

Walter Mischel: The Mind Behind Personality Theory

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Walter Mischel (born 1930) is an American psychologist specializing in personality theory and social psychology. He is the Robert Johnston Niven Professor of Humane Letters in the Department of Psychology at Columbia University.

Early life

Mischel was born on February 22, 1930 in Vienna, Austria, from where he fled with his family to the United States after the Nazi occupation in 1938. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York and studied under George Kelly and Julian Rotter at Ohio State University, where he received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology in 1956.

Professional career

Mischel taught at the University of Colorado from 1956 to 1958, at Harvard University from 1958 to 1962, and at Stanford University from 1962 to 1983. Since 1983, Mischel has been in the Department of Psychology at Columbia University.

Mischel was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 2004 and to the American Academy

of Arts and Sciences in 1991. In 2007, Mischel was elected president of the Association for Psychological Science. Mischel's other honors include the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association, the Distinguished Scientist Award of the Society of Experimental Social Psychologists, the Distinguished Contributions to Personality Award of the Society of Social and Personality Psychologists, and the Distinguished Scientist Award of American Psychological Association's Division of Clinical Psychology. He is past editor of *Psychological Review* and past president of the American Psychological Association Division of Social and Personality Psychology and of the Association for Research in Personality. Mischel is the recipient of the 2011 Grawemeyer Award in Psychology.

Contributions to personality theory

In 1968, Mischel published the now classic monograph, *Personality and Assessment*, which created a paradigm crisis in personality psychology that changed the agenda of the field for decades. Mischel showed that study after study failed to support the fundamental traditional assumption of personality theory, that an individual's behavior with regard to a trait (e.g. conscientiousness, sociability) is highly consistent across diverse situations. Instead, Mischel's analyses revealed that the individual's behavior, when closely examined, was highly dependent upon situational cues, rather than expressed consistently across diverse situations that differed in meaning.

Mischel made the case that the field of personality psychology was searching for consistency in the wrong places. Instead of treating situations as the noise or "error of measurement" in personality psychology, Mischel's work proposed that by including the situation as it is perceived by the person and by analyzing behavior in its situational context, the consistencies that characterize the individual would be found. He argued that these individual differences would not be expressed in consistent cross-situational behavior, but instead, he suggested that consistency would be found in distinctive but stable patterns of if-then, situation-behavior relations that form contextualized, psychologically meaningful "personality signatures" (e.g., "she does A when X, but B when Y").

These signatures of personality were in fact revealed in a large observational study of social behavior across multiple repeated situations over time (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Contradicting the classic assumptions, the data showed that individuals who were similar in average levels of behavior, for example in their aggression, nevertheless differed predictably and dramatically in the types of situations in which they aggressed. As predicted by Mischel, they were characterized by highly psychologically informative if-then behavioral signatures. Collectively, this work has allowed a new way to conceptualize and assess both the stability and variability of behavior that is produced by the underlying personality system, and has opened a window into the dynamic processes within the system itself (Mischel, 2004).

In a second direction, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Mischel pioneered work illuminating the ability to delay gratification and to exert self-control in the face of strong situational pressures and emotionally "hot" temptations. His studies with preschoolers in the late 1960s, often referred to as "the marshmallow experiment", examined the processes and mental mechanisms that enable a young child to forego immediate gratification and to wait instead for a larger desired but delayed reward. Continuing research with these original participants has examined how preschool delay of gratification ability links to development over the life course, and may predict a variety of important outcomes (e.g., SAT scores, social and cognitive competence, educational attainment, and drug use), and can have significant protective effects against a variety of potential vulnerabilities. This work also opened a route to research on temporal discounting in decision-making, and most importantly into the mental mechanisms that enable cognitive and emotional self-control, thereby helping to demystify the concept of "willpower" (Mischel et al., 1989; Mischel & Ayduk, 2004).

Stanford marshmallow experiment

The Stanford marshmallow experiment was a study on deferred gratification. The experiment was conducted in 1972 by psychologist Walter Mischel of Stanford University. The experiment has been repeated many times since, and the original study at Stanford has been "regarded as one of the most successful behavioural experiments". In the study, a marshmallow was offered to each child. If the child could resist eating the marshmallow, he was promised two instead of one. The scientists analyzed how long each child resisted the temptation of eating the marshmallow, and whether or not doing so had an effect on their future success. The results provided researchers with great insight on the psychology of self control.

Original experiment

Origins

The experiment has its roots in an earlier one performed on Trinidad, where Mischel noticed that the different ethnic groups living on the island had contrasting stereotypes of one another, specifically, on the other's perceived recklessness, self control, and ability to have fun. He performed an experiment similar to the marshmallow experiment, albeit with a chocolate bar, and discovered that ethnicity did not affect deferred gratification at all, while social and economic backgrounds did.

Stanford experiment

The purpose of the original study was to understand when the control of deferred gratification, the

ability to wait in order to obtain something that one wants, develops in children. The original experiment took place at the Bing Nursery School located at Stanford University, using children around the age of four to six as subjects. The children were led into a room, empty of distractions, where a treat of their choice (Oreo cookie, marshmallow, or pretzel stick) was placed on a table, by a chair. The children could eat the marshmallow, the researchers said, but if they waited for fifteen minutes without giving in to the temptation, they would be rewarded with a second marshmallow. Mischel observed as some would "cover their eyes with their hands or turn around so that they can't see the tray, others start kicking the desk, or tug on their pigtails, or stroke the marshmallow as if it were a tiny stuffed animal", while a few would simply eat the marshmallow as soon as the researchers left.

Results

While a few children would eat the marshmallow immediately, of the over 600 who took part in the experiment, one third could defer gratification long enough to get the second marshmallow. The experiment confirmed the hypothesis that age does determine the development of deferred gratification.

Follow-up studies

It was the results of the follow-up study, that would take place many years later, which surprised Mischel. Since Mischel's daughters knew and grew up with many of the original test subjects, through casual conversation, Mischel discovered there existed an unexpected correlation between the results of the marshmallow test, and the success of the children many years later. The first follow-up study, in 1988, showed that "preschool children who delayed gratification longer in the self-imposed delay paradigm, were described more than 10 years later by their parents as adolescents who were significantly more competent". A second follow-up study, in 1990, showed that the ability to delay gratification also correlated with higher SAT scores.