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## Will the real personality researcher and the real social researcher please stand up?

Jessica L. Tracy<sup>a,\*</sup>, Richard W. Robins<sup>b</sup>, Jeffrey W. Sherman<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of British Columbia, 2136 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of California, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA, United States

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At a recent meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, eminent personality psychologist “Gordon Goldberg” was chatting with the eminent social psychologist “Floyd Festinger” about recent political affairs, and they found themselves on the topic of Abu Ghraib. Said Gordon, “It seems to me that Chuck Graner, the military prison guard who was convicted of abusing Iraqi prisoners, has some serious anti-social personality traits that make him a nasty bastard. In fact, I heard he has a history of abuse, including domestic violence and even mace-ing fellow guards at the prison where he worked before joining the military. That guy would be abusive and commit atrocities in virtually any situation.” Floyd, shocked, responded, “Gordon, you’re crazy! Chuck Graner was simply a pawn of broader social forces. The whole context was rotten, from the prison itself up to the Generals and even the politicians running the show. Almost anyone would have succumbed to situational pressures in that kind of environment.”

Gordon and Floyd are, of course, caricatures, but to what extent do they represent actual personality and social researchers working in the field today? To address this question, we surveyed a group of personality and social psychology journal editorial board members (Tracy, Robins, & Sherman, *in press*). These researchers, whom we identified as “personality” or “social” based on journal affiliations and self-reports, were asked about two issues from the “person” side of the person–situation debate – the extent to which their research focuses on “stable dispositions” and their agreement with the broad theoretical perspective that “behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are consistent across time and situation” – and two issues from the “situation” side – extent of focus on “situational factors” and agreement that “situations drive most behav-

iors, thoughts and feelings”. Participants also rated how the typical personality and social researcher would respond to these questions, and we compared these stereotypes to actual ratings.

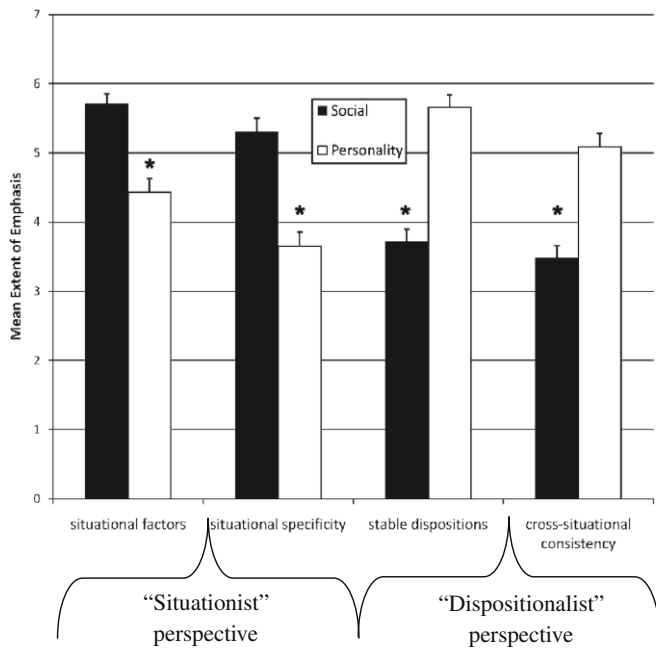
Personality and social researchers showed the expected differences in their degree of focus on “person” vs. “situation” causes of behavior, and in their theoretical stance toward cross-situational consistency vs. specificity (see Fig. 1). More striking, however, is the degree of overlap between the two groups. Most respondents acknowledged the importance of both stable dispositions *and* situational factors, and agreed that behavior shows cross-situational consistency *and* situational specificity (mean ratings for all four variables were at or above the midpoint of the scale for both groups). Furthermore, despite group differences, 36% of respondents reported studying *both* stable dispositions and situations more than “somewhat”, and the two variables were not significantly inversely related ( $r = -.12, ns$ ).

Although stereotypes about personality and social psychologists were accurate, they were also substantially exaggerated: stereotyped differences ranged from 2.62 to 3.14 standard deviations (*Median d* = 2.81), whereas actual differences ranged from .90 to 1.50 (*Median d* = 1.24). Thus, personality and social researchers disagree about the importance of persons vs. situations, *but not nearly as much as they think they do*. Rather, the person–situation debate reflects a divergence in emphasis, not the all-or-none stance that is assumed to characterize (and divide) these two groups.

As a final point, although for the purposes of these analyses we created two distinct groups of researchers, just under half of the sample (44%) could be considered ‘hybrids’, in that they reported working in both areas at least “sometimes” (rating of “4” or above). Thus, many researchers in the field have bridged the divide (and perhaps the sibling rivalry) that separates the stereotypical Gordon and Floyd.

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 604 822 6923.

E-mail address: [jltracy@psych.ubc.ca](mailto:jltracy@psych.ubc.ca) (J.L. Tracy).



**Fig. 1.** Mean differences between personality and social researchers in the extent of emphasis on person- and situation-related causes of behavior and theoretical perspectives. All ratings were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 “not at all” to 7 “very much”. Note.  $N = 139$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Reference**

Tracy, J. L., Robins, R. W., & Sherman, J. W. (in press). The practice of psychological science: Searching for Cronbach's two streams in social-personality psychology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.