



## Situational Determinism-One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

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critical drivers of subordinate attitudes and behaviors. Why would anyone care about the effects of leadership if the behavior of subordinates is already programmed in their genes?

As organizational downsizing continues and the number of stable jobs declines, it is imperative that selection not be based on criteria of questionable validity. Virtually all of the studies cited by House and colleagues (1996) on the predictive validity of dispositions for job performance find effects in the single digits. As researchers, we have an ethical responsibility to discourage selection and promotion decisions based on invalid criteria that have only limited effects on individual job performance.

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### Situational Determinism—One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

Below we respond to Davis-Blake and Pfeffer's (1996) dialogue about our response (House, Shane, & Herold, 1996) to their (1989) article, and again

challenge their suggestion that dispositional research is not advancing knowledge about organizational behavior.

**Definition of dispositions.** Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1996) criticize our definition of dispositions as being so broad as to be inconsistent, or even meaningless. By insisting on absolute stability as a criterion for identifying dispositions, they develop an overly rigid definition. For example, they identify race and gender as individual differences, while arguing that anything less stable cannot be a disposition. In response, we ask what should we call these other "things"? Just because situations interact with dispositions, such as need for achievement, negative affectivity, or self-esteem, does not negate their value as predictors of behavior. Either we have to define individual differences rigidly and wish away all characteristics of individuals that are malleable or consider the effect of individual characteristics that have theoretical value and that vary in stability.

Davis-Blake and Pfeffer's (1996) contention that we equate states and traits misrepresents our position and misses the point being made by the research of Brief, Butcher, and Roberson (1995) and others. We do not believe that, by allowing for the malleability of dispositions, we equate traits with states. Rather, there is a proper place for stable, malleable, and transitory individual characteristics. Forcing a choice only between immutable traits and transitory states is imposing a rigidity that flies in the face of evidence that some individual differences can be affected by time and events. For example, Brief and colleagues (1995), who Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1996) cite, found that cookies and aromas had *differential effects on people of different dispositions. Negative affectivity was not caused by cookies; it merely shaped the response to the cookies!*

**The effects of situations.** Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1996) disagree with our view that many contemporary organization settings represent "weak" situations and, therefore, may be more likely to surface the effects of individual differences. They note that "change and uncertainty cause individuals to seek more, not fewer, cues from their environment." That is precisely the point! Strong situations are, by definition, unambiguous. They provide clear guidelines for behavior and minimize the interpretation or inference that needs to be made by individuals possessing different characteristics. When the situation no longer provides the clarity of cues to guide behavior, however, information-seeking, or sense-making activities will increase. Who will seek what, from whom, how they will process the information, and how they will react to the uncertainty will be subject to the operation of individual differences. Greater uncertainty and ambiguity in situations will increase attempts at sense making, which are influenced by individual differences.

**The costs of dispositional research.** Finally, we respond to Davis-Blake and Pfeffer's (1996) reiterated position that dispositional research ought to be discouraged due to "cost" considerations. Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1989: 397) note that such an "approach . . . creates difficult social policy problems," resulting from organizational attempts to select people whose

dispositions are likely to make them more docile or accepting of negative organizational outcomes, or other questionable applications of the research. Of all the criticisms of dispositional research that have been offered, we find this one to be the most puzzling.

The outcomes they fear presume that dispositions can predict important behaviors—exactly what they have been arguing to be a futile exercise. Furthermore, their argument that a dispositional orientation will somehow lead to more abuse than a situational orientation seems utterly baseless. One could easily pose the alternative view that situational perspectives diminish the uniqueness of individuals and their potentialities and reduce organizational life to habituated responses made in response to manipulated environments—a sort of giant Skinner box. If dispositions are, in fact, “just a mirage,” should we not be more concerned with the misuse of environmental manipulation of behavior?

Contrary to Davis-Blake and Pfeffer’s (1996) claim, research is not “unethical” just because it is applied toward ends with which one may disagree. Research to find disease-causing genes is not unethical just because employers or insurance companies may someday use the findings to screen out potential health risks. We feel that this issue represents an expression of a philosophical or an ideological position, not a legitimate criticism of dispositional research, or of our article.

In our view, the situational determinism that is advocated by Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1989, 1996), with a dose of ideological hegemony thrown in, represents one step forward and two steps back. Dispositional research has a legitimate role in the study of behavior in organizations.

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