Individual and situational explanations

Lesson 7.1.2 | A Level issues, debates and methods

Core ideas

Individual explanations focus on characteristics inside the person, such as beliefs, personality, biology, motivation, cognition or prior experience.

Situational explanations focus on features outside the person, such as social pressure, physical setting, work design, culture, instructions or rewards.

Many behaviours are best explained by an interaction between individual factors and situational pressures.

A Level specialist topics often invite this debate, such as stress, pain, consumer behaviour, mental disorder, motivation and workplace safety.

Individual explanations can be useful for tailored support, but they may risk blaming the person if the situation is ignored.

Situational explanations can support environmental or policy changes, but they may underplay personal differences in how people respond.

Key terms

Individual explanation: An explanation based on personal characteristics or processes.

Situational explanation: An explanation based on the surrounding context or environment.

Disposition: A person's characteristic tendency or way of responding.

Individual and situational explanations

Continued

Context: The setting, people, demands and conditions around behaviour.

Interaction: Two or more factors influencing each other.

Attribution: A judgement about the cause of behaviour.

Personal factor: A characteristic of the individual that may affect behaviour.

Environmental factor: A feature of the situation that may affect behaviour.

Further detail and evidence

Individual explanations emphasise relatively enduring traits, beliefs, biology or skills; situational explanations emphasise the immediate environment, roles, incentives and social context. A measured individual difference is not necessarily inherited, and a situational effect is not necessarily universal.

Clinical: vulnerability and cognitive appraisals can interact with stressful conditions. Consumer: self-monitoring can alter the response to an advertising message. Health: personal beliefs interact with cost/access. Organisational: skill and motivation interact with leadership and task design.

An interaction occurs when the effect of one factor depends on another. In an experiment, manipulate the situational factor while measuring a relevant individual characteristic; avoid calling the measured characteristic a randomly allocated condition.

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Applying the ideas

In Landry, a fixed-value reward was presented supportively or controllingly. Presentation is situational, while employees may differ in how they value autonomy. In Robson, the effect of spacing can depend on the dining relationship. Use this conditional pattern to move beyond simply listing two causes.

Worked example: A hospital manager says nurses make errors because some staff are careless. Another manager points to rotating night shifts, fatigue and confusing displays. How do these explanations differ? The first explanation is individual because it locates the cause inside the nurses, such as carelessness or personal responsibility. The second explanation is situational because it focuses on working time, tiredness and the design of the operator-machine system. A balanced answer would consider both: individual attention matters, but workplace conditions can make errors more likely.

Worked example: In consumer psychology, one shopper buys an expensive dessert because they love sweet food, while another buys it because music, lighting and table spacing make the restaurant feel relaxed. What does this show about the debate? The first shopper is explained more individually because preference for sweet food is a personal factor. The second shopper is explained more situationally because the restaurant environment influences behaviour. The example shows why the debate is useful: consumer decisions can reflect both personal preferences and situational cues in the setting.

Evaluation and connections

Individual accounts can support personalisation but risk blaming the person and ignoring constraints. Situational accounts identify changeable environments but may overlook consistent differences. Controlled manipulation helps isolate a factor; correlations between traits and behaviour retain alternative explanations. A balanced conclusion follows the actual evidence.