Contextual Determinants of Personality

Joseph Veroff
University of Michigan

An approach is developed that relies on the principle that an individual's personality is best described and understood in terms of various contexts in which that individual is embedded. Five different kinds of contexts are considered: historical, cultural (and subcultural), developmental, organizational, and interpersonal. Each is illustrated with findings from two national sample surveys (one done in 1957; the other in 1976) that measured social motives through thematic apperceptive techniques. This contextual approach implies that personality is dynamically accumulative over the life span and that it is best assessed by subdividing a given personality characteristic into variants of that characteristic, which, if measured, can accurately pick up the contextual effects on the characteristic.

According to most personality theorists and researchers, a personality characteristic exists within a person's organization of behavior and experience independent of changes in that person's situational context. Traits, values, motives, and coping and expressive styles are thus described as having conceptual realities that transcend any particular life setting, whether we are talking of cross-situational consistency at a given point in a person's life span, or temporal stability over short or long periods of a person's history.¹ Some people are thought to have a high need for affiliation regardless of their current affiliative status or experience with friends or family; some people are thought to espouse authoritarian values even when associating with people of lower status during their lives and people of higher status at other times; and some people are thought to be repressors in relaxed or anxious settings.

In this notion of a stable personality, many social researchers propose that to understand a person's behavior, we have to know not only what his or her personality is, but the dynamics of the setting in which the behavior occurs. Behavior represents an interaction of personality and situation. Indeed, this position has become the preferred model for explaining complex social behavior. One is impressed by the array of active personality researchers who automatically assume such a position in the exciting set of papers collected by Magnuson and Endler (1977).

The clearest, most sophisticated use of the interaction position is articulated by Atkinson and Birch (1970). To predict persistence in an achievement setting

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by their model, one has to know not only the person's expectancies and incentives in that setting and what that person has been experiencing in the preceding flow of activity, but also the strength of the person's general motives to approach success and avoid failure.

My earlier work with Sheila Feld in studying well-being of the general population also adopted the interaction strategy. We analyzed how people with the same personality such as those having a high power motive react differently to different family or work role situations such as parenting preschoolers or parenting adolescents, and how people with different personality structures (high vs. low motives) react to the same situations such as being well-educated, married, and at midlife (Veroff & Feld, 1970).

The interactionist's research task is to determine how a specific measure of personality interacts with a specific situation to determine behavior in that context. While this position is appealing because it acknowledges both situational and personality determinants of behavior, it nonetheless oversimplifies our conception of personality. My own recent work on the study of motives and other personality characteristics increasingly convinces me it is theoretically impossible to isolate a unitary stable personality factor outside its various contexts. What we are like as people cannot be isolated from what we are like as we interact with the social world, and perhaps vice versa. This view is very much like Raush's (1977) perspective on interactions. It forces us to question simple personality assessments and turn to multiple dimensions of any given characteristic; dimensions that can sensitize the scientist to the variety of situations in which that characteristic is relevant.

This article's premise is not essentially different from what symbolic interactionists have advocated for many years—that a person's self can be defined only in reference to his or her relationships. This tradition has deep roots in sociology, where there has been a firm preference for seeing human behavior as organized primarily from conditions outside the person. This tradition has begun to take root in psychology as well, especially after Mischel's influential advocacy of the situation as primary determinant of personality-relevant behavior took hold in our journals (Mischel, 1968). The now popular interaction strategy in psychology approaches the symbolic interactionist's position by acknowledging the importance of situation, but it steadfastly retains some notion of a stable personality interacting with that setting. Mischel (1977) himself has acknowledged the importance of many types of personality variables interacting with situations, but avoids consideration of those personality characteristics that represent broad cross-situational traits. Bem and Funder (1978) attempt to assess situationally relevant aspects of personality but ultimately have a conception of personality that transcends situations.

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Can we assume that important personality characteristics remain stable and unaffected by situations? While there is evidence of impressive stability for some characteristics (Moss & Sussman, 1980), we should be open to seeing how situations potentially affect all characteristics. When we enter into a new situation, we emerge from a previous context that affected us. This also applies to our personality when we first entered the new situation. Personality, then, is not affected by the distant past alone but is affected by the near past. Moreover, as soon as we begin to act or react in any current situation, our personality can change. Personality is thus dynamically accumulative. Even characteristics thought to be core may shift, however minutely, if the contextual shifts are very dramatic. In philosophical analysis we are able to say the person is not really the same person from one moment to the next, but we fail to deal with that philosophical insight in studying personality. We must begin to think about personality in this contextual way.

Moss and Sussman's extensive review of longitudinal studies of personality (1980) suggests that whether one concludes personality is relatively changeable or stable over the adult life span depends on the dimension of personality considered. A stylistic characteristic, such as introversion-extraversion, shows stability at a very early age (Bronson, 1967) and over a ten-year period for young, middle-aged, and elderly men (Costa & McCrae, 1980). Characteristics related to values, such as motives, are more susceptible to changing cultural prescriptions and hence show less stability over time. The contextual influences on personality discussed in this article most clearly apply to personality characteristics directly relevant to values, but they also may be relevant to other aspects of personality less amenable to change.

— This article presents a contextual approach to personality from our work on the assessment of motives. For over 20 years a number of us have been involved in the analysis of data amassed in 2 national surveys of well over 2000 Americans each—one done in 1957, (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff, Feld, Gurin, & Atkinson, 1960) and another in 1976 (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981; Veroff, Depner, Kulka, & Douvan, 1980). Each was a representative sample of adults residing in households. In each we obtained identical assessments of people's well-being, self-conceptions, reactions to life roles, and—most relevant to this article—the strength of their motives for achievement, affiliation, and power. By providing us with heterogeneous samples at 2 very different periods in modern American history, these surveys made us look at social underpinnings of personality characteristics. Not until we discovered that motive-behavior connections varied across the 2 surveys or across different age and status groups did we become fully aware of the differential effect various contexts might have on personality characteristics. It soon became hard for us to separate the nature of a given motive for a given individual from the year of assessment, or apart from the social roles in which that person was embedded. We found concrete instances of Parsons and Shils's (1951) abstract representation of personality as dynamically interdependent with social systems. Our survey results forced us to

envision personality as dependent on a variety of contexts: historical, cultural (subcultural), developmental, organizational, and interpersonal. Each of these will be discussed briefly.

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

First, let me illustrate the need to consider personality in historical contexts, a position emphasized by life-span theorists (Baltes & Nesselroade, 1969; Elder, 1979). In both the 1957 and 1976 surveys, we were able to obtain projective assessments of achievement, affiliation, and power motives commonly used in personality research (Atkinson, 1958; McClelland, 1975; Winter, 1973). Overcoming substantial methodological hurdles to replicate these measures over a generation (see Veroff et al., 1980), we have valid assessments of people's general dispositions to value achievement, affiliation, and power in their lives. Most researchers using these measures have assumed these reflect stable dispositions. Winter, McClelland, and Stewart (1981), for example, have shown that the power motive assessed in college is predictive of the health status of men many years later.

An analysis of the 1957 versus 1976 comparison of the motives did indicate that the absolute level of some of the motives differed in the population. Women in 1976 had higher achievement motives and fear of weakness; men in 1976 had higher hope of power and fear of weakness but lower affiliation motives (Veroff et al., 1980). With an overall change in the society over a generation, one might expect the meaning of having a strong or weak motive might change. And, indeed, recent analysis suggests that very few correlations of the motives to other variables that were meaningful and significantly related in 1957 follow the same patterns in 1976 (Veroff, Note 1).

The most striking instance of this concerned men's achievement motives. In 1957 we found that the higher the achievement motive, the more men expressed dissatisfaction with their work (Veroff & Feld, 1970). This was true for men from every level of the occupational hierarchy. This led us to theorize about the general meaning of the achievement motive in relationship to work. A reasonable interpretation had been that a strong achievement motive prompts men to set higher and higher levels of aspirations for themselves which keep them from being entirely satisfied with their work. The achievement motive arouses men to seek further accomplishment and not rest on past accomplishments.

This seemed an adequate explanation, until we tested that hypothesis once again in 1976. To make a long story short, instead of replicating results in the 1976 survey, we found them reversed: The stronger the achievement motive, the *greater* the job satisfaction. What happened to our conception of the achievement motive as something inciting higher levels of aspiration and thus dissatisfaction with work? It obviously needed amendment. We can begin to speculate that either the meaning of work or the meaning of the achievement

motive, or both, were different in the 2 periods. A lot of other data suggest that, compared to workers in 1957, men in 1976 were more defensively involved in getting achievement gratifications from work (Veroff et al., 1981). It became a normative expectation in 1976 that one should attain a sense of personal accomplishment from work (*Work in America*, 1973). Thus, to express job dissatisfactions may have had a different meaning to highly motivated persons in each period. The 1976 men may have had more ego at stake in making such an evaluation.

Even so, another interpretation is possible. The nature of men's achievement motive may have shifted from 1957 to 1976. Evidence from the way men reacted to their work shows that the meaning of "pride of accomplishment," the presumed general affective goal of the achievement motive, may have shifted from the emphasis on task accomplishments in 1957 to an emphasis on the process of personal actualization by 1976. Task accomplishment is defined as an investment in the product of one's effort; personal actualization means an investment in the fulfillment of personal potential. A recent check on the type of imagery associated with the achievement motive in the 1957 and 1976 studies showed, in fact, that tests using a character striving for a unique task accomplishment were used significantly more frequently in the 1957 stories. The 1957 achievement motive was thus more task-centered. It could very well have kept men in 1957 from feeling completely satisfied with work because it is rare for men to accomplish all the task goals they set for themselves. By contrast, the 1976 achievement motive was more oriented toward personal actualization and may have encouraged men in 1976 to be involved in their own successful accomplishments on a day-to-day basis. The 1976 orientation could lead to enhanced job satisfaction, whether or not long-term task goals were met.

Still another interpretation is possible. We must recognize the possibility that since the bases of the scoring of the achievement motive (McClelland et al., 1950) were validation studies begun in the late 1940s, the criteria in coding may be historically biased. Criteria that became relevant in 1976 may not have been picked up by the system used in 1957. Had the 1976 stories been scored with criteria relevant to 1976, the relationship between the achievement motive and job satisfaction might have been constant across the generations. Under these circumstances, the meaning of the achievement motive would be the same in 1957 and 1976, but the style of expression in story-telling would be different. This kind of speculation raises the methodologically burdensome necessity of making different criteria for assessment of personality for different historical eras.

These various interpretations are highly speculative. Nonetheless, the results do suggest that we must appreciate the meaning of the achievement motive within the historical era in which it was evolving. We should attend to the historical implications of that motive as well as to the historical influences on assessment.

CULTURAL AND SUBCULTURAL CONTEXTS

Clearly, when we refer to different historical eras, we are also describing the different overall cultural contexts of a society. Historical changes in motives, like the recent increase in the level of the achievement motive in women mentioned earlier, force us to notice shifts in values in the society that are contextually relevant for all members of a given culture or subculture. If women are more highly motivated to achieve in 1976 than they were in 1957, the meaning of high achievement motives for a given woman or man in the 2 eras is also different. Different types of attributions about success or failure may be involved with a larger reference group of people who strive for achievement (Goethals & Darley, 1977).

In addition to the historical and cultural contexts, we should be alerted to the effect subcultural contexts have on personality. The meaning of high motivation may be different in one group compared to another. For example, our survey data shows that in working-class groups, the power motive has more to do with men's reactions to their families than to their work. The reverse is true for middle-class men (Veroff, 1982). We speculate that for power-motivated men of lower status, work is secondary because it has little recognition or impact on others, including their families. Power-motivated men thus become more directly concerned about their power in the family arena. By contrast, middle-class power-motivated men can pay primary attention to their work because their work not only provides many opportunities for power but also conveys power to their family and peers; thus these men become especially concerned about guaranteeing their impact at work.

We have found parallel results for women. Educated women with high power motives are particularly involved with power issues connected to their children, while less-educated women with high power motives focus on power issues connected to their marital relationship (Veroff & Feld, 1970). In explaining the results, Veroff and Feld argued that the more-educated women are likely to see raising children as an arena for personal accomplishment and impact, while the less-educated are likely to take child-rearing for granted without involving themselves in issues of personal influence. Conversely, compared to more-educated women, the less-educated women are more likely to see control of husbands as an arena for impact. Lower-status women often are married to men in low-status jobs, which then reduces men's actual power in the family and allows power-assertion by their wives.

Thus, concerns about power are very different for men and women from different class positions in our society. My argument is that these different concerns, in turn, must affect the quality of the power motive for these groups. Different contexts help to define slightly different power motivational dispositions in these groups.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXTS

Let us shift to another source of different contexts for defining personality: a person's age. Is the achievement motive (or any other similar personality characteristic) in an older person the same as it was when that person was young? A contextual argument about personality would say it is not. Most researchers of the assessment of motives have held the view that the meaning of achievement motive remains constant over the life cycle. We have argued that differing contexts of life experience at different points in adult development may create new arenas for expression of achievement motives; we have not suggested that the motive itself changes. By contrast, Maehr and Kleiber (1981) suggest that the qualities of the motive may change as people get older. These writers suggest a version of the contextual position: In the process of aging, new aspects of a person's achievement motive must be created and others destroyed. In other words, the achievement motive itself must change.

I have come to agree with this position. We must move away from viewing personality as a template forged in early childhood or adolescence, a readiness to be aroused by situations but never affected by them. Let me illustrate. In both the 1957 and 1976 surveys, we find a decrease over the life span in women's career achievement orientations but not in their desires to seek excellence in tasks performed (Veroff et al., Note 2). Such a conclusion stems from the following findings: While older women tell fewer stories codable for achievement about work settings than younger women do, they are as likely as the younger women to tell stories about wanting to apply standards of excellence to tasks outside an employment setting. This means that the contexts for career expression are absent from the lifespace of the older women, and the absence of such contexts has affected the nature of their achievement motive. For older women, achievement goals focus on tasks outside work (homemaking, civic activity, etc.) but not on careers. The contexts for achieving that apply to younger and older women reward different ways of being motivated, for achievement, hence women's achievement motives change over their life cycle. The same might also be true for men, but we have less evidence of it.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

Part of the reason changing developmental contexts affect personality is that they also partially reflect changing organizational contexts. As people in young adulthood move from college to work, or to newly formed families, they move to different organizational contexts. Similarly, middle-age-people who have gone from families with younger children to having families in which children are grown up also clearly are part of new organizational contexts. So do older people who have moved from work to retirement, or married couples who lose spouses. As formal and informal organizations change, so do roles. New

demands for behavior, as well as ways of thinking and feeling, are created. These roles transitions must bring about personality change.

Kohn and Schooler (1978) have given us research evidence to demonstrate that being in certain jobs can change men's personalities. They show how people in complex jobs become more flexible, and how people in autonomous jobs learn to emphasize self-evaluation for themselves and their children. Bem's self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), when applied to attitude change, also states that we learn to value what we do. We discover our attitudes from our actions. This is a powerful idea when analyzing how organization contexts might affect personality. Whatever actions we have to perform in work or other organizations we begin to adopt as our personal values. Such an approach to personality change might help us explain the important results we are finding in our analysis of motive scores. In both 1957 and 1976, we found that middle-aged-men are especially strong in the power motive relative to younger and older age groups in each period (Veroff et al., Note 2). It is not difficult to argue that since midlife is a time when men are often given greater responsibility at work, an increased power orientation accompanies the changes in role expectations for responsibility occurring from this job change.

Such an approach to personality would also help us explain another result: Compared to younger women, older women in both surveys were low in the affiliation motive. Older women are usually released from nurturance responsibilities with families as they advance in age. In turn, concern with social comparison to test out their adequacy diminishes as their public duties are fulfilled. Diminished concern with social comparison diminishes the concern about affiliation. Evidently, as most women's children grow up and establish their own lives, women's own anxieties about behaving acceptably as women diminish, which in turn lowers their social comparison and affiliative involvements. Transitions over the life cycle affect women's affiliative motives.

INTERPERSONAL CONTEXTS

In their lives people are deeply enmeshed not only in organizations but also in very private role expectations. The people we love or hate, or with whom we play or work, help shape our personality continuously. Obviously, certain relationships are more indelible. Freud thought so with regard to the oedipal triangle. Alder thought so with regard to siblings. But to construe personality only in terms of early sibling effects, or oedipal resolutions, or even earlier object introjects, would ignore important reshaping that occur in our adolescent and adult experiences. Through our sexual ties, our friendships and attachments, our siblings and children, working colleagueships and associations, we become different people constantly. As we describe a person's current achievement motive or any other important personality characteristic, we have to be aware of how these relationships might define these characteristics.

Let us consider how a certain kind of interpersonal context—a person's sibling relationship—may influence the quality of the power motive. To know that a person's strong motive for power focuses on sibling competition would tell us quite a bit about what kind of social situation might cue power strivings. We might expect such a person to take risks, argue, be ingratiating, or whatever, in order to gain power in groups where people vie for the attention of an authority as siblings might. Some evidence suggests siblings influence the nature of the power motive. Winter (1973) distinguished imagery that reflects hope of power from imagery that reflects fear of power. Men with older siblings are much higher in the use of fear of power imagery than are men who are oldest in their families or who are only children. Evidently men with older siblings experience the sibling hierarchy in a way that arouses a particular power concern that is less evident in other men. Whether these findings represent early socialization differences or current interpersonal setting differences for these men cannot be evaluated. In either case, interpersonal context affects the nature of the power motive.

An additional finding reflecting an effect of an interpersonal context emerged in our comparison of the achievement motive in men whose wives are working with the motive in men whose wives were not working. In the former group there is a significantly greater frequency of competitive achievement imagery in stories that contribute to achievement motive scoring. We would argue that being in a family in which a man's wife is working helps shape this kind of imagery, which in turn is likely to have special effects on this man's achievement strivings. While we recognize that men who have competitive achievement orientations might be just the ones who might marry or encourage wives to work, we believe the direction of causality is better interpreted as the effect on men's motives of the spouse working.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO PERSONALITY

What does this all add up to? What are the implications of a contextual approach to personality? First and foremost, it suggests we cannot easily extricate the description of personality from contexts in which it occurs. We need to move to a more naturalistic science—not one that speaks of single variables, like need for achievement, but one that distinguishes either various dimensions to achievement motivation or variants of need for achievement. We need such complexity because of people's varying historical, cultural, and subcultural contexts, developmental and organizational contexts, as well as their interpersonal spheres. It goes beyond saying we need to institute contexts as controls in our study of personality. A given personality characteristic, like a motive, has different meanings for different people depending on the contexts defining that characteristic. Perhaps there is a general abstract meaning to a

characteristic like the achievement motive, such as "pride in accomplishment," as researchers in achievement motivation have suggested, but its proper assessment and its implications for a given person's activity are defined by the important contexts that make up that person's life.

Traditionally, personality theorists have assumed that from interactions in early childhood we internalize some basic personality core that is our "self." That self is fixed. It may interpret new contexts and alter phenotypic behavior to conform to these new contexts, but the genotypic core self is consistent. The approach advocated in this article questions this assumption and suggests that the core self may be reshaped by contextual changes. Need and value systems are reintegrated as part of the self throughout life. Highly significant changing contexts can alter basic personality characteristics.

As we become aware of the contextual factors that describe personality, we often discover new meanings for a characteristic to which we had previously been insensitive. For example, when we recognized that the meaning of a motive may shift historically, we allowed ourselves to think of ways in which the achievement motive of the 1950s was different from the achievement motive of the 1970s. Our conception of the achievement motive as a fulfillment of personal potential now colors our thinking about this motive as it operated in the 1976 sample, while our view of it as competition with others or with outside standards of excellence predominates for the 1957 sample.

A program for personality research that insists on measuring contexts moves us dangerously close to advocating a completely idiographic assessment of personality, a measurement strategy that has thus far defied adequate systematic analyses for research purposes. Idiographic assessment is of a characteristic within the hierarchy of a person's other characteristics and hence based only on information from the person and not on comparison with others such as assessment permits us to use contextual aspects of an individual's life to assess his or her motivational orientations. We are a long way from achieving systematic idiographic assessment. Instead, we can take another approach. If we could develop a theory of how social contexts affect a characteristic like the achievement motive, we could perhaps limit the dimensions necessary for differentiating variants or dimensions of a given personality characteristic.

Let me illustrate with our own work on the achievement motive. We were faced with a contextual interpretation of this motive when we tried to generalize the achievement motive assessment to groups other than white affluent college men. In studying the achievement motives of women, for example, we find that ideas about the achievement motive based on white affluent men did not fit data observations well. We soon began to reason that women are more involved in the process of achievement, in its intrinsic challenge, and men more involved in achievement as social impact (Veroff, 1977). Other such distinctions took account of other failures to generalize to all groups and finally encouraged us (Veroff & Veroff, 1980) to suggest four variants of the achievement motive: mastering one's own potential; responsibility for other people's achievement

goals; doing well in social comparison and competition; and accomplishing a task that has been set. These types undoubtedly vary over the life span in different cultural contexts, social organizations, or interpersonal settings. As we begin to isolate how social context controls achievement strivings, we have clues about distinctive types of achievement motives that could be assessed in everyone. A completely idiographic assessment is perhaps not needed.

With the contextual viewpoint we have been able to cover many diverse deficiencies in a classical model of personality that assumes both consistency and stability in factors that are useful in explaining human behavior. The contextual view incorporates changing expressions of motives for time (both historical time and developmental stages), roles in formal and informal organizations, and various significant interpersonal involvements.

Another clear implication of the contextual viewpoint is that our belief in the constancy of personality has to be reconsidered. That belief is a well-socialized habit. The common assumption of most social scientists is that people have from childhood a core personality that is difficult to reshape. People may take on subpersonalities from adolescent or adult experience, but these are transient and in some sense less diagnostic of a person's "real" motives, values, and beliefs. We agree there is a constancy of the early learned core despite research evidence from longitudinal data that only the most general expressive aspects of personality, such as extroversion-introversion, show considerable consistency. One does not have to become a situational psychologist to deal with this fact. One can assume that personality is always evolving in contexts. For people who remain in stable contexts, there will be considerable consistency over time. For others who move into very different contexts, there will always be some change—perhaps even dramatic ones. For all of us, role transitions occur over the life cycle. The transitions must continuously redefine our personalities. How much of a so-called core personality remains insulated from these transitions must remain an open question. To think about and assess personality in contextual terms seems like a critical way to look at personality in the decades ahead. We must rethink what we mean when we assert that a single dimension like the achievement or affiliation motive is applicable to all people in all situations. Such characteristics must be assessed on a more complex level to account for the fact that they are inextricably tied to the social contexts that define men's and women's lives.

NOTE

¹Mischel and Peake (1982, in press) draw a distinction between cross-situational consistency and temporal stability in personality, and, in their own terms, find more evidence for the latter than the former. In this article these terms are considered equivalent, since demonstrating either one requires that the psychologist examine a person's behavior at different times under changing contexts.

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Joseph Veroff is a professor of psychology and a faculty associate at the Survey Research Center, both at the University of Michigan. His research interests have focused on subjective mental health and social motivation.