# The Oxford Handbook of Psychological Situations

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John F. Rauthmann, Ryne A. Sherman
and David C. Funder

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# The Culturally Situated Process of Personality Judgment

Yu Yang

**Abstract**

Personality psychology has made tremendous progress in demonstrating important outcomes of personality traits. Yet the process by which people make personality judgment needs to be better understood. In this chapter, it is argued that to provide personality judgment, people must rely on a reference group of the target, a lay theory of the trait, or both. Importantly, the specific reference group and lay theory that people naturally choose are situated in their immediate cultural milieu, affecting trait judgment in systematic ways. Moreover, the relative impact of reference groups and lay theories on personality judgment can change under different circumstances. Postulates concerning the nature of these circumstances, consideration of how traits are inferred, and possible routes to better compare cultural groups on traits can also stimulate new understanding of the personality process.

**Keywords:** personality judgment, traits, situations, reference groups, lay theories, personality process

Personality judgment is one of the most intriguing topics in personality research. To date, many studies on personality have focused on the consequences of personality traits. It has been shown that traits predict a wide range of individual, interpersonal, and societal outcomes (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). In terms of predicting some of the most important life outcomes, such as mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment, personality traits are as powerful as other, well-established indices such as socioeconomic status and cognitive ability (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Unlike the early years (see Kenrick & Funder, 1988 and Swann & Seyle, 2005), personality psychologists are no longer concerned about the existence of traits (Funder, 2009). They have argued that, important directions for future research include deeper understanding of the developmental origins of personality traits (e.g., Sherman & Klein, 1994; Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004; Wrzus & Roberts, 2017), basic components of the traits (e.g., Wilt & Revelle, 2015; Yang et al., 2014), possible processes by which traits manifest themselves in daily behaviors

and life outcomes (e.g., Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Fleeson & Law, 2015; McCabe & Fleeson, 2016; Read et al., 2010), and relations between traits and situations (e.g., Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015; Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006, 2009).

Perhaps another, equally important research direction is better understanding the process by which individuals provide personality judgment. For example, how does someone arrive at the conclusion that he or she is more or less extraverted than others? This deceptively simple question is difficult to answer. In this chapter, I argue that people make personality judgment through two distinct mechanisms, namely, comparing with a reference group of the target, and matching with a lay theory of the trait. Both mechanisms, as I will suggest, are culturally situated such that the specific reference group and lay theory that people naturally choose are obtained from their own culture, affecting their trait judgment in systematic ways. These two mechanisms also have relatively larger or smaller influence over one another under different circumstances. To

illustrate the main tenets, let us start from a hypothetical research scenario.

## A Hypothetical Research Scenario

Assume that we are interested in investigating whether individuals from two different groups are similar to or different from each other with regard to certain personality traits. As researchers, we would ask participants from these two groups to complete self-report personality trait measures. If we find significant differences in how the individuals score on these measures, then we would conclude that the individuals from these two groups differ in the personality traits measured.

For simplicity and clarity, in our hypothetical research scenario, we imagine that a group of American participants were asked to complete a typical self-report measure of extraversion (e.g., "I see myself as extraverted"). A group of Chinese participants were asked to complete the same measure. If the American participants on average scored high on this measure and the Chinese participants on average scored low on the same measure, we would conclude that Americans may be more extraverted than the Chinese. To make it more interesting, we can build personality profiles of individuals in different cultures around the globe. These profiles can be extremely useful for scientists and for people interested in others from other cultures.

It is important to note that, actual research on personality and culture has a long history of inquiry (LeVine, 2001) and has become much more sophisticated than the hypothetical scenario just described. For example, first, instead of using single-item personality measures, researchers typically use batteries of multiple-item measures (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005a). Second, to complement simple self-report trait measures, researchers have begun to use more objective, behavioral measures of personality traits (Heine, Buchtel, & Norenzayan, 2008). Third, to avoid possible biases involved in people rating themselves, researchers have examined ratings of familiar others (McCrae & Terracciano, 2005b). Fourth, researchers have used not only trait items with adjectives and short phrases (Goldberg, 1992; Saucier, 1994) but also items describing definitions of the traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999). Finally, researchers have identified psychological processes such as self-enhancement that may distort trait ratings toward certain directions (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999).

Nonetheless, the hypothetical research scenario still resembles a number of studies. Across these studies, five possible elements of personality judgment can be distinguished: *judges, targets, reference groups, lay theories*, and *traits* (Figure 31.1). A group of judges are asked to provide judgments on a set of traits for a group of targets. The targets can be the judges themselves (self-judgments) or a group of people familiar to the judges (other-judgments). The three elements of judges, targets, and traits are explicit, but the other two elements are much less so. In what follows, I discuss problems associated with the hypothetical research scenario and the conclusions that may be obtained. At the same time, in discussing these problems, I suggest that to make personality judgment of targets, judges must rely on a reference group of the target, a lay theory of the trait, or both. Reference groups and lay theories are two culturally situated mechanisms in the process of personality judgment. While their roles have often been ignored in previous personality research, they should be better recognized in the future.
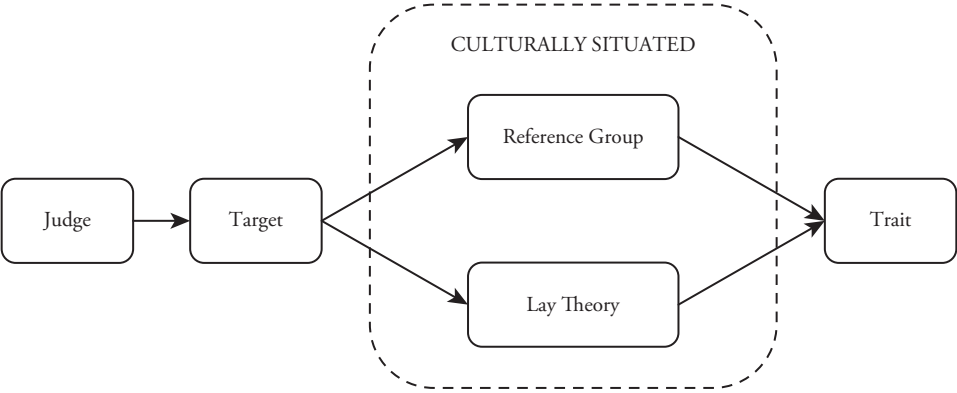


**Figure 31.1.** The culturally situated process of personality judgment

## Reference Groups

The first problem with our hypothetical research scenario is related to the reference groups that people in different groups may choose for their targets. Classic studies using social comparison theory have suggested that people routinely rely on a reference group, or a standard of comparison, when making various social judgments (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Hyman, 1942; Latane & Darley, 1970; Sherif, 1936). Contemporary studies along this tradition have also shown that the nature of the particular group or standard exerts a systematic impact on people's judgments (e.g., Biernat, 2012; Credé, Bashshur, & Niehorster, 2010; Goodman & Haisley, 2007; Guimond et al., 2007; Heine et al., 2008; Peng, Nisbett, & Wang, 1997; Schwarz, 1999; Takano & Sogon, 2008; Wood, Brown, Maltby, & Watkinson, 2012). Cultural psychologists Heine and colleagues (2002) further suggested that "to the extent that two groups differ in their average level on the dimension under question, the groups have different standards by which members of those groups are evaluated, which thus confounds comparisons of them" (p. 905).

In the context of our hypothetical research scenario, the notion of reference groups involves three assumptions, which make the conclusion that Americans are more (or less) extraverted than the Chinese problematic. First, when making personality judgments, people may have relied on a reference group. That is, they may have compared the targets of judgments, whether it is oneself or others, with some reference group during their judgment process. For example, when someone endorsed a statement that described him or her as extraverted, it is implied that this person is more extraverted than someone else or some group of individuals. The extent to which this person would endorse the same statement can also change with different reference groups. Compared to his or her friends, this person may be more extraverted. Compared to his or her co-workers, this person may be less extraverted. Regardless of the specific reference group that people may choose in their judgments, it is reasonable to assume that some reference group is involved.

Second, when making personality judgments, people are more likely to choose a reference group that they are familiar with, have substantial knowledge about, or frequently interact with, that is, others in their own culture. In most personality judgment studies, the reference group is not specified. In this case, people are more likely to make their judgments based on comparisons between themselves and those that they regularly interact with in their own culture. Unless specifically asked to do so, they are unlikely to provide their judgments based on comparisons between themselves and those in other cultures. This applies not only to self-judgments but also to the judgments of others. For example, when Joe who lives in America is considered more extraverted by himself or others, the possibility is that he is only more extraverted than people with whom he regularly interacts with in his immediate cultural milieu (e.g., his friends, family, coworkers, neighbors, and essentially, fellow Americans). Whether Joe is more or less extraverted than a group of people in China with whom Joe rarely interacts remains unclear. If our hypothetical research scenario showed that the American participants on average scored higher on extraversion than the Chinese participants, this result might only suggest that Americans consider themselves more extraverted than their fellow Americans, and the Chinese consider themselves less extraverted than their fellow Chinese. The specific reference groups that people choose for personality judgments are more likely to be individuals in their own culture than those in other cultures.

Third, reference groups become a problem when the different reference groups that people choose differ with regard to the specific trait under study. In our hypothetical research scenario, Americans and the Chinese in general should already have a mean score on extraversion before any judgments occur. If the actual mean level of extraversion is very high for Americans and very low for Chinese, during the study of personality judgments our American participants should instead score low on the trait, because they may think of themselves as less extraverted than their fellow Americans. Our Chinese participants, on the contrary, should score high on the trait, because they may think of themselves as more extraverted than their fellow Chinese. Conversely, if the actual mean level of extraversion is very low for Americans and very high for Chinese, during the study of personality judgments, our American participants should instead score high on the trait, because they may think of themselves as more extraverted than their fellow Americans. Our Chinese participants, on the contrary, should score low on the trait, because they may think of themselves as less extraverted than their fellow Chinese. The results of our hypothetical research scenario are therefore confounded.

The problem of reference groups becomes less pronounced when individuals in two similar groups, such as Americans and Canadians, are compared but it becomes more pronounced when individuals in dissimilar groups, such as Americans and Chinese, are compared. As scientists and lay people, we are much more interested in understanding possible differences between relatively dissimilar groups than between similar groups. Hence, the problem of reference groups becomes increasingly complicated.

The research design in our hypothetical scenario may not allow us to determine actual differences between groups with regard to the specific trait if the groups are already very different. Cultural psychologists have also noted that this design and the reference group effect may be responsible for the many empirical findings that are inconsistent with cultural psychological theories (Heine et al., 2002; Peng et al., 1997). Several researchers have further attempted to solve the problem, at least partially, by using judges who possess substantial knowledge on the groups in comparison. In one such study (Heine et al., 2002, Study 2), bicultural participants who possess substantial knowledge on Canadian and Japanese cultures (e.g., European Canadians who have taught in Japan and Japanese exchange students in Canada) were asked to compare themselves against Canadians and Japanese. The results revealed expected cultural differences between Canadians who are more individualistic and Japanese who are more collectivistic.

To summarize, it is important for personality researchers to recognize that first, people may rely on a reference group of the target in the process of providing personality judgment. Second, people naturally choose others in their own culture as their reference group. Third, this specific choice may have systematic impact on judgment.

**Lay Theories**
Another problem with our hypothetical research scenario is related to the lay theories that people in different groups may hold for traits. Lay theories of personality traits refer to specific and often concrete ways in which members of a group typically define personality traits in their everyday lives (Cantor & Mischel, 1979; Klein, Loftus, Trafton, & Fuhrman, 1992; Pytlik Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002; Read, Jones, & Miller, 1990; Sherman & Klein, 1994; Werner & Pervin, 1986; Wilt & Revelle, 2015; Wood, Gardner, & Harms, 2015; Wood, Tov, & Costello, 2015; Yang et al., 2014). These theories are likely to include the kinds of

situations people find themselves in, their behavioral responses to those situations, and their explanations for their behaviors in those situations (Yang et al., 2014). They can also include components of affect, behavior, cognition, and desire (Miller, Cody, & McLaughlin, 1994; Pytlik Zillig et al., 2002; Wilt & Revelle, 2015). Regardless of how a lay theory of personality traits is specifically defined in a particular group, presumably it is well understood by existing members of the group, learned when new members join the group, and established through evolving consensus over time to enhance communication efficiency and group identity. These features of lay theories are similar to those of cultural knowledge produced and maintained within cultural groups (Morris, Chiu, & Liu, 2015; Morris, Hong, Chiu, & Liu, 2015).

In the context of our hypothetical research scenario, the notion of lay theories also involves three assumptions, which make the conclusion that Americans are more (or less) extraverted than the Chinese problematic. First, when making personality judgments, people may have relied on a lay theory of the trait. Instead of *comparing* the targets of judgments with a reference group on a particular trait, people can engage in *matching* the behaviors (or affect, cognition, and motivation) of the targets with how the trait is defined in terms of behaviors (or affect, cognition, and motivation). For example, tailgating at a football game is strongly associated with the trait extraversion in America. Stated differently, people in America have a lay theory of extraversion which includes the behavior of tailgating at a football game, as well as other behaviors such as initiating conversations with strangers at a party. As long as the targets of judgments displayed one (or more) of these behaviors or other characteristics that are well defined in the lay theory of extraversion, these targets are likely to be considered extraverted. This process does not necessarily involve a reference group.

Second, when making personality judgments, people may have relied on a lay theory of traits from their own culture. Similar to our earlier reasoning for reference groups, whether the targets of judgments are judges themselves or other individuals who are familiar to them, it is reasonable to assume that, during the process of personality judgment, Americans would naturally rely on their ideas of how personality traits are defined in America, and the Chinese would naturally rely on their ideas of how personality traits are defined in China. Unless specifically asked to do so, they are unlikely to make

their judgments based on any lay theories from other cultures. If our hypothetical research scenario showed that the American participants on average scored higher on extraversion than the Chinese participants, this result might only suggest that Americans consider themselves a good match with how extraversion is defined in America, and the Chinese consider themselves less of a good match with how extraversion is defined in China. The specific lay theories that people use for personality judgments are more likely to come from their own culture than from other cultures.

Third, lay theories become a problem when the specific lay theories that people choose from different cultures actually define the same personality traits in very different ways. Indeed, the same trait can manifest itself in extremely different ways in different cultures. For example, tailgating at a football game is well defined in the lay theory of extraversion for Americans. However, it is missing in the lay theory of extraversion for the Chinese because tailgating is a situation not found in China. Therefore, the lay theories of personality traits held by Americans and the Chinese are composed of at least somewhat different elements. Initiating conversations with strangers in a party is often construed as extraverted in America; however, it may be construed as less extraverted (and more rude) in China where two strangers should be properly introduced in a party by a third person who knows them both. Thus, while some elements of the lay theories of personality traits held by Americans and the Chinese may be the same, the implication of each element on the particular trait under study can differ for Americans and the Chinese. The results of our hypothetical research scenario are therefore confounded. Even when people from two cultures score similarly on the trait extraversion, we cannot argue that their levels of extraversion are the same because extraversion could mean very different things in the two cultures.

Again, the problem of lay theories becomes less pronounced when people in two similar groups, such as Americans and Canadians, are compared, but it becomes more pronounced when people in dissimilar groups, such as Americans and Chinese, are compared. However, comparing dissimilar groups can be much more interesting than comparing similar groups. Hence, the problem of lay theories becomes increasingly complicated.

Cultural psychologists have also noticed the problem. Several of them have attempted to address it by correlating personality traits (e.g.,

conscientiousness) with objective, behavioral markers of the traits (e.g., walking speed, postal workers' speed, accuracy of clocks in public banks) while acknowledging that these behavioral markers may have different meanings in different cultures (Heine et al., 2008). Notably, the problem of lay theories is not limited to research on personality traits. If we wish to obtain a fair comparison between two groups of people on any set of attributes, we must define the attributes in much the same way (Rivers & Volkema, 2013; Yang, De Cremer, & Wang, 2017).

To summarize, it is important for personality researchers to recognize that first, people may rely on a lay theory of the trait in the process of making personality judgments. Second, people naturally choose the lay theory from their own culture. Third, this specific choice may have systematic impact on judgment.

## The Culturally Situated Judgment Process

In the process of personality judgment, the three elements of judges, targets, and traits are relatively explicit. Each of these elements, such as a good judge, a good target, and a good trait, has been studied in depth (Funder, 1999, 2012). The other two elements of reference groups and lay theories, by contrast, are much more implicit and have not been recognized as key elements in the process of personality judgment by most personality researchers. Our foregoing discussion strongly suggests that to make personality judgments, people must rely on a reference group, a lay theory, or both. Furthermore, the process of personality judgment should be culturally situated, such that the specific reference group and lay theory that people choose are most likely situated in their immediate cultural milieu. In the American sample of our hypothetical research scenario, the judges were Americans, the targets were Americans, and the trait to be judged was extraversion. The reference group that the judges chose was most likely their fellow Americans. The lay theory they used was most likely how extraversion is defined in the everyday lives of Americans. By contrast, in the Chinese sample of our hypothetical research scenario, the judges were Chinese, the targets were Chinese, and the trait to be judged was extraversion. The reference group that the judges chose was most likely their fellow Chinese. The lay theory they used was most likely how extraversion is defined in the everyday lives of the Chinese.

If our American judges on average scored higher on extraversion than our Chinese judges did, this

result might only suggest that Americans consider themselves more extraverted than their fellow Americans, Americans believe they display more behaviors related to extraversion, or both, than their Chinese counterparts. Conversely, if our American judges on average scored lower on extraversion than our Chinese judges did, this result might only suggest that Americans consider themselves less extraverted than their fellow Americans, Americans believe they display fewer behaviors related to extraversion, or both, than their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, Americans and the Chinese might have defined extraversion in ways that only some behaviors are shared understanding of extraversion and others are not. For these reasons, drawing firm conclusions from the available results is extremely difficult. Both reference groups and lay theories can be problems when comparing personality trait ratings between groups. The more dissimilar the groups are, the more pronounced the problems can be.

In one of the most famous rebuttals against the problem of reference groups (McCrae, Terracciano, Realo, & Allik, 2007), it was argued that while some trait items from the well-established NEO-PI-R demand reference groups explicitly (e.g., "I have fewer fears than most people") or implicitly (e.g., "I am dominant, forceful and assertive"), other items from the same measure require only intraindividual comparisons (e.g., "I'd rather vacation at a popular beach than an isolated cabin in the woods" and "Watching ballet or modern dance bores me"). As such, these items of intraindividual comparisons should be less affected by the problem of reference groups. According to the dual mechanisms of reference groups and lay theories, however, items of intraindividual comparisons may also be problematic, as they may suffer from the problem of different lay theories. For example, while a popular beach and an isolated cabin in the woods make perfect sense to most people in America, most people in China have extremely different ideas about the same objects. While people in America may be bored by ballet or modern dance, most people in China have never sat in an actual ballet or modern dance performance. If reference groups are less of a problem, lay theories may be a problem. If lay theories are less of a problem, reference groups may be a problem.

While we have focused our discussion on personality judgment, the hypothetical research scenario and the conclusions it produces can be found in other social judgment studies as well. As long as these studies use a similar procedure, similar problems of reference groups and lay theories apply. Nonetheless, the purpose of this chapter is not to dismiss research on personality and culture or other studies that used a similar procedure. In fact, these studies are not inherently problematic. They are only problematic in cross-cultural settings when the conclusions of groups in comparison are similar to or different from one another are drawn. In examining the plausible criticisms outlined earlier, as personality psychologists, we are much better served by recognizing the culturally situated nature of personality judgment and that comparing with reference groups and matching with lay theories are two essential mechanisms in the process of personality judgment. Festinger (1954) pointed out that, although people have no disagreement on the physical height of a particular person, the same person regarded as tall in one group can be looked at as short in a different group. For less clearly defined attributes such as personality traits, lay theories of these traits are required for the judgments to make sense to people. In short, a reference group helps the judge position the target, and a lay theory helps the judge determine the trait. Similar to other types of judgments (Barsalou, 2008; Robbins & Aydede, 2009; Smith & Semin, 2007; Yeh & Barsalou, 2006), personality judgment cannot be made in a vacuum. It has to be situated, and culture provides the essential context for the judgment and drives the reference groups and lay theories.

**Postulates of Relative Impact**

The culturally situated process of personality judgment differs significantly from other related models that focus on the accuracy of personality judgment, such as the classic lens model (Brunswik, 1955, 1956), the dual lens model (Hirschmuller, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2013; Nestler & Back, 2013), the weighted average model (Kenny, 1991), the PERSON model (Kenny, 2004), the realistic accuracy model (Funder, 1995, 2012), the state and trait accuracy model (Hall, Gunnery, Letzring, Carney, & Colvin, 2017), and the self-other knowledge asymmetry model (Vazire, 2010). Our focus is on the basic psychological process by which people make personality judgments. In our conception, this process is culturally situated, and reference groups and lay theories can jointly or separately influence these judgments. In what follows, I discuss five postulates of whether either of them may have a larger impact.

The first postulate is related to the objective of the judgment. In some circumstances such as job

interviews or first dates, the stakes of judgments can be high, and the accuracy of judgments may be the foremost objective. In such circumstances, people may pay more attention to trait related behaviors as evidence of the trait and rely more on lay theories to reach an accurate judgment. In other circumstances with low stakes, the motivation from the judges to become accurate can be low, and people may pay less attention to trait related behaviors as evidence of the trait. If necessary, it would also be easier for people to switch between possible reference groups. Thus, it can be postulated that when accuracy is the main objective, lay theories may exert a larger impact than reference groups on personality judgment. By contrast, when accuracy is not an important concern, reference groups may exert a larger impact than lay theories on the judgment. It is interesting to note that, as Funder (1999) and other personality psychologists pointed out, people must achieve at least some level of accuracy in personality judgment, or they may not survive in the complex social world. Hence, it can be further postulated that people tend to rely more on lay theories than on reference groups in most circumstances of personality judgment.

The second postulate is related to the types of the judgment. As shown in many personality judgment studies, the targets of judgment can be the judges themselves (self-judgment) and others familiar to the judges (other-judgment). When people are asked to think about their own levels of extraversion, for example, they might be inclined to think about the specific instances in which they showed extraversion related behaviors, and they have sufficient information concerning these instances. When people are asked to think about the levels of extraversion of other people, however, they might be inclined to think about how the targets are compared to others in the reference groups. Thus, it can be postulated that when the targets are judges themselves, lay theories may exert a larger impact than reference groups on personality judgment. By contrast, when the targets are others, reference groups may exert a larger impact than lay theories on the judgment.

The third postulate is related to the dispositions of the judges. For example, it has long been observed that American culture encourages competitiveness, outward looking, and autonomy of the individual, whereas Japanese culture encourages cooperativeness, inward looking, and conformity of the individual (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Morling, Kitayama, &

Miyamoto, 2002). These different cultural emphases can lead to important differences among individuals. Americans may, therefore, routinely make personality judgments by comparing the targets with outside groups, whereas the Japanese may make similar judgments by routinely matching with internal definitions of the traits. It can be postulated that, as a result of different cultural emphases, when the judges are Westerners such as Americans, reference groups may have a larger impact than lay theories on personality judgment. By contrast, when the judges are Easterners such as the Japanese, lay theories may have a larger impact than reference groups on the judgment. These differences can be used to describe not just national cultures but also different organizations, communities, and the like.

The fourth postulate is related to the degree of familiarity of the judges with the targets. Some judgments are about strangers, whereas others are about acquaintances. Essentially, when people make personality judgments of strangers, they are provided with limited information on the targets. As a result, they may have to focus their attention on making sense of the trait related behaviors. When people are asked to make personality judgments of acquaintances, they would already have sufficient information about the targets and only need to position the acquaintances in the appropriate group for comparison. Hence, it can be postulated that when the targets are strangers, lay theories may have a larger impact than reference groups on personality judgment. By contrast, when the targets are acquaintances, reference groups may have a larger impact than lay theories on the judgment.

The fifth postulate is related to the description of the traits. As in previous personality judgment studies, the specific trait items that judges evaluate can be stated in abstract versus concrete terms. Personality research along the lexical tradition began with words and short phrases captured in dictionaries. Today, some of the trait measures use more abstract terms (e.g., Goldberg, 1992; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003; Saucier, 1994) and others use more concrete descriptions of traits (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999; Soto & John, 2017). Some of the personality measures have a mix of abstract and concrete items. For example, the same trait extraversion can be measured by asking people to consider how extraverted they are. It can also be measured by asking people to consider the extent to which they feel excited or eager and the extent to which they prefer to have others take charge (Soto & John, 2017). When

people are presented with trait items that are more abstract, the room for consideration widens, and thinking about possible reference groups becomes easy. By contrast, when people are presented with trait items that are more concrete, they may involve themselves more in matching the concrete behaviors described in the items with the possible behaviors of the target. Thus, it can be postulated that when the trait items are more abstract, reference groups may exert a larger impact than lay theories on personality judgment. By contrast, when the trait items are more concrete, lay theories may exert a larger impact than reference groups on the judgment.

Additional postulates can be developed and empirically tested to further disentangle the relative impact of reference groups and lay theories. There should be a number of specific circumstances in which reference groups or lay theories would exert a larger impact. Consideration of these postulates can also stimulate new understanding of various issues in the personality process.

## Inferring Traits from Situations, Behaviors, and Explanations

Our foregoing discussion also suggests that given the dual mechanisms of reference groups and lay theories, people may rely heavily on lay theories in many circumstances of personality judgments because the accuracy of these judgments may be important, and these judgments could lead to important life outcomes. If we are still at the beginning of understanding how people actually choose reference groups, as personality psychologists, we know even less about how people choose lay theories for the traits to be judged.

One possible means to better understand the connection between traits and lay theories would be the framework involving situations, behaviors, and explanations (SBEs) recently developed by Yang and colleagues (2014). In a series of empirical studies, these researchers demonstrated exceptionally strong relationships between all Big Five personality traits and the kinds of situations people find themselves in, their behavioral responses to those situations, and their explanations for their behaviors in those situations. For example, high level of conscientiousness may manifest itself in the situation of "when someone asks me to complete a task" by the behavior of "I make sure to get it done and to the best of my ability" and for the explanation of "because I don't like letting others down." For another example, low level of extraversion may be reflected in the situation of "When I am in school" by the behavior

of "I usually like to sit alone" and for the explanation of "because I feel overwhelmed by all the people." While correlations between two identical constructs in psychology typically range from .70 to .90 (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009), Yang and colleagues (2014) found that correlations between traits and SBEs were between .75 and .89 on the Big Five dimensions. Moreover, after the SBEs were translated into different cultures, they found that correlations between traits and SBEs still ranged from .62 to .87 on the Big Five dimensions, suggesting that SBEs may be a universal folk psychological mechanism that underlies personality traits.

In addition to the strong correlations between traits and SBEs, Yang and colleagues (2014) also showed that one trait (and any particular standing on the trait) can manifest itself in multiple SBEs. In line with the example of SBE described earlier, high level of conscientiousness can also be reflected in the situation of "when I have an assignment due" by the behavior of "I create a timeline" and for the explanation of "because I want to be as efficient as possible." Hence, many different situations, behaviors, and explanations can have implications for the same trait. This point is important because it contrasts directly with the traditional notion focusing on behavioral consistency across situations for inferring traits (see Swann & Seyle, 2005). The SBE framework suggests that behavioral consistency is not required for the existence of a trait. The very diverse situations, behaviors, and explanations associated with a trait show precisely the predictive power of the trait.

Conversely, each SBE is only diagnostic for some, and not all, possible traits. The two examples of SBEs related to conscientiousness would have little implication in judging traits unrelated to conscientiousness, such as extraversion or openness. Not all situations are relevant to all traits, either. Only when the right situation is present can one make a personality judgment based on the behavior displayed in the situation and the explanation provided for the behavior. This point of relevance is important because traits should not be expected to predict all behaviors in all situations (Swann & Seyle, 2005). Traits should only be used to predict relevant behaviors in relevant situations. The commonly assumed .30 to .40 "personality effect ceiling" may be an underestimation. Yang and colleagues (2014) showed that correlations between traits and relevant behaviors can range from .64 to .85 on the Big Five dimensions.

Then, what would be the situations relevant to traits? There are at least two venues to examine this

question. One is external to traits. In the past decade or so, personality researchers have made great progress in classifying situations and developing taxonomies of situations (e.g., Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Parrigon, Woo, Tay, & Wang, 2017; Rauthmann et al., 2014; Saucier, Bel-Bahar, & Fernandez, 2007; Yang et al., 2006). The major types or features of situations identified through these efforts can be associated with specific traits. Another venue is internal to traits. Personality researchers have also attempted to look at situations embedded in the traits (e.g., Church, Katigbak, & del Prado, 2010; Jones, Brown, Serfass, & Sherman, 2017; Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman, 1996; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001, 2002; Tett & Guterman, 2000; Yang et al., 2014). Either way, the connection between situations and traits can and should be examined in a more systematic manner. This point is important because most situations are irrelevant to the trait to be judged. Only certain situations can provide the appropriate opportunities for trait expression.

Once the situations relevant to specific traits are identified, the kinds of behaviors and explanations relevant to the traits can be identified as well. Traditional research on personality judgment has focused on behaviors as the strongest indicator of personality traits. The SBE framework can help determine the most relevant behaviors of particular traits. This framework also shows that, explanations are as strong as behaviors in providing trait related information (Yang et al., 2014, Studies 5 and 6). Thus, explanations can also have strong implications in judging traits. Yang and colleagues (2014) further suggested that the process by which lay people begin to associate specific situations, behaviors, and explanations with particular traits can be examined as well.

## Comparing Cultural Groups

While the overarching objective of this chapter is to better understand the process of personality judgment, it is worthwhile to reconsider the hypothetical research scenario described in the beginning of this article. If the problems of reference groups and lay theories are so troublesome, can we ever determine actual differences in personality traits between groups? I suspect that at least three possible solutions to this issue are available. The first solution is to ignore the problems of reference groups and lay theories as long as there are sufficient reasons to believe that the groups in comparison are more similar than different. This assumption is not unrealistic-given that globalization has become a major theme

in today's world (Arnett, 2002). For example, the reference groups and lay theories used by university students in Shanghai may be more similar than different from those used by university students in Los Angeles.

A second possible solution is to have judges familiar to both groups in comparison as participants of the study. Bicultural participants with substantial knowledge on two cultural groups can be asked to compare themselves (or other targets) against either group (Heine et al., 2002, Study 2). A limitation of this strategy is the self-selected nature of the bicultural participants, which may further confound the conclusions. This strategy cannot be used among other, non-bicultural participants with no substantial knowledge on other cultures.

A third possible solution is related to the targets of judgment. In one sample of the comparison study, for example, the participants would be Americans, the targets would be both Americans and Chinese, the reference group and lay theory would both be American, and the traits to be judged would be the entire domain of the Big Five. In another sample of the same study, the participants would be Chinese, the targets would be both Americans and Chinese, the reference group and lay theory would both be Chinese, and the traits to be judged would be the entire domain of the Big Five. This strategy does not require bicultural participants. It also simulates actual circumstances in which the personality characteristics of Americans and Chinese are judged in America and China. However, a major challenge of this strategy is to actually have the targets of judgments as both Americans and Chinese. At least two options can be considered for this purpose. One is to use group labels (e.g., Americans and Chinese), and another is to use descriptions of the people as the targets of judgments.

Although presenting group labels is simple and direct, if we present group labels to the judges, these judges may have to base their judgments on the stereotypes they hold about the groups, as they would not have sufficient knowledge on other cultural groups. Alternatively, descriptions of American and Chinese can serve as the targets of judgments. We can systematically identify the ways in which the personality characteristics of Americans and the Chinese are described in everyday language in America and China, translate these descriptions between English and Chinese to form a common pool, and have these descriptions judged simultaneously by people in America and China on the Big

Five traits. This strategy was applied in the last two studies of Yang and colleagues (2014). A limitation of this strategy is the fact that representative descriptions of Americans and Chinese can be difficult to obtain.

## Summary

In this chapter, reference groups and lay theories are introduced as two implicit, yet essential components in the process of personality judgment. It is argued that people must rely on a reference group of the target, a lay theory of the trait, or both, to provide personality judgment. Importantly, the specific reference group and lay theory that people choose are situated in their immediate cultural milieu and have systematic impact on their judgment. The relative impact of reference groups and lay theories can also change under different circumstances. Moreover, the strong connections between traits and situations, behaviors, and explanations are discussed. Possible means to better compare cultural groups on personality traits are also suggested.

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