiam, in pyromantiam, in hydromantiam, in chaomantiam, in medicinam adeptam . . . physiognosis, which deals with occult physics, the static, the dynamic, and the kinematic, or astrology and esoteric biology, the study of spirits of nature, hermetic zoology. I could add cosmognosis, which studies the heavens from the astronomical, cosmological, physiological, and ontological points of view, and anthropognosis, which studies human anatomy, and the sciences of divination, psychurgy, social astrology, hermetic history. (Eco, 1988/1989, p. 217)

Whereas the first two legs of Ross and Nisbett's conceptual tripod are mutually inconsistent, they are still more useful than the third. The concept of tension systems, again ascribed to Lewin, gets defined in a myriad of ways, none of them clear. Here are some examples:

No simple mechanistic laws relating particular stimuli to particular responses are possible, given that both are always embedded in dynamic contexts that alter and constrain their effects. (p. 13)

Quasi-stationary equilibria can be hard to change because of the balance of opposing forces that maintain, and in a sense overdetermine, the status quo. (pp. 14–15)

Big manipulations may fly in the face of, or even increase the strength and resistance of, even bigger restraining factors. Conversely, small manipulations may take advantage of the precarious balance of the system, or facilitate an important channel factor, moving the system by redirection rather than by brute force. (p. 15)

Not to mention by hermetic zoology.

### IV

"O basta la," Belbo said. Only another child of Piedmont could have understood the spirit in which this expression of polite amazement was uttered. No

equivalent in any other language (dis donc, are you kidding?) can convey the apathy, the fatalism with which it expresses the firm conviction that the person to whom it is addressed is, irreparably, the product of a bumbling creator. (Eco, 1988/1989, pp. 123–124)

To Ross and Nisbett, "personologists" are, irreparably, a bumbling lot. Specifically, they "cannot predict with any accuracy how particular people will respond" (p. 2), and "neither the professional nor the layperson can do that well when obliged to predict behavior in one particular new situation on the basis of actions in one particular prior situation" (p. 3). Moreover, as scientists, their

chief reaction to Mischel's assault, and the challenge it presented, was a mixture of stony silence, accusations of nihilism, appeals to common sense, and renewed insistence that the behavioral studies cited by Mischel were badly flawed. . . . There was often an 'ad discipline' ring to the defense. (p. 105)

Social psychologists, on the other hand, are treated a bit more gingerly: "Social psychology rivals philosophy in its ability to teach people that they do not truly understand the nature of the world" (p. 1). "The principles that social psychology has taught us over the past 60 years have broad social and political implications as well as personal ones" (p. 244). Nonetheless, the authors resemble Uriah Heep when compared to series-editor Zimbardo:

During the many decades when American psychology was held captive by a limited scientific doctrine of behaviorism, the pathfinders who dared to venture beyond these intellectually limited boundaries and explore new horizons were largely social psychologists. They valued the personal perspectives of the human actor in life's dramas, honored the alternative interpretations of reality held by different observers, and defended the subtle interplay of dynamic forces between and within cultures, social situations, and individual psyches.

Long relegated to a subordinate position within psychology's status hierarchy for these points of view, social psychology has steadily moved to the center of contemporary psychology. It did so by establishing a cognitively flavored brand of psychology, which, in recent years, has become the banner flown by mainstream psychology. Social psychology was the home of generalists within psychology, a haven for scholars interested in understanding the depth and breadth of the nature of human nature. It was neither too shy to ask the big questions that have intrigued social philosophers for centuries, nor too orthodox to venture into alien territories with new methodologies that have provided empirically grounded answers to the more vital questions of our time. . . . Indeed, it is not immodest to declare that nothing of human nature is too alien to social psychological inquiry and concern. (p. xi; emphasis added)

Although it is intriguing to learn that confirmed anti-dispositionists are not "shy," "orthodox," or "immodest," it is even more important to inquire whether any significant aspects of the scientific study of personality have been omitted from this textbook on that subject (given that "nothing of human nature is too alien to social psychological inquiry and

concern"): Missing is virtually all the evidence on the dispositional side of the debate. For example, Ross and Nisbett do not cite, much less discuss, any research on biological and genetic factors affecting personality characteristics (e.g., Eaves, Eysenck, & Martin, 1989; Gale & Eysenck, in press; McCartney, Harris, & Bernieri, 1990). Indeed the distinction between monozygotic and dizygotic twins is never mentioned, yet the differences produced in these natural experiments can be viewed as providing the death knell to anti-dispositionist arguments (e.g., Rowe, 1987). Moreover, there is no mention of the longstanding tradition of studies of temperamental dispositions, nor even of any aspects of psychopathological ones.

Ross and Nisbett acknowledge the dispositional existence of abilities, skills, and talents, but they discuss these individual differences only as a foil to belittle the strength of all others: "It is thus only for behaviors reflective of personality, and not for behaviors reflective of abilities, that people dramatically overestimate the amount of consistency to be expected and seem oblivious to the advantages of aggregated behavior samples over individual instances" (p. 124). The authors also acknowledge the consistency of assessments based on self-reports and peer reports, and the concordance between the two, but they belittle such consistency and concordance as not reflecting "objective behavioral consistency" (p. 99), "objective behavioral measures" (p. 106), and "objective behavioral data" (p. 106). Nowhere do they acknowledge any of the measurement problems associated with such "objective" data, not even the fact that all such data must be encoded by human judges in some way prior to being analyzed (e.g., Borkenau, 1990; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1987).

Nonetheless, in spite of the virulent antidispositionism that pervades most of this book, the authors eventually throw in the towel:

It is easy to empathize with the frustration felt by the personologists. Indeed, as we will make clear in Chapter 6, we believe that they were correct in their conviction that stable individual differences in social behavior are more than cognitive illusions. And we share their insistence that the people one encounters in the course of ordinary life show considerable consistency and predictability in the way that they behave and in the way that their behavior differs from that of their peers. (p. 106)

Specifically, by chapter 6 the authors admit that they "doubt that the objective behavioral studies captured the degree of consistency and predictability that exists in everyday social dealings" (p. 146).

The basis for this conceptual turnabout stems from the authors' conviction that scientific studies artificially unconfound variables that are highly entangled in real life. These confounding factors that tend to produce personality consistency include selecting and altering the situations one is in, and responding to others' needs for interpersonal predictability. As a consequence, "the interaction between the person and the person's environment—that is, the cumulative or aggregated effects of the person's active choices and the social environment's response to that person's behavior and reputation—can produce important life-span continuities in an individual's actions and outcomes" (p. 158). What is

never addressed, but is the crux of the matter, is the *cause* of individuals' situational selections and alterations, and of their idiosyncratic construals.

## V

"The rune also recalls the constellation of the Virgin."

"I dabble in astronomy," Diotallevi said shyly. "The Virgin has a different shape, and I believe it contains eleven stars."

The colonel smiled indulgently. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, you know as well as I do that everything depends on how you draw the lines. You can make a wain or a bear, whatever you like, and it's hard to decide whether a given star is part of a given constellation or not. Take another look at the Virgin, make Spica the lowermost point corresponding to the Provincial coast, use only five stars, and you'll see a striking resemblance between the two outlines."

"You just have to decide which stars to omit," Belbo said.

"Precisely," the colonel agreed.

(Eco, 1988/1989, p. 124)

Indeed, everything depends on how you draw the lines. In most of this book, the lines are drawn to present an anti-dispositionist portrait, even when most readers might see a dispositionist one. As one of many possible examples, the authors highlight the "general failure of mass media campaigns to change social and political attitudes," noting that "it is notoriously difficult to change someone's political views," and "the fact remains that campaigns produce few genuine political conversions," . . . "much less persuade the voters to change their basic ideologies" (p. 35). Some of us might interpret this as evidence for dispositional consistency. To Ross and Nisbett, on the other hand, this is evidence for the "power of the situation" that existed at Bennington College between 1935 and 1939 to influence its students to become more liberal.

Just as seers have merely to decide which stars to omit so as to make a wain or a bear, authors have merely to decide which scientific contributions to omit so as to convey one position or the other. As already noted, some of Ross and Nisbett's omissions seem ironic, and some may have been calculated to buttress their antidispositionist legal brief. On the other hand, some just seem unfathomable. Among the possibly motivated omissions is the trenchant analysis of Funder and Ozer (1983), who systematically compared the effect sizes elicited in some classic experiments in social psychology with those achieved in studies of individual differences, and concluded that the two types of effect were about the same size. Among the unfathomable omissions are those from chapter 7 ("The Social Psychology of Culture") to the work of the social psychologist Dean Peabody, who has provided both a personality-related theoretical framework (Peabody, 1967, 1970) and some cross-cultural applications of this framework in various countries in Europe (Peabody, 1985) and in the Philippines (Peabody, 1968). The culture chapter, which seems completely disconnected from the six that preceded it, sorely needs an integrative framework, both to facilitate understanding its content and to link it with the personality-related topics that are discussed in the preceding chapters.

### Coda

The authors of this book have collaborated before, having produced the classic volume, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). In my judgment, and that of at least some others (e.g., Wiggins, 1982), their first book was an extraordinarily thoughtful reformulation and integration of an important literature. Since it was first published, I have assigned that book as a required textbook in every one of my courses in psychological assessment, at both the graduate and undergraduate levels, and I will continue to do so. So great has been my admiration for the first offspring of this duo that, when asked to review their second book, I leaped at the chance to read a preview copy.

As the reader has no doubt detected, I was disappointed with *The Person and the Situation*. First of all, I was put off by the disputatious language of the book, and its repeated raillery against "personologists." More important, I was amazed at the flaws in the logical arguments presented by the authors, and appalled at the omission of some important contributions on the other side. Finally, I wish the authors had devoted far more space to their own theory of personality beyond the 5½-page tidbit at the end of chapter 6. Having ended up in the same camp as the once-castigated personologists, it behooves the authors to try to integrate scientific findings concerning the structure of phenotypic descriptions of personality (e.g., Goldberg, 1990) with their own preferences for the more abstract constructs of "goals and preferences," "competencies and capacities," "subjective representations of situations," "attributional styles and perceptions of personal efficacy," and "conceptions of the self" (pp. 163–168).

Therefore, in contrast to their first book, I will not assign the second in my classes. However, that does not mean that it has no value, nor that I obtained no enjoyment in reading it. For one thing, it is replete with "empirical parables" or "situationist classics" (p. 4). In addition to the four already mentioned in the first section of this review, chapter 2 includes brief descriptions of the studies of Sherif on the autokinetic effect and on intergroup conflict, Tajfel on minimal groups, Darley and Latané on bystander intervention, and Darley and Batson on the Good Samaritan. As one would expect from the authors of *Human Inference*, the corresponding chapter in this book, chapter 3 ("Construing the Social World"), is expertly handled and highly stimulating; included in that chapter are brief descriptions of the work of Asch on the object of judgment, Hastorf and Cantril (and later Lepper and Ross) on partisan-influenced perceptions, Kelley on causal attributions, Schachter and Singer on attributed emotions, Bem on self-reported attitudes, Nisbett and Wilson on the lack of awareness of situational influences, and Ross and his colleagues on the false-consensus effect and the fundamental attribution error.

Indeed, one of the most important uses of this book may be to provide an antidote for the latter overattribution effects. Clearly, many people are prone to overgeneralization, and especially prone to attribute broad personality dispositions on the basis of limited information. And, most of us would be better off if we tried to interpret the behaviors of others by getting into their skins and looking at the world through their eyes. Chapters 2 through 5, although one-sided, should be

quite useful in alerting readers to the dangers that can accompany a dispositionist bias. In a sense, then, this book may be more useful for personal than for scientific guidance, and it would be on that basis that I would recommend it to students.

For other purposes, however, it has some severe limitations. In addition to those I have already noted, the authors' antidispositionist arguments are based on a false premise, namely, that scientists in the field of personality seek to predict a *single* response of a *particular* individual in a completely *novel* situation. Most of us entertain no such illusions. In the first place, the authors' repeated stress on predictions to "new" and "novel" situations introduces a false dichotomy; future situations can be viewed as varying on a continuous scale of similarity to previous ones, and few if any situations are truly "novel." Moreover, most personality scientists are interested in the prediction of aggregate behaviors, not of a particular response from any single individual (e.g., Buss & Craik, 1983; Epstein, 1983; Green, 1978). By ascribing irrelevant criteria to a field, it is easy to denigrate its scientific utility.

Ross and Nisbett have characterized *The Person and the Situation* "as an olive branch and invitation to more fruitful intellectual dialogue with our friends in personality research" (p. xv). As one of these friends, I have found the branch to be filled with thorns, with some of the best fruit having been removed. True friends deserve better than that.

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Lewis R. Goldberg, Oregon Research Institute, 1899 Willamette Street, Eugene, OR 97401.

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## Of Persons and Situations, of Personality and Social Psychology

Mark Snyder

University of Minnesota

I don't judge books by their covers. But, I do look to them for clues to their authors' intentions, for I prefer whenever possible to approach books on terms set by their authors. As a statement of intentions and a definer of expectations, the cover of *The Person and the Situation* does not disappoint. On the back cover, Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett have this to say about their long awaited and eagerly anticipated book:

*The Person and the Situation* explores the complex ideas about personal versus situational determinants of behavior. . . . This is the type of book that we have long wished we had available to assign to the serious, critical student who asks, "What have we really learned from social psychology?"

We offer this book . . . as a "stand tall and be proud" peptalk for our colleagues. . . . We offer it as an olive branch and invitation to more fruitful intellectual dialogue with our friends in personality research. . . . And . . . , we offer it as an invitation to honor the great tradition of Kurt Lewin that links basic theory . . . to the task of effective social innovation.

*The Person and the Situation* is indeed a "stand tall and be proud" paean to social psychology. For Ross and Nisbett, their answer to the question "What have we learned from social psychology?" is a joyously triumphant tribute to three themes: (a) situationism, (b) subjectivism, and (c) dynamic tension. For them, these themes are not only the three legs of a tripod on which social psychology rests, but also the foundation on which a social psychology of culture can be built, and the recipe for applying social psychology to the problems of society.

The inspirational and exhortative qualities of this book are

undeniable. I have no doubt that, were I one of those serious, critical students Ross and Nisbett had in mind when writing it, *The Person and the Situation* would have made a social psychologist of me, just as many years ago Roger Brown's *Social Psychology* textbook recruited me into social psychology. This comparison serves only partially as praise for Ross and Nisbett as craftsmen of this highly engaging invitation to social psychology (which, by the way, was thoroughly enjoyed by the serious, critical students who joined me in reading and discussing it). Beyond that, this comparison also serves as a springboard to some reflections on the lessons I have learned from social psychology over the years since I first made its acquaintance. These reflections provide the context for this essay on *The Person and the Situation*.

My particular concern here is the book's central theme of the relations between person and situation as seen through the lens of social psychology, and the "olive branch" that Ross and Nisbett offer to personality researchers. (For this reason, I say little about what really are two of my very favorite parts of the book, their discussions of culture and of applying social psychology.) On matters of persons and situations, of personality and social psychology, this is very much a book about the power of situations and the accomplishments of social psychology. It is not that Ross and Nisbett lack an appreciation for critical theoretical and methodological issues in studying persons and in the psychology of personality. To the contrary, much of their book is about the search for personal consistency and related issues in personality theory and research. Their discussions are informed and informative; in particular, their treatment of statistical issues in assessment and prediction is a highly sophisticated one. And, their construal principle is intriguing, allowing as

