HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Eur J Pers. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2016 August 17.

Published in final edited form as:

Eur J Pers. 2015 ; 29(3): 400–401.

The Roles of Time and Change in Situations

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Abstract

Rauthmann, Sherman and Funder have made a landmark contribution to situation research in the target article of this issue. However, we propose that their work overlooks the need to incorporate a developmental perspective. This includes the separate but related issues of *time* and *change*. Situations often unfold over long periods of time, can bleed together, and are not time-delimited in the way traditional laboratory experiments define them. Moreover, individuals systematically change over time (lifespan development) and their reactions to situations, as well as their personality-situation transactions, develop in tandem.

Rauthmann, Sherman & Funder have made a landmark contribution to situation research in their target article. After several decades marked by lack of consensus, the authors proffer a well-crafted case for consensual approval on key topics in situational research including three over-arching principles, many related corollaries, and several underlying operational definitions. We hope the article achieves the desired effect: provision of a solid and much-needed foundation for the field.

We propose however that the work of Rauthmann, Sherman & Funder overlooks the need to incorporate a developmental perspective, including the separate but related issues of *time* and *change*. To their credit, they do mention “cumulative effects that accrue over time,” intra-individual variation in situation experiences, temporality in situation ratings, and “multi-time” assessments of situations and persons. However, none of these directly acknowledges that situations often unfold over long periods of time, can bleed together, and are not time-delimited as traditionally defined by laboratory experiments. Additionally, individuals systematically change over the lifespan (development) with their reactions to situations developing in tandem.

The Issue of Time

We illustrate the *time* component by anecdote: after 50 years of smoking and 2 weeks of discomforting symptoms, one of our parents received a chilling, if not surprising, diagnosis

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of advanced lung cancer. This news was broken to family members with the familiar phrase, “we have a situation.” (We gladly report it is in full remission.)

Consistent with the claims of Rauthmann et al., this situation is well-defined by its immediate, flashbulb characteristics. In the DIAMONDS model (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2014), adversity and negativity seem most salient at the time of diagnosis. This situation also serves as an example for the objectivist and subjectivist positions as well as the six theoretical perspectives (review of the particulars are left up to the reader). Yet it is most useful for our purposes because it has an unusual half-life.

The fact that this particular situation is neither fleeting nor constant in psychological salience raises a number of questions. Most prominently, is the gestalt experience of the patient valid as a “health situation” despite its protracted nature or must it be evaluated as a series of related, dependent situations? The situational examples provided by the authors are conveniently time-delimited: cyberball situations last the length of the data collection window; party situations rarely last longer than the hangover; and work situations, though repeated, end at quitting time.

Our health example can be divided into similarly tidy episodes (e.g., the doctor’s office visit where the diagnosis was received, the breaking of news to family, the many therapy and consultation appointments). Yet separation of this experience into distinct episodes belies its deeper meaning -- the unanticipated necessity of passing through these situational transactions in close succession. Health situations, like other significant events across the lifespan, often become so consistently salient over time that they become incorporated into one’s identity, motivations and personality.

Much of this nuance is lost in the typical study of situations in social psychology. In the usual experiment, situations are artificially truncated to fit a convenient time slot. In real life, situations can be long and may bleed into one another. Different people will evoke different situations, prior situations influence later ones, and actors often shape situations through their personalities. This richness is difficult to study in a controlled laboratory experiment, although experience sampling and unobtrusive monitoring (EAR; Mehl & Holleran, 2007) can plumb these complexities. Moreover, they are well-suited to provide Rauthmann, Sherman and Funder’s three principles with time-informed data, endowing their already-excellent ideas with better depictions of what situations really look like as people move through time, be it minutes, days, weeks, or years.

The Issue of Change

The issue of time is important in defining situations, but time is not synonymous with development. There is increasing recognition that many variables – personality traits, cognitive dimensions, interpersonal skills, attitudes – develop and unfold over the lifespan (Mroczek & Spiro, 2003; Mroczek, 2014). Situations, by contrast, are often studied under the assumption they are impervious to developmental changes within the person over the life course. This assumption is likely false. Individuals may respond to the same situation differently at different ages. A situation that, in one’s youth, was particularly anxiety-

provoking or led to aggressive behavior may no longer do so at age 40, for most people gain better control over their impulses as they develop from their teenage years into adulthood, midlife and older adulthood.

Personality development that results from systematic changes – those brought on by increases in impulse control, changes in health circumstances, or other significant life events such as the experience of having and raising children – alter how we respond to situations. More specifically, they induce profound changes in how we perceive the cues of a given situation (the characteristics).

For example, the cyberball experiments described by the authors highlight the power of social exclusion on feelings and behavior. However, almost every cyberball study has used undergraduate samples. It may be the case that midlife and older adults, who are in general more confident about themselves and more interpersonally experienced, may not feel especially excluded in experimental exclusion conditions. Mature individuals may more easily shrug off social exclusion attempts, or even dismiss them out of confidence that close family and friends are the ones who really matter. Being excluded by strangers is not something to worry about. By contrast, an emerging adult who is less confident, and still striving to make new friends and form social circles, may be devastated by exclusion situations. It seems likely that the movement of a person through developmental milestones may dampen the psychologically salient characteristics of some situations and amplify those of others.

Fortunately, we feel the need to incorporate time and change concepts which are so critical in lifespan personality research is not particularly controversial, nor does it constitute a major obstacle to the utility of this contribution. To the contrary, we think the excellent ideas put forth by Rauthman, Sherman & Funder can be made stronger by a developmental perspective.

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