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Journal of Research in Personality 43 (2009) 255–256

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Research in Personality

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

The legacy of the person–situation debate for understanding variability in emotional experience

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 10 January 2009

Keywords:
Emotion
Appraisal
Person–situation debate

People can experience a vast range of different emotional experiences, ranging from joy and love to anger, sadness and fear. Where the person–situation debate revolved around the question how we can explain "why people behave the way they do", a tantalizing question that has occupied emotion researchers over the past decades is how we can account for the variability in emotional experiences across different persons and contexts, or—stated differently—how we can understand "why people feel the way they feel". As it turns out, there is remarkable similarity between the answers that have been formulated to this question and the insights that emerged from the person–situation debate.

Appraisal theories of emotions are widely regarded as one of the most compelling accounts of the elicitation and differentiation of different emotions (Scherer, Schorr, & Johnstone, 2001). They posit that an individual evaluates (or *appraises*) his or her circumstances as a function of his or her own concerns, goals, and competencies (e.g., as positive or negative, as fair or unfair, controllable or not) and that the outcome of this appraisal process is associated with specific emotional experiences. For instance, when publically insulted, a person may appraise this event as negative and unfair, and he or she may experience anger in response to the event. As such, appraisal theories strongly resonate with one of the key insights from the person–situation debate by assuming that the emotion-eliciting process rests on the interaction between person and environmental characteristics (Griner & Smith, 2000; Kuppens & Van Mechelen, 2007). Moreover, contemporary appraisal research has shown that not only how people appraise their circumstances, but also how specific appraisals are associated with emotional experience is subject to individual differences. In other words, the same appraised meaning may not be associated with the same emotion for all individuals (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Smits, De Boeck, & Ceulemans, 2007). Taken together, appraisal theories can thus be considered to reflect a specific realization of the CAPS theory formulated by Mischel (Mischel & Shoda, 1998). In this theory it is likewise posited that a situation elicits particular cognitive-affective units (in the emotion context: appraisals), that the excitatory and inhibitatory influences of these units (appraisals) combine to determine the person's behavior (emotion), and that individual differences in behavior (emotion) result from how people differ in the accessibility of the CAPS units (appraisals) and in the ways these units give rise to behavioral outcomes (emotions).

It is no mere coincidence that our current knowledge about how emotions come about strongly reflects and corroborates what we have learned from the person–situation debate. If there is anything to learn from this fundamental convergence reached between the personality and emotion domain, it is that for both the key task ahead lies in studying the regularities and consistencies in people's contextualized behavioral and emotional signatures—how people behave and feel in response to specific contexts—if we truly want to capture the richness, and both stability and variability in how people behave and feel the way they do.

Acknowledgments

Peter Kuppens is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the Fund for Scientific Research, Flanders (FWO) and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. The work for this

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doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2008.12.027

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paper was supported by KULeuven Research Council Grant GOA/05/04.

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