Individual and situational explanations

Lesson 1.5.2 | Concepts and methods

1. Individual explanations

An individual explanation focuses on the person: abilities, personality, biological characteristics, beliefs or prior experiences. It can explain why people differ in the same broad setting. Individual does not mean inherited, permanent or impossible to change.

Examples include empathy scores in Perry, prior aggression in Bandura and one child's button-related disgust. Learned experiences can become individual characteristics.

2. Situational explanations

A situational explanation focuses on circumstances: social roles, other people, instructions, rewards, available choices and task conditions. It can explain why one person behaves differently across contexts. A situation includes implied authority or an expected conversation, not only a physical place.

Individual focus	Situational focus
Empathy or beliefs	Who approaches; social relationship
Age, ability, prior experience	Instructions, task demands, cues
Baseline aggression	Adult modelling condition
A learned fear	Current exposure and rewards

3. Not the same as nature versus nurture

Nature/nurture asks about innate/inherited influences and environmental experience. Individual/situational asks where an explanation focuses. A learned fear is individual but experience-related. An administered hormone is biological yet part of a changed current condition.

4. Whose behaviour is being explained?

For the subway helper, the victim's cane or apparent drunkenness is a cue in the helper's social situation. The helper's own perceived lifting ability is an individual factor. Naming the person whose behaviour is explained prevents inconsistent classification.

Hint: Identify the behaviour, the person and the proposed influence before labelling an explanation individual or situational.

Individual and situational explanations

Lesson 1.5.2 | Evidence and interpretation

1. Social studies

Study	Evidence and interpretation
Milgram	26/40 reached 450 V in an authority setting; 14 refused. The setting mattered, but neither personality nor individual authority cues were isolated.
Piliavin	62/65 cane trials versus 19/38 drunk trials received spontaneous help. Victim cues and the train context matter; helper differences and varying passengers also matter.
Perry	Measured empathy combined with OT/placebo and task/stimulus differences. Conditional results support considering person and situation together.

2. Cognitive and learning studies

Study	Individual and situational factors
Andrade	Individual attention may vary; shading and a monotonous message changed task circumstances.
Baron-Cohen	Natural diagnostic/cognitive differences; static eyes and supplied words shaped performance.
Pozzulo	Age-related cognition; target type, presence and adult-led expectations.
Bandura	Prior aggression and child sex; changed adult modelling conditions.
Fagen	Age, health and history; reinforcement, cues and distractions.
Saavedra and Silverman	One child's responses; changed exposure and family reinforcement.

3. Biological examples

Dement and Kleitman examined sleep physiology with individual rhythm/recall differences in a controlled laboratory. Hassett combined sex/preferences with group access and rank. Hölzel combined motivated self-selection with an experience-based course. Biological research is not automatically a personality explanation.

Individual and situational explanations

Lesson 1.5.2 | Evaluation and connections

1. Strengths of individual explanations

They account for different responses within similar settings and can guide personalised support. Perry illustrates why an average treatment account may hide different directions of response. Saavedra and Silverman show the value of assessing the specific person's feelings rather than only visible behaviour.

2. Risks of individual explanations alone

They can overlook authority pressure, task demands or unequal opportunities. Calling obedient participants simply "bad people" ignores Milgram's social setting and distress. Group differences also do not establish the cause of individual differences.

3. Strengths and risks of situational explanations

Situational accounts identify conditions that could potentially be changed, such as modelling or instructions. Controlled changes can support causal interpretation when design and measures are sound. However, a situation-only account may overlook variation in abilities, beliefs or prior experience.

Milgram's original condition did not separately manipulate Yale, clothing or payment. Piliavin's group size was observed. A named situational feature is not automatically an experimentally established cause.

4. Interaction

An interaction means a factor's relationship with behaviour depends on another factor. In Perry, treatment-related distance patterns depended on empathy and the task/stimulus. An interaction account must show how the combination matters; merely listing person and environment is insufficient.

5. Build a balanced explanation

Identify a study-specific result; link it to the proposed factor; distinguish manipulated conditions from natural group differences or correlations. Then explain what remains unresolved. Do not claim that one study has removed every competing explanation.

> Hint: Use "the result supports..." with a concrete link. Avoid "proves personality" or "proves the situation" when the proposed cause was not isolated.

Useful judgement: both person and context can matter, but their relative contributions require evidence. A balanced answer is precise about what was measured, changed and left uncontrolled.