

Approaches to the study of social situation and its subjective interpretation

Enfoques de la investigación de la situación social y su interpretación subjetiva

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ABSTRACT:

The results of the theoretical and methodological analysis of the problem of understanding and explaining social reality from the point of view of the situational and personal approaches have been presented in the article. From the perspective of the situational approach the study of social situations is based on the investigation of the situational causes of action. Researchers are interested in revealing the causes conditioning the change of behavior in time - an individual's adaptation to changing situational conditions. From the viewpoint of the personality approach the study of situations must be based on an individual's characterological features, behavior of whom is derived from interpsychic processes. The conclusions have been made that it is necessary to rest on the personal and situational approach for a comprehensive study of the personality's psychological picture of the world, because it is impossible to study the personality and environment surrounding it independently of one another. It has been proved that the personality and environment should be studied in unity, and an emotional experience can serve as a measurement unit - an active attitude of the individual to a situation. Thanks to the works of K.Z. Lewin (2000, 2001) and L.S. Vygotsky (2000), the concept about the fact that

RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta los resultados del análisis teórico-metodológico del problema de entendimiento y explicación de la realidad social obtenidos tan por el enfoque situacional como por el de la personalidad. Siguiendo el primero, la investigación de las situaciones sociales se apoya en las obras respecto a las causas de la acción situacionales. En eso, el interés especial se sitúa en revelar las causas que determinan los cambios de la conducta en el transcurso temporal, es decir, la adaptación del individuo a las condiciones situacionales cambiables. Desde el punto de vista del enfoque personal, la investigación debe ser basada sobre las peculiaridades característico-lógicas del individuo, la conducta del cual se determina por los procesos interpsíquicos. El artículo saca las conclusiones: el examen multilateral del cuadro psicológico del mundo de la personalidad debe ser basado sobre el enfoque situacional y de la personalidad, ya que la personalidad y su ambiente no pueden ser estudiados separadamente. Ya está aprobada la necesidad de estudiar la personalidad y su ambiente como un entero, teniendo como la unidad de medición posible el experimento emocional o sea la actitud activa del individuo hacia la situación. Gracias a las obras de K. Lewin, W. Thomas, L. Vygotsky, ya está de uso

behavior is not determined by the situation which can be described «objectively», but the situation as it is given to the subject in his experiences, is already generally accepted one.

Keywords: Social situation, subjective interpretation, situational approach, personal approach, personal and situational approach

general la noción de que la conducta no viene determinada por la situación la cual puede ser demostrada "objetivamente", sino aparece como realidad dada al sujeto en sus experimentos emocionales.

Palabras clave: Situación social, interpretación subjetiva, enfoque situacional, enfoque personal, enfoque situacional y de la personalidad

1. Introduction

One of the most important key concepts of social psychology is the concept of «social situation». A situation can be treated as something created by the individual in the process of interacting with other people. On the other hand, we can view it as existing independently of its participant or participants. In the first case, the situation is a definite script waiting to be performed by its actors. The adherents of symbolic interactionism always emphasized that external observation has access only to the «actors'» interpretation of the situation that has consequences for behavior and experience, but not its objective characteristics. Another point of view of symbolic interactionists consists in the fact that many definitions of a situation are made through the process of interaction. According to this point of view, the participants cooperate to preserve a mutually acceptable understanding of circumstances that take place in their interacting, to help each other to correctly identify oneself and diminish possible inconveniences. All of us find ourselves in such situations as work, a party and so on, where each person behaves in such a way, in order to correspond with his behavior to the most essential and generally recognized features of the situation, despite the fact that the observed forms of behavior can be different or even contradictory to one another. When we believe that the situation is something, existing only in the «head» of an individual or this is what is created in interaction between several «doers», objective and quantitative features of the situation stop exerting influence on the individual.

Another approach is that situations in fact exist independently of individuals «engaged» in them, and their objective characteristics of the situations really have important consequences (Salakhova et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Enyashina et al., 2017; Efimova et al., 2017; Ganieva et al., 2015; Mitin, 2016; Masalimova & Chibakov, 2016; Klepach & Borodovitsyna, 2017).

No people by themselves create situations of learning, selling, training and so on, that is why each of them has a measurable influence on how people behave in these situations and interact with one another. The expression of emotions, general emotional state, the degree of physical contact depends on the situation which an individual finds himself in. Some psychologists believe that everyday situations number a considerable quantity of features that determine by themselves what people think, how they feel and behave. From this point of view, the subjective nature of defining a situation is unacceptable. The study of the objective nature of situations is connected with a number of difficulties. Firstly, it is difficult to classify occurring social situations, because their quantity is practically innumerable. For example, they can be classified according to the place, where they take place: at home, at work, on holiday... Another way – the classification in conformity with the type of relations – formal, intimate, competitive, collaborative. The difficulty with such approach consists in the fact that there is a situation (without fail) certainly that does not fit into any of the categories. On the other hand, different people not always can come to an agreement regarding the quality of the same situation, for example, the game for an amateur and a professional. Another approach to the classification of situations is an attempt to use perception characteristics that are typical of the majority of people: inclusiveness – non-inclusiveness, simple – complex, activity is manifested – passivity is manifested, pleasant – unpleasant, a feeling of comfort – a feeling of discomfort, occasional – regular, cooperation – competition, formal – informal (Kalinina et al., 2017; Masalimova et al., 2014; Mitin et al., 2017a; Mitin et al., 2017b, Salakhova et al., 2017a, Salakhova et al., 2017b, Salakhova et al., 2017c; Klepach & Gridyaeva, 2017b).

The meaning of the factors of a situation in development and manifestation of the psychical in fact has been recognized by all approaches to the explanation of human behavior, and

discrepancies between them are connected with the fact to what extent situational factors are capable of determining a person's behavior.

However, the recognition of the role of situational variables in the determination of a person's behavior does not indicate yet the study of this situation itself.

The notion of a situation very often is not defined in the literature on psychology. For some psychologists any aspect of the experiment, which does not include intrapersonal variables, is a situational one (Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 2001). Even behaviorism with its focus on external events and conditions of behavior and activity did not give a systematic description of the notion of a situation (all the more a social situation). Experimental social psychologists who studied a person's behavior in the situations modeled by them, were subjected to stiff and substantiated criticism for their loose suggestion that a subject «determines» the situation in such a way as an experimenter expects it from him. In reality, in view of their opponents, in the laboratory its own «subculture» of the situation is created with rules, roles, concepts and targets intrinsic to it (Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 2001). Even in such an «advanced» field of social psychology as the theory of attribution, where the concept of the situation is one of the central ones, the situation, its different aspects and elements having influence on attributive processes, are not described sufficiently enough. The lack of a clearly defined concept of the situation, not to the last extent, may be connected with complex problems which arise before those who address the concept of the situation and its specific form as a social situation.

2. Methodological Framework

At first, the personal approach was formed in science to an understanding and explanation of social reality which was followed by such researchers as R.B. Cattell (1965), G.W. Allport (2002), J. Guilford (1965) and others. These scientists postulated that individual behavior is guided mainly by internal determinants. The controversy around the personality and situation embraced such issues as the interstation sequence of behavior, its stability in time, attribution of causes of behavior to personal or situational factors and the forecast of activity.

Different people in similar situations behave differently due to the fact that the same situation is perceived by people differently. Supporters of the personal approach to the definition of the situation recognize that the subject objectively perceives the same circumstances in a way peculiar to him. Behavior is not determined by the situation which can be described «objectively» or through the general consensus of external observers, but in such a way that the circumstances are considered as they are given to the subject in his emotional experience as they exist for him personally. Theoretically different people in an identical situation should act differently, only people who perceive the situation similarly, act in it alike. The parameters of the assessment of a person's individual actions are distinguished. In H. Heckhausen's (1991) opinion, what makes an action individual is that it is not determined by the conditions of the situation completely, because there are specific qualities in a subject which impel him to act in a certain way. He identifies three parameters of a person's individual actions. The first parameter is the extent of conformity of this action to other people's actions or individual differences. Further, H. Heckhausen (1991) distinguishes the extent of conformity of this action to the subject's actions in other situations or stability in relation to situations. Under the third parameter H. Heckhausen (1991) means the extent of conformity of this action to a person's actions in analogous situations in the past or stability in time.

In E.Yu. Korzhova's (2004) opinion, the classifications of the personality in its reactions to situations are characteristic of contemporary studies, as well as getting back to an understanding of the personality as a set of personal traits, but slots into place in the hierarchical schemes of the ratio of personal traits and situations. In L.F. Burlachuk (1998) and E.Yu. Korzhova's (2004) opinion, the situation can be defined at different levels, from micro to macro. They distinguish the following approaches to the analysis of situations:

- structural and content-related analysis;

- the analysis of peculiarities of perception, motivation and reactions and others.

Advocates of the personal approach to the definition of situation concentrated their attention on characterological differences between people, deriving behavior from intrapsychic processes. Over time the researchers have advanced forward in describing conceptual differences between personalities, however, there was a gap in the description of the situation and circumstances, in which individuals act. Observing one's own behavior, an individual sees the situation as if from the inside, and perception is directed to essential peculiarities of the environment. Accordingly, the subject considers the changing specific features of the situation as the causes of behavior, but not dispositions that impel us to act in this way, not in another way

The situational approach was developed in opposition to the personal approach. The attempt of the theory of properties to reduce the causes of behavior exclusively to the personality was to generate a reciprocal response. The scientists paid attention to the fact that in similar situations the subject's behavior is not as uniform as one would expect under the assumption that action is entirely based on situational actualization of already existing dispositions. If we also proceed from intra-individual changes over time, then the peculiarities of the situation serve as the causes of behavior.

N.V. Grishina (2014) formulated the following stages of the situational approach formation:

— the first stage — «methodological breakthrough» in the setting of a problem «man — environment» (the 20-30-s of the XX century) — the methodological bases of the situational approach were laid down in the works of K.Z. Lewin (2001), L.S. Vygotsky (2000).

K. Z. Lewin (2001) in his works offers his own solution to the fundamental methodological problem of the relationship between the objective and the subjective, of the outer and inner world of a person. In conformity with his approach «description of the situation must be rather "subjective", than "objective", that is the situation must be described from the viewpoint of an individual, whose behavior is studied, but not from the viewpoint of an observer» (Citation according to: Shikhirev, 2000). L.S. Vygotsky's (2000) position is less known in the world science who develops the similar ideas at the same time. L.S. Vygotsky (2000) in his works of the beginning of the 1930-s in connection with the study of the child development pointed out that a tremendous impediment in its theoretical and practical study was «a wrong resolution of the problem of environment», when the environment is treated as some aggregate of external conditions in relation to the person. A traditional mistake of the existing approaches, in his opinion, is that the environment is studied «in its absolute indicators. In fact, this is absolutely false both from the point of view of theory and practice. A significant difference of the child's environment from the animal's environment consists in the fact that the human environment is the social environment, and the child is a part of the living environment, the environment is never external for the child. If the child is a social human being and his environment is the social environment, then from here the conclusion follows that the child himself is a part of this social environment» (Vygotsky, 2000). This idea, as it is known, was concretized by L.S. Vygotsky (2000) in two concepts that have the most important significance for the situational approach. The first of them is – «social situation of development». Defining this concept in the context of problems of child development, L.S. Vygotsky (2000) described it as a «relationship between the child and the environment that surrounds him», which means in a broad context that the life situation of a person is formed by his relations with the real environment and only through these relations it can be understood. Another concept, offered by L.S. Vygotsky (2000) as a unit for studying the personality and milieu is the concept of experience, which should be understood as an internal attitude of a person to this or that moment of reality. It is this internal attitude that plays a fundamental role in childhood – «...the environment determines the development of the child through experiences of the environment» – and keeps its significance in the life of an adult (Vygotsky, 2000).

Thus, already in the works of such classical scientists of world and Russian psychology as K.Z. Lewin (2001) and L.S. Vygotsky (2000), not simply the methodological ideas were formulated about the role of the environment in fact (which is often studied as something external in relation to a person) in development and a person's life activity, but also the

bases of the situational approach that considered the holistic unity of the personality and its situation. Thus, the traditional stiff opposition between internal (personal) and external (situational) factors was overcome.

— the second stage (the 70-80-s of the XX century) — the appearance of works devoted to the study of situations (Mischel, 1968; Lomov, 1976).

W. Mischel's (1968) well known work that aroused great resonance should be called among them. It was devoted to personal psychodiagnostics which demonstrated limited prognostic possibilities of personologic approaches. The novelty of W. Mischel's (1968) approach consisted in the conclusion drawn by him: without reducing the results obtained by him to the weakness of the methodological tools, he hypothesized that low values of the cross-situational coherence of behavior are explained by some important objective laws of human behavior. In fact, W. Mischel's (1968) work posed a question of the necessity to go beyond the boundaries of traditional personological approaches (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

At the end of the 80-s L. Ross and R. Nisbett's (1991) well known book «The person and the situation» came out which was evaluated as one of the most important psychological works of the decade and became the strongest «challenge» of the situational approach to contemporary psychology. The «force» of their work is in persuasive argumentation of impossibility to predict a person's behavior on the basis of the knowledge about his personal peculiarities or his behavior in other situations. Relying on K.Z. Lewin's (2001) ideas, the authors formulate three fundamental principles which, in their opinion, must underlie an understanding and study of man's behavior: the principle of situationism (the idea about a strong determining influence of the social situation), the principle of subjective interpretation (which represents the result of interaction between the personality and situation) and the notion of the tense systems (individual and collective psychological phenomenology should be viewed as systems in the state of tension (for more details see Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

In 1979, the conference on interactive psychology was held in Stockholm entitled "The Situation in Psychological Theory and Research". All 22 reports presented at the conference were published in 1981 in a special publication under the promising title "Towards the Psychology of Situations: An Interactive Perspective," compiled and edited by one of the most prominent researchers in the field, D. Magnusson (1981). In his view, the creation and development of a new field - the psychology of situations - is an urgent task of psychological science. The works presented in the collection of works reflect three fundamental themes - the environment and real situations, the perception of situations and the environment, the interaction between man and the environment - and contain both the development of theoretical ideas in the field of the situational approach, and examples of empirical studies. The same year, in 1981 two works came out, devoted to the studies of situation psychology by British psychologists M. Argyle, A. Furnham & J. Graham (2001), having become today already classical. Possible approaches to the study of situations are described in it, their characteristics are identified and analyzed in detail, the examples are set from numerous empirical and experimental studies of situations (for more details see).

It is worth noting that at the same time in domestic science B.F. Lomov (1976) names the study of situations as one of the most important objectives of psychology. In fact, thanks to these and some other works not only were empirical data obtained that helped to specify and develop the ideas about situations, but the objectives of their empirical study were also set.

— the third stage — the intensification of interest in psychological problems of situations in contemporary world and domestic psychological science.

W. Thomas (1988) and K. Lewin's (2001) works marked the beginning of contemporary studies of social situations.

W. Thomas (1988) emphasized the role of the situational determination of a person's behavior, however, he focused attention on the point that one could describe the situation adequately only with the help of understanding its subjective meaning for the individual himself. The definition of the situation, in W. Thomas' (1988) opinion, not only characterizes

the individual's actions that follow from this definition but also determines the whole way of life. The situation, in W. Thomas (1988), W. Thomas & F. Zanetsky's (2006) understanding, contains three types of data:

- 1) objective conditions under which the individual and society act; these conditions represent a set of values which at this moment exert influence on the state of the individual's consciousness or the group's consciousness;
- 2) the existing attitudes of the subject which have a real influence on his behavior at this moment;
- 3) the definition of the situation representing a more or less clear conception of condition and understanding the attitudes.

Thus, W. Thomas (1988) turned the academic community's attention to the problem of studying situations, without denying the personal determination.

K.Z. Lewin (2001) is considered to be one of the founders of the situational approach in social psychology. He formulated his theory in the mid 30-s of the XX century from the idea that behavior represents the function of the personality and situation, the function of «life space», that is formed by the personality and which is becoming a part of his own self. Each psychological event, in K.Lewin's (2001) opinion, depends on the individual's state and at the same time on environmental conditions, though their relative significance is unequal in different cases. In other words, in order to understand behavior, it is necessary to consider the subject and environment as an integral part. The unity of the individual and psychological environment K.Z. Lewin (2001) names as life space. In the studies of the actual social situation K.Z. Lewin (2001) makes a conclusion that the social context of life impels or, vice versa, restricts the powerful forces determining the person's behavior.

The consideration of the situation not from the point of view of a researcher but from the point of view of the individual endowing the situation with his subjective sense becomes the methodological foundation. Special interest while analyzing the person's behavior is paid to externally insignificant, but extremely important specific features of the situation — «channel factors» indicating to the presence of critically important influences and barriers. The impact of any objectively stimulating situation depends on the personal and subjective meaning which the person attaches importance to the situation. However, despite the fact that personal characteristics were not ignored by the supporters of the situational approach, its meaning remained unchanged: behavior and activity are completely determined by the situational factors.

Understanding the environment as external conditions of the person's life activity resonates with such concepts as «social case», «case», «social episode». This approach identifies such concepts as «environment» and «situation», however, the level of defining the situation is not taken into account. The situation is treated either as the aggregate of the environment elements or as a fragment of the environment at a certain stage of the person's life activity. Such definition of the situation is quite common. It is followed by D. Magnusson (1981), M. Argyle, A. Furnham & J. Graham (2001), W. Mischel (1968) and others. According to such understanding, the structure of the situation comprises the doers, the activity they carry out, its temporal and spatial aspects. Situations are distinguished by ecological, geographic, architectural, psychosocial and other environmental variables and their attributes.

3. Results and Discussions

The conducted theoretical and methodological analysis allows us to draw the following conclusions.

The representatives of the personal approach while defining social situations place emphasis on characterological differences between people, derive behavior from intrapsychic processes. Observing his own behavior, the individual sees the situation as if from the inside, and perception is directed to essential peculiarities of the environment. Accordingly, the subject considers the changing specific features of the situation as the causes of behavior, but not dispositions that impel us to act in this way, not in another way.

The majority of the authors of situational approach treat the situation as an objective totality of the environment elements which exerts a stimulating, conditioning and corrective impact on the individual. In the study of situational causes of action, the scientists are interested in revealing the causes that condition the change of behavior in time — the individual's adaptation to changing situational conditions. The limitation of such interpretation harbors danger, since it may lead to the scheme «stimulus — reaction». Any form of the use of the thesis — «going through the system of internal variables, a stimulus turns into a motive» — reaches a methodological deadlock, because what is excluded from the subject is what constitutes his essence — activity. This factor is taken into account only in the personal approach to the definition of the situation. Of these viewpoints follows from the latter assertion which is based on the fact that subjective and objective interaction between the personality and environment is viewed as some interrelationships. From this point of view, the authors assert, the situation must be defined not as the totality of elements of objective reality, but as a product and result of the active interaction between the personality and environment.

4. Conclusions

Thus, one can draw a conclusion that it is necessary to rely on the personal-situational approach for a comprehensive study of the psychological picture of the world of the personality, since the personality and his environment cannot be studied in isolation from each other. L.S. Vygotsky in his works wrote that the person and his environment could not be studied separately from each other. The study of the personality and the environment must also be carried out in unity, and emotional experience should serve as a unit of measurement. Emotional experience is an active relationship of the individual to the situation.

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