


Taking Situations Seriously: The Situation Construal Model and the Riverside Situational Q-Sort

Current Directions in Psychological Science
2016, Vol. 25(3) 203–208
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DOI: 10.1177/0963721416635552
cdps.sagepub.com


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Abstract

After years of neglect, situations are beginning to be taken seriously in psychological research. Two recent steps include the development of a theoretical framework, the Situation Construal Model (SCM), and an assessment tool, the Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ). The SCM describes behavior not only as a function of direct effects of personality and situations but also as a function of construal—how the individual perceives and responds to each situation he or she confronts. The RSQ assesses situations in terms of 89 descriptive phrases that can be rated by observers or participants; the consensus of socially competent observers represents the “objective” nature of a situation. The SCM provides a basis for an ongoing program of research using the RSQ to examine topics including the consistency of behavior, person-environment congruence, consequences of situational construal in social and medical contexts, classification of situations based on evolutionary theory, and the comparison of situational experience across cultures. Promising directions for future research include applications to educational, medical, and industrial settings. Taking situations seriously opens the door to many potential theoretical advances and practical applications.

Keywords

assessment, construal, personality, situations

For a long time, psychologists have acknowledged the truism that behavior is a function of an interaction between the person and the situation (Lewin, 1951), and some have even viewed the situation as nearly all-important (e.g., Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Nonetheless, the development of a true psychology of situations was long delayed. For many years, the traditional method in social psychology has been to manipulate one or two (usually one) aspects of experimental settings and measure the behavioral result. The situational independent variables selected for study are chosen on two grounds: first, the feasibility of manipulating them in a laboratory, and second, their relevance for testing specific hypotheses. They are not necessarily selected to be intrinsically important or representative of situations in real life. Moreover, the focus on single (or a few) independent variables means that whole situations are seldom assessed, taxonomized, or compared. As a result, the many accomplishments of social psychology do not include the development of a systematic psychology of situations, because that was never really its goal in the first place. However, in recent years a psychology of situations has begun to take shape,

and the purpose of this article is to summarize some progress toward this goal.

As soon as one begins to consider situations worthy of study in their own right, one confronts a difficult conceptual question: Where do situations exist: in the eye of the beholder, or as objective reality? The question arises because psychological consequences of situations are inevitably filtered through the perceptions of the people who experience them (Reis, 2008). As Mischel (1977) observed, “any given, objective stimulus condition may have a variety of effects, depending on how the individual construes and transforms it” (p. 253), and Bem and Allen (1974) went so far as to claim that “the classification of situations . . . will have to be in terms of the individual’s phenomenology, not the investigator’s” (p. 518).

While this point of view has merit, it can be taken too far. In its extreme form, the idea that everyone has a

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unique construal of every situation is directly contradicted by the vast literature of experimental social psychology. If most research participants did not perceive the situational independent variables manipulated in these studies in more or less the same way, then meaningful differences between experimental conditions could not emerge. In fact, individual differences in how people respond to situations in experimental research are typically treated as error variance.

Moreover, to view situations as residing solely in the eye of the beholder raises serious conceptual problems. First, such an analysis absorbs the study of situations back into the study of personality. For example, imagine two people playing a game. One person is characteristically competitive and the other is not. The first might construe the game as involving and motivating and respond with activity and engagement. The second might construe the game as pointless and respond with behavioral and emotional withdrawal. Their different behavior could be explained on the basis of their different perceptions, but in this analysis the situation itself—the actual game—has disappeared. Instead, analytical focus has returned to differences between individuals, where standard personality analysis began in the first place.

Second, defining situations solely in terms of construals opens the risk of circularity. The first person's competitive behavior might be "explained" on the basis of his or her perception of the situation as evoking competition—which is not very helpful. Thus, situations must be conceptualized separately from individual construals (Reis, 2008; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010; Wagerman & Funder, 2009). This is not to say that psychological situations can exist apart from the humans who experience them (Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015). The "objective" nature of situations, like the objectivity of anything else, can be defined only in terms of the consensus—as opposed to the discordances—among socially competent observers¹ and in that sense can be considered akin to "social axioms" (Leung et al., 2002).

Conceptual Framework: The Situation Construal Model

The Situation Construal Model (SCM; see Fig. 1) aims to integrate the three legs of the *personality triad* (Funder, 2006): persons, situations, and behaviors. The model's analysis begins with the observation that personality and situations both have direct effects on behavior. Personality's direct effects stem from factors such as temperament, habit, and ability. These individually distinctive influences affect nearly every behavior that a person performs and are not necessarily (or typically) mediated by conscious construal. The situation's direct effects stem from its objective structure, such as the incentives it contains,

the dangers it affords, the rules that are enforced within it, and other aspects that would affect the behavior of almost anybody. These aspects of the situation are readily visible to any competent social observer and, as mentioned above, in that sense can be considered consensual or objective.

Over and above these personality and situational processes, every individual also uniquely interprets or construes every situation that he or she confronts, and this construal is a joint product of his or her personality as well as the situation's objective nature. This construal is important at both the individual and the cultural level. At the level of the individual, construal constitutes what Murray (1938) called *beta press*, the situation as perceived (as opposed to *alpha press*, the situation as it really is). Discrepancies between alpha and beta press produce individual differences in behavior and, when extreme, might indicate psychopathology. At the level of the culture, "in spite of the many ways in which cultures differ, the proximal prediction of affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses will be subjective construal of the situation" (Oyserman, Kemmelmeier, & Coon, 2002, p. 116). In other words, for the individual and for the culture, situational experience is where the rubber meets the road.

Assessment Tool: The Riverside Situational Q-Sort

The SCM is a conceptual framework; empirical study requires commensurate tools to measure its three basic elements: persons, situations, and behaviors. For personality, our lab has long used a comprehensive Q-sort measure developed decades ago by Block and his colleagues (the California Adult Q-sort, or CAQ; Block, 1961, 1978), and we later developed our own parallel Q-sort for describing behavior (the Riverside Behavioral Q-sort, or RBQ; Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000). The more recent development of the Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ) aimed to provide a commensurate means for describing situations.

Existing tools did not fit the bill. Several creative efforts developed various taxonomies of situations over the years (e.g., Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Endler, Hunt, & Rosenstein, 1962; Kelley et al., 2003; Krahe, 1986; Magnusson, 1971; Van Heck, 1984; Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006; see Ten Berge & De Raad, 1999, for a review and Wagerman & Funder, 2009, for an update), and the cognitive-affective personality system model (CAPS; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) described if-then patterns that conceptualize individuals in terms of behavioral signatures associated with particular situations. However, none of these prior efforts yielded a practical assessment instrument, and the CAPS model, in particular, did little to specify the

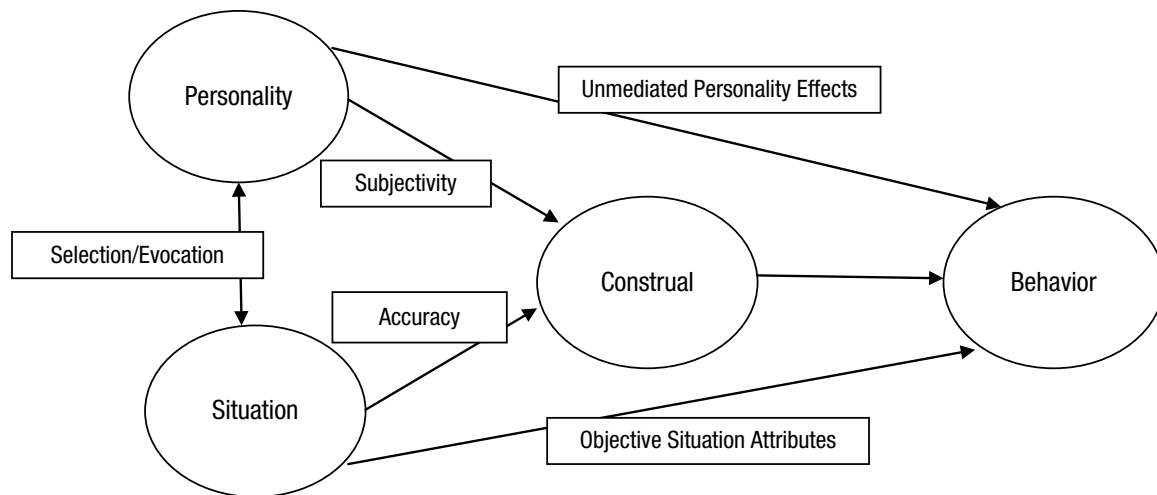


Fig. 1. The Situation Construal Model. The model views an individual's construal of a situation as a joint function of his or her personality and the objective situation and his or her behavior as a function of this construal, effects of personality not mediated by construal (e.g., temperament and automatic processes), and objective attributes of the situation visible to others (e.g., incentives, dangers, rules).

psychological variables that make one situation different from another (Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2008, 2009).

The RSQ was designed to assess psychologically meaningful properties of situations at a middle level of analysis (cf. Rauthmann et al., 2015), neither in terms of concrete properties (e.g., temperature, number of people present) nor broad categories (e.g., a party, a meeting) but at the level of experientially salient aspects, such as the presence of an authority figure or the encouragement or prohibition of talking. Further, the instrument is intended to quantify the degree of similarity or dissimilarity between any two situations and to directly address the person-situation interaction widely acknowledged to be a fundamental basis of human behavior (Bem & Funder, 1978; Lewin, 1951). This focus on the person-situation interaction made prior conceptualizations of personality a natural place to start.

For each of the 100 personality descriptors in the CAQ, we tried (with partial success) to write an item describing an aspect of situational context that might evoke the relevant behavioral tendency. For example, the first item of the CAQ reads "is critical, skeptical, not easily impressed." The parallel item in the RSQ is "someone is trying to convince someone of something"; the presumption is that someone placing high on the CAQ item would behave differently in such a situation than would someone placing low. The RSQ remains a work in progress; the most recent version, which includes a total of 89 items, is excerpted in Table 1.

What's the Use?: Empirical Studies

The development of this new tool is only the beginning, and philosophical and conceptual analysis will only get

you so far. For empirically minded psychologists, when *any* new research method is developed, the next question should be, what empirical findings and psychological insights can it provide that would not have been possible without it? In other words, what's the use? This is a fair question concerning any putative taxonomy of situations, including the RSQ, and studies over the past several years have sought to answer it in several ways.

Situations and behavior

One of the first published studies using the RSQ found that the different situations that an individual experiences over time will be more similar to each other than to situations experienced by other people (Sherman et al., 2010). Moreover, behavior is more consistent across situations that are more similar to each other, but personality characteristics predict individual behavioral consistency even after statistically controlling for situational similarity. Although these

Table 1. Partial List of Items From the Riverside Situational Q-Sort, Version 3.15

1. Situation is potentially enjoyable.
3. A job needs to be done.
10. Someone needs help.
20. Things are happening quickly [low placement implies things are happening slowly].
30. Situation entails frustration (e.g., a goal is blocked).
60. Situation is relevant to bodily health of P (e.g., possibility of illness; a medical visit).
70. Situation includes stimuli that could be construed sexually.
87. Success requires cooperation.

Note: P = participant. For all 89 items, see <http://rap.ucr.edu/qsorter>.

findings are very basic, it is important to note that they had not been reported in the empirical literature before, because a method for holistically comparing the similarity of situations was previously unavailable.

A further study found that the degree to which one's personality matches or is "congruent" with one's behavior in particular situations is associated with psychological adjustment (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012). Moreover, gender and personality are associated with distinctive patterns of construal; for example, extraverts are more likely to see themselves as the focus of attention, and men are more likely than women to see a potential for someone to be blamed for something (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2013). Additionally, the RSQ tested predicted situation-behavior correlations derived from evolutionary theory, which were generally confirmed (Morse, Neel, Todd, & Funder, 2015).

Situational construal

In an experimental study, participants used the RSQ to describe situations portrayed in video clips. Construing a situation "distinctively" (i.e., differently from most other observers) was associated with personality attributes including neuroticism and openness to experience (Todd & Funder, 2012). A larger, experimental study, which placed participants in three video-recorded three-person interactions, found that that personality is associated with how positively people construe the situations they experience and that this positivity is associated with beneficial social outcomes, such as being liked (Morse, Sauerberger, Todd, & Funder, 2015). Similarly, a separate study found that personality traits predicted how people construed their medical visits, and more positive construals were associated with better health outcomes (Morse, Sweeny, & Legg, 2015). All these studies suggest that focusing on the good rather than the bad aspects of situations can be advantageous, although the limits to this advantage remain to be explored.

Cross-cultural situational assessment

The first cross-cultural application of the RSQ found that behavioral correlates of situational descriptors including "P [the participant] is being criticized" and "members of the opposite sex are present" were remarkably similar in the United States and Japan (Funder, Guillaume, Kumagai, Kawamoto, & Sato, 2012). In a more recent, larger project (Guillaume et al., 2015), 5,447 members of college communities from 20 countries, recruited by local collaborators, described the situation they had experienced the previous evening at 7:00 p.m. Situational experience was surprisingly similar, and generally positive, around the world. The countries with the most similar

average situational experience were the United States and Canada; those with the least similar average situational experience were South Korea and Denmark. The country with the situational experience most similar to the others', overall, was Canada; those with the most distinctive situational experiences were South Korea and Japan. Among the RSQ items that varied the most across countries were "situation is potentially emotionally arousing" and "others are present who need or desire reassurance"; among the least varying items were "members of the opposite sex are present" and "situation is potentially enjoyable." In general, the most varying items described relatively negative aspects of situational experience; the least varying items were more positive. Situational experience is an important active ingredient of culture, one that deserves more detailed and extensive exploration.

Future Directions

The International Situations Project is currently being expanded beyond the 20 countries in the initial study, and we and our colleagues are also working to develop efficient taxonomies (for example, the DIAMONDS model, which summarizes the 89 items of the RSQ in terms of eight key dimensions—duty, intellect, adversity, mating, positivity, negativity, deception, and sociality; Rauthmann et al., 2014) and to expand the conceptual analysis of situations and how they affect behavior (Rauthmann et al., 2015). Situational assessment also has many potential, as-yet-unexplored applications for assessing educational contexts, health promotion, and industrial settings: What situations lead to greater academic accomplishment, better health outcomes, or more effective workplaces? After a long delay, situations are finally beginning to be taken seriously. Many theoretical advances and practical accomplishments can be expected as a result.

Recommended Reading

- Guillaume, Baranski, Todd, Bastian, Bronin, Ivanova, . . . Funder, D. C. (2015). (See References). An accessible summary of research examining the experience of situations across cultures and reporting a new study using the Riverside Situational Q-sort.
- Reis, H. T. (2008). (See References). A wide-ranging call for the renewal of research on situations that has stimulated new work in this area.
- Rauthmann, J., Sherman, R., & Funder, D. C. (2015). (See References). An article containing a thorough—even exhaustive—summary of theoretical issues that arise when considering the task of situational assessment, followed by a large number of commentaries and the authors' response.
- Wagerman, S., & Funder, D. C. (2009). (See References). An overview of situational assessment that framed much of the subsequent work cited in this article.

Acknowledgments

Many people have contributed to the research summarized in this article, including (but not limited to) Erica Baranski, C. Randall Colvin, R. Michael Furr, Esther Guillaume, Patrick Morse, Christopher Nave, John Rauthmann, Kyle Sauerberger, Ryne Sherman, Elysia Todd, and Seth Wagerman. Patrick Morse also made helpful comments on a previous draft of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Funding

The research was supported by National Science Foundation grants BCS-0642243, BCS-1052638, and BCS-1528131. Any opinions, findings and conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation. Errors and omissions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

Note

1. The exact nature of “objective” reality is a fraught philosophical issue that will not be resolved in this article; for purposes of empirical research, the consensus of competent observers provides a practical definition.

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