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The Concept of Situations

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Abstract

The concept of situations has a long past, but the conceptualization of situations only has a short history. This article provides a survey of the concept of situations. Based upon Milgram's [*Human Relations* 18 (1965), 57] vision toward 'a compelling theory of situations,' the authors examine the concept of situations in three specific literatures: definitions of situations, taxonomies of situations, and interrelationships among persons, situations, and behaviors. To further integrate the literature, the authors propose that the essence of a situation is its affordance of human goals, and that situations are largely characterized by two specific principles of *goal processes* (what happened, is happening, or might happen to people's goals) and *goal contents* (the specific goals afforded in the situation).

Every day, humans readily infer that they are in one situation or another. Yet, situation is one of the most elusive concepts in the study of human behavior. Today, there is growing consensus, in personality psychology (Funder, 2006), social psychology (Reis, 2008), organizational behavior (Johns, 2006), and sociology (Seeman, 1997) that our conceptualization of situations has been inadequate. This lack of an adequate conceptualization is forestalling long-term progress in deeply understanding the dynamic interactions among persons, situations, and behavior critical for interdisciplinary work (Rozin, 2001).

Recently, a growing number of researchers have begun to address the need for strong theoretical and empirical work on situations (e.g., Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Funder, 2006, 2008, 2009; Furr, 2009; Furr & Funder, 2004; Heller, Perunovic, & Reichman, 2009; Kelley et al., 2003; Saucier, Bel-Bahar, & Fernandez, 2007; Wagerman & Funder, In press; Yang, Read, & Miller, 2006). The *Journal of Personality* devoted a special issue to personality and its situational manifestations (Roberts, 2007). Also in 2007, Harry Reis devoted his presidential address to 'reinvigorating the concept of situation' at the annual meeting of the *Society for Personality and Social Psychology* (SPSP) (Reis, 2008). In 2008, the annual meeting of SPSP included a symposium entitled 'Towards a psychology of situations,' and the biennial meeting of the *European Association of Personality Psychology* invited a similar symposium on 'Situations and behavior.' Furthermore, in 2009, the *Journal of Research in Personality* devoted a special issue to the legacy of the person–situation debate and the integration of persons and situations (Donnellan, Lucas, & Fleeson, 2009).

It is time to again take up the gauntlet thrown down more than 40 years ago by social psychologist Stanley Milgram:

> Ultimately, social psychology would like to have a compelling theory of situations which will, first, present a language in terms of which situations can be defined; proceed to a typology of situations; and then point to the manner in which definable properties of situations are transformed into psychological forces in the individual. (Milgram, 1965, p. 74)

Following Milgram's road map, this article provides an overview of three sets of literatures on situations: (1) definitions of situations, which underlie a common language of situations, (2) taxonomies of situations, which identify the major features and types of situations and allow us to distinguish one situation from the next, and (3) investigations of the interrelationships among persons, situations, and behaviors, which pinpoint how the properties of situations are transformed into psychological forces in the individual. Our goal is to facilitate the ongoing discussion of conceptualizing situations. We close this article with a goal-based perspective that may synthesize the literatures, stimulate new ideas of conceptualizing situations, and broaden our understanding of human behavior.

Definitions of Situations

Before we introduce the ways in which situations have been defined, it is worthwhile to distinguish situation from related concepts such as stimulus and environment. All three terms have been used interchangeably to refer to the external conditions surrounding human activities. However, situation differs from the other two in both the levels of analysis and disciplinary foci. In terms of levels of analysis, situation is typically conceptualized at the intermediate level, while stimulus is at the micro level concerned with a specific object that gives rise to the organism's response (Sells, 1963), and environment is at the macro level concerned with the aggregate of larger physical and psychological conditions that influence human behaviors (Wapner & Demick, 2002). Thus, the concept of situations can be considered at the level between stimulus and environment, such that a stimulus may be a part of a situation, and a situation may be a part of the environment. An empirical relationship established at the level of situations to behaviors may or may not be replicated at the levels of stimulus or environment to behaviors (Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004). In terms of disciplinary foci, then, situation tends to be a focus for personality and social psychologists, stimulus tends to be a focus for cognitive psychologists, and environment tends to be a focus for environmental psychologists (Endler, 1982), although personality and social psychologists have recently developed renewed interests in understanding the role of physical environment in person–environment interactions (e.g., Milgram, 1970; Miyamoto, Nisbett, & Masuda, 2006; Rentfrow, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). In this article, we consider the concept of situations in its broadest sense and discuss research related not just to the traditionally conceived situation, but also to environment and, occasionally, stimulus. We have also considered other terms, such as personal context, social episodes, scripts, situational frames, and behavioral settings as variants of the concept of situations. It is our hope that this broad treatment would be most beneficial to further conceptualizations of situations.

Psychologists have defined situations in terms of two relatively distinct aspects: psychological versus ecological environments (Barker, 1987), social versus physical situations (Endler, 1982), psychological versus biological environment (Kantor, 1924, 1926), behavioral versus geographical environment (Koffka, 1935), perceived versus actual situations (Magnusson, 1981a), alpha versus beta press[1] (Murray, 1938), and subjective versus objective situations (Stebbins, 1967, 1969).

Some definitions have emphasized the idiosyncratic nature of situations. Little (2000), for instance, defined 'personal contexts' as ''the idiosyncratically construed objects, situations, settings, and circumstances of our daily lives'' (p. 93). Krahé (1990) defined 'situation cognition' as the process of ''individuals' attempt to establish the meaning of situations in a subjectively accurate way'' (p. 12). Pervin (1976, 1982, 1992) suggested

that individuals not only have distinctive patterns of perceiving situations, they also have distinctive ways to consider what counts as a situation.

Other definitions have emphasized the culturally construed nature of situations. Argyle, Furnham, and Graham (1981), for instance, defined a situation as ''a type of social encounter with which members of a culture or subculture are familiar'' (p. 4). Abelson (1981) defined 'script' as the ''conceptual representations of stereotyped event sequences'' (p. 715). Furthermore, Read and Miller (1998) argued that situations are concepts that economically instantiate the gist of culturally recurring episodes or stories.

Thus, situations can be generally defined as a combination of the individually interpreted, implicit, and unique understandings, and the culturally shared, explicit, and common understandings of the surroundings that produce and constrain human behavior. As illustrated in the social cognitive theory of personality, Mischel and colleagues argued that *psychological* situations ''capture basic psychological features or ingredients that occur in many different nominal situations and settings'' (Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994, p. 675), and that *nominal* situations are ''dictated by the structure of the particular ecology (the setting), rather than by their potential psychological impact on, and meaning for, the person or by the generalizability of the observations obtained within them'' (Shoda et al., 1994, p. 675).

Taxonomies of Situations

Swann and Seyle (2005) recently argued for ''the development of a comprehensive taxonomy of situations – a development that has been pursued with stunningly modest success since H. Wright and Barker's (1950) early attempt'' (p. 162). In this section, we evaluate a variety of empirically based situation taxonomies that focused on the major features and types of situations in relatively broad domains (cf., Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Block & Block, 1981; Frederiksen, 1972; Insel & Moos, 1974; Moos, 1973; Ten Berge & De Raad, 1999). Taxonomies that focused on relatively restricted domains (e.g., situations of anxiousness, Endler, Hunt, & Rosenstein, 1962; situations of conflict, Pinkley, 1990), or on the physical attributes of the environment (e.g., molar physical environments, Ward & Russell, 1981; environmental scenes, Tversky & Hemenway, 1983) are not discussed.

It is also important to note that, similar to the distinction in the prototype analysis of objects (Rosch, 1978), emotions (Fehr & Russell, 1984), person categories (Cantor & Mischel, 1979), and situation categories (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982), there are two basic kinds of situation taxonomies. The first kind is intended to capture the major *features* (or attributes, characteristics, qualities, and dimensions) of situations. The second kind is intended to capture the major *types* (or groups, clusters, classes, and categories) of the situations themselves.

Across these taxonomies, there is a common three-step methodological procedure. First, a sampling pool of the features of situations, or situations themselves, is selected. Second, interrelations among the features of situations, the situations themselves, or between situations and features of situations are empirically established. Third, the major features or types of situations are identified using data reduction methods such as cluster analysis, factor analysis, and multidimensional scaling. Table 1 summarizes the results of these taxonomies and how they were conducted. To better synthesize this literature, in what follows, we have organized these taxonomies not necessarily in terms of when they were constructed, but in terms of how they complement each other methodologically and conceptually. We first describe the kinds of taxonomies conducted in three major

Table 1 Taxonomies of Situations Based upon Empirical Research

Study	Sample of Situations	Samples of Situational Features	Samples of Participants	Judgment Procedure	Methods of Statistical Analyses	Major Features and Types of Situations Identified
Battistich and Thompson (1980)	30 situations self-reported by students	38 features self-reported by students	Students	Similarity judgment and feature rating	Multidimensional scaling	*Types:* (1) Interpersonal intimacy, (2) Group versus Individual activity, (3) Social isolation, and (4) Behavioral conformity
Eckes (1995)	30 situations self-reported by students	18 features self-reported by students	Students	Feature rating	Cluster analysis	*Features:* (1) Nonintimate, (2) Emotionally un-involving, (3) Informal, (4) Relaxed, (5) Social, (6) Familiar social, (7) Frightening, (8) Emotionally involving, and (9) Competitive
Edwards and Templeton (2005)	Unspecified number in Study 1; 33 situations suggested by other researchers in Study 2	395 and 100 English adjectives in Study 1; 12 English adjectives in Study 2	Students	Similarity judgment and feature rating	Factor analysis, multidimensional scaling, and cluster analysis	*Features:* (1) The extent to which they lead to favorable or unfavorable outcomes for the person, (2) The extent to which the situation fosters or hinders a person's goal-related activities, and (3) The amount of effort required to deal with the situation's constraints

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Table 1 (Continued)

Study	Sample of Situations	Samples of Situational Features	Samples of Participants	Judgment Procedure	Methods of Statistical Analyses	Major Features and Types of Situations Identified
Forgas (1976)	25 situations self-reported by students and housewives	12 features self-reported by students and housewives	Students and housewives	Similarity judgment and feature rating	Cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling	*Features for Students:* (1) Involvement, (2) Pleasantness, and (3) Know how to behave *Features for Housewives:* (1) Perceived intimacy, involvement and friendliness of situations, and (2) The subjective self-confidence or competence of the actors related to the regularity of the situations *Types for Students:* (1) Friends, (2) Acquaintances, (3) Strangers, and (4) People in their official capacity *Types for Housewives:* (1) Casual, (2) Family, and (3) Social
King and Sorrentino (1983)	20 goal-oriented international situations written by item writers	13 features self-reported by students and suggested by other researchers	Students	Similarity judgment and feature rating	Multidimensional scaling	*Features:* (1) Pleasant versus Unpleasant, (2) Accidentally caused/Involved versus Intentionally caused/Uninvolved, (3) Physically oriented versus Socially oriented, (4) Sensitive versus Insensitive, (5) Nonintimate versus Intimate, (6) Long versus Short duration, and (7) Work-oriented versus Relaxation-oriented

Table 1 (Continued)

Study	Sample of Situations	Samples of Situational Features	Samples of Participants	Judgment Procedure	Methods of Statistical Analyses	Major Features and Types of Situations Identified
Magnusson (1971)	25 situations formulated by researchers	None	Students	Similarity judgment	Factor analysis	*Features:* (1) Positive, (2) Negative, (3) Passive, (4) Social, and (5) Active
Nascimento-Schulze (1981)	12 situations suggested by students and researchers	9 features suggested by researchers	Students	Feature rating	Factor analysis	*Features:* (1) Constraints, and (2) Involvement
Pervin (1976)	23, 25, 28, and 29 situations self-reported by four students	185, 210, 162, and 342 features self-reported by four students	Four students	Feature rating	Factor analysis	*Features:* (1) Friendly–Unfriendly, (2) Tense–Calm, (3) Interesting–Dull, and (4) Constraint-Free *Types:* (1) Home–Family, (2) Friends–Peers, (3) Relaxation–Recreation Play, (4) Work, (5) School, and (6) Alone
Price & Blashfield (1975)	445 behavior settings from Barker's, 1968–1969 survey	43 features from Barker's, 1968–1969 survey	Unspecified	Feature rating	Factor an cluster analysis	*Types:* (1) Local business settings, (2) Religious versus Government settings, (3) Youth performance settings, (4) Elementary school settings, (5) High school settings, (6) Adult settings, (7) Women's organizational settings, and (8) Men's organizational settings
Ten Berge and De Raad (2001)	132 situations from 290 personality traits	44 triads of personality traits	Students	Feature rating	Factor and cluster analysis	*Types:* (1) Adversity, (2) Amusement, (3) Positioning, (4) Conduct, and (5) Daily routine

Table 1 (Continued)

Study	Sample of Situations	Samples of Situational Features	Samples of Participants	Judgment Procedure	Methods of Statistical Analyses	Major Features and Types of Situations Identified
Ten Berge and De Raad (2002)	237 situations from 290 personality traits	One's ability to deal with the situations	Students	Feature rating	Factor analysis	*Types:* (1) Pleasure, (2) Individual adversity, (3) Interpersonal conflict, and (4) Social demand
Van Heck (1984, 1989)	248 Dutch nouns	659 features	Unspecified	Feature rating	Factor analysis	*Types:* (1) Interpersonal conflict, (2) Joint working, (3) Intimacy, and interpersonal relations, (4) Recreation, (5) Traveling, (6) Rituals, (7) Sport, (8) Excesses, (9) Serving, and (10) Trading
Yang et al. (2006)	None	115 and 125 Chinese idioms	Students and adults	Similarity judgment	Cluster analysis	*Features:* (1) Whether one's goals succeed or fail, (2) Whether one's goal pursuit is, or is not supported by others, and (3) Whether one's goal pursuit is, or is not supported by social norms

areas of psychology: social psychology, personality psychology, and ecological psychology. We then summarize and discuss the key findings.

Taxonomies of situations in social psychology

In social psychology, the research program on social episodes established by Forgas involves one of the most comprehensive bodies of empirical work on situations. Social episodes, according to Forgas (1976), are ''interaction sequences which constitute natural units in the stream of behavior and are distinguishable on the basis of symbolic, temporal, and often physical boundaries…there is a shared, consensual representation in the given culture about what constitutes an episode and which norms, rules, and expectations apply'' (p. 199). Some examples of social episodes are 'having dinner with your family,' 'having morning coffee with people in the department,' and 'playing chess.'

In one set of studies (Forgas, 1976), participants were asked to keep diaries of their social episodes and descriptive adjectives for each of these episodes, with the most frequently nominated retained for subsequent analysis. Then, the collection of the social episodes was sorted based upon how similar they were to each other, and rated against the list of features in terms of how descriptive the features were to the episodes. The data were then analyzed using cluster analysis and multidimensional scaling to reveal the major features and types of the social episodes. Across a range of such studies, the most frequently identified major features of social episodes are evaluation, involvement, and self-confidence (Forgas, 1979; Forgas & Van Heck, 1992). That is, the overall gist of the situation is captured by its affective charge or likely effect; the extent to which the individual is the actor versus the recipient or target of action; and the degree to which the individual feels confident regarding the outcome of the situation.

Taking a similar approach, other social psychologists have examined the structures of situations common to college students (Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Eckes, 1995; Magnusson, 1971; Magnusson & Ekehammar, 1973) and situations predefined by researchers for specific theoretical purposes (King & Sorrentino, 1983; Nascimento-Schulze, 1981). All these studies used a definition of situations similar to social episodes. At the methodological level, within the studies described thus far, some samples of situations were chosen based upon researchers' intuitions or specific theoretical purposes (King & Sorrentino, 1983; Magnusson, 1971; Nascimento-Schulze, 1981). Others were chosen because participants self-reported the situations with high frequency (Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Eckes, 1995; Forgas, 1976). Almost all the samples of features of situations were chosen because participants self-reported those features of situations with high frequency.

These commonalities may have limited the representativeness of the situations and features of situations sampled in three important ways. First, if only the kinds of situations or features of situations that are more frequently reported by participants are sampled, those that are more idiosyncratic and unique to individuals would not have been chosen and their psychological meanings would not have been revealed. Second, in a majority of the studies mentioned, the content of the situations and features of situations sampled have been limited to the ones related to the daily lives of college students. Finally, across these studies, the actual number of situations and features of situations sampled was small. The numbers of situations sampled ranged from 12 to 36, and the numbers of features of situations ranged from 9 to 38. Considering that most of the contemporary taxonomies of personality traits were distilled from Allport and Odbert's (1936) list of nearly 18,000 trait terms, it would be difficult to conclude that the number of situations or features of

situations sampled in these studies was sufficient. These issues were better addressed by several studies conducted within the tradition of personality psychology.

Taxonomies of situations in personality psychology

The first limitation arising from the lack of idiosyncratic situations and features of situations was addressed by a study conducted by Pervin (1976). In this study, only four college students participated, yet a fairly extensive sample of situations and features of situations was collected from each participant. The inter-correlations between participants' own situations and features of situations were then established. The specific results of this study can be found in Table 1.

The second and third limitations of relying on a relatively small number of situations from college students were addressed by a lexical approach following the trait tradition of personality psychology. Specifically, the lexical approach assumes that the most important aspects of human personality should have been given names and encoded as single terms in the lexicon (Galton, 1884). Over the years, personality researchers have sampled such terms extensively from different languages, factor analyzed them, established a relatively stable five-factor structure, and demonstrated its extraordinary ability to predict a variety of psychological outcomes (Allport & Odbert, 1936; Cattell, 1946; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Allik, 2002; Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). In line with the lexical hypothesis of personality traits, some researchers hypothesized that the most important aspects of situations should also have been given names and encoded as single terms in the lexicon. Therefore, extensive searches into dictionaries should provide us with a large but finite number of terms that people use to describe situations. Thus far, this approach has been applied directly in the studies of situations from Chinese idioms (Yang et al., 2006), Dutch nouns (Van Heck, 1984, 1989), English adjectives (Edwards & Templeton, 2005), and indirectly in the study of situations from personality trait terms (Saucier et al., 2007; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001, 2002).

Van Heck (1984, 1989) was the first researcher to study situations from a lexical approach. Later, Ickes, Snyder, and Garcia (1997) argued that "the English language presents us with a rich vocabulary for describing traits but an impoverished vocabulary for describing situations" (p. 172). More recently, in line with strong empirical findings suggesting that East Asians tend to be more situation or context oriented in allocating attention (e.g., Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), Yang et al. (2006) argued that a rich vocabulary of situations can be found in certain East Asian languages such as Chinese idioms. Therefore, they searched Chinese–English dictionaries for Chinese idioms that can be used to describe the major features of situations. Most of these idioms, consistent with the lexical hypothesis, are a standard length and composed of exactly four Chinese characters. Based upon these rationales, a list of 928 idioms from dictionaries was selected to describe the major features of situations (e.g., too late for regrets, catching up from behind, and holding the winning cards). Native Chinese and English speakers then sorted two random lists from these idioms, and cluster analyses of the data demonstrated that, across different lists of idioms and samples of participants in America and China, goal processes, or what happened to people's goals, were a central organizing principle of how people across cultures distinguish the features of situations. In another study of situations based upon English adjectives (Edwards & Templeton, 2005), it was also found that people distinguish situations based upon the extent to which they lead to favorable or unfavorable outcomes, the extent to which they foster or hinder

people's goal-related activities, and the amount of effort required to deal with the constraints of the situations.

At the methodological level, however, there is a major limitation relevant to the generalizability of the studies taking the lexical approach. Despite the comprehensiveness of situations and features of situations sampled, it is unclear whether the vocabularies of situations in dictionaries might differ from the language of situations people actually use in their everyday lives. In other words, there might be a discrepancy between the world as we describe it, and the world as we actually experience it (Lau, Lee, & Chiu, 2004). While dictionaries provide an extremely useful tool to classify terms of situations, at some point people's lay conceptions of situations need to be studied *in vivo*. This issue has been addressed, at least in part, by the studies conducted under the tradition of ecological psychology.

Taxonomies of situations in ecological psychology

Ecological psychology is a distinct research endeavor initiated by Barker and his associates and spanning half a century (Barker, 1965, 1968, 1987; Barker & Wright, 1951, 1955; Schoggen, 1989; Wicker, 1979, 2002). Deeply influenced by Lewin's field theory, Barker believed that individuals and their behaviors are best understood through a naturalistic approach that uncovers the concrete, immediate situations in which people find themselves. Thus, for example, in a 435-page book *One Boy's Day*, Barker and Wright (1951) presented in lay language the everyday life of a child with extreme detail. Almost all aspects (e.g., where he went, what he said, who he interacted with, what he did) of the life of the child were recorded in the book.

As expected, a primary goal for ecological psychologists is to map out the units of the environment that are psychologically meaningful to ordinary people. Such units, termed *behavior settings*, were developed as a chief concept to capture the social–physical situation in which human behaviors occur. Behavior setting can be defined as 'a bounded, self-regulating and ordered system composed of replaceable human and nonhuman components that interact in a synchronized fashion to carry out an ordered sequence of events called the setting program' (Wicker, 1979; p. 12). As Barker (1963) noted, their field studies in Midwest, Kansas (USA), and Yoredale, Yorkshire (UK) showed that such settings can be reliably identified and described without any explicit theories. In fact, they were able to identify and describe 758 behavior settings in Midwest, and 884 behavior settings in Yoredale. These settings were argued to have captured most, if not all, publicly available settings in these two communities. Some examples of the behavior settings include 'high school assemblies,' 'Hopkin's feed store,' 'Midwest theater,' and 'U.S. Army recruiting office' (Barker & Wright, 1955, pp. 156–176). Examples of the often hundreds of descriptive features of behavior settings include 'time and place boundaries of the setting,' 'duration of setting,' 'number of times setting occurred over the survey year,' and 'number of people who took part in setting.' Details of how behavior settings can be identified and described are provided in Barker (1968). In a later study, Price and Blashfield (1975) demonstrated that the 455 behavior settings and 43 features identified by Barker (1968) that characterized McLouth, Kansas, a small rural town consisting of 628 persons, can be statistically reduced to a limited set (see Table 1).

The research program on behavior settings developed by Barker et al. is probably the very earliest systematic work on situations. However, it has not been well received in mainstream American psychology. The methods of ecological psychology used to identify

behavior settings and their characteristic features have proven to be laborious (Wicker, 2002). Furthermore, the overwhelming details in the descriptions of behavior settings seemed to have prevented generalizability of the findings. Perhaps most importantly, having focused almost exclusively on the influence from environment to behavior, it has been argued that ecological psychology 'came to be not really very much about psychology as it is generally conceived' (Scott, 2005, p. 323).

Features and types of situations identified across taxonomies

Across the variety of studies that identified the major features or types of situations, there are several commonalities (see Table 1). On the one hand, the most frequently identified *features* of situations are evaluation, positivity versus negativity, pleasure versus adversity (Forgas, 1976; King & Sorrentino, 1983; Magnusson, 1971), or the success or failure of people's goal pursuit (Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Yang et al., 2006). Other frequently identified features of situations include constraint, passive versus active situations (Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Forgas, 1976; Magnusson, 1971; Nascimento-Schulze, 1981), involvement, or emotionally involving versus un-involving situations (Eckes, 1995; Forgas, 1976; King & Sorrentino, 1983; Nascimento-Schulze, 1981), and ease of dealing with the situations (Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Eckes, 1995; Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Forgas, 1976; King & Sorrentino, 1983; Pervin, 1976; Yang et al., 2006). It can be argued that these features of situations are most related to people's goal strivings and various trajectories associated with people's goal pursuit.

On the other hand, the most frequently identified *types* of situations are those about family and intimacy, which afford such goals as having family and romantic relationships (Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Forgas, 1976; Pervin, 1976), about friends, social, and organizational situations which afford such goals as establishing interpersonal and social relationships (Forgas, 1976; Pervin, 1976; Price & Blashfield, 1975; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001, 2002; Van Heck, 1984, 1989), about school, work, and business which afford such goals as achievement (Pervin, 1976; Price & Blashfield, 1975; Van Heck, 1984, 1989), and about relaxation–recreation play, recreation, traveling, sport, amusement, and daily routine which afford such goals as maintenance and play (Pervin, 1976; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001, 2002; Van Heck, 1984, 1989). It can be argued that these types of situations are most related to the kinds of goals afforded in the situation.

Persons, Situations, and Behaviors

A central reason for developing an adequate conceptualization of situations is that it is critical to understanding the interrelationships among persons, their situations, and their behavior in those situations. The interrelationships among persons, situations, and behaviors, according to Funder (2006), can be considered in terms of the three specific pairs of person–situation interactions, person–behavior interactions, and situation–behavior interactions. As research on person–situation interactions has historically attracted more attention than research on the other two, we focus our current discussion on the studies of person–situation interactions. Specifically, we first consider studies that adopted a static view of person–situation interactions or a dynamic view of person–situation interactions, and then consider studies that explored the underlying principles that may explain the dynamic person–situation interactions.

The static and dynamic views of person–situation interactions

The static view of persons and situations was first proposed during the person–situation debate (see Funder, 1999, 2001; Kenrick & Funder, 1988). As the focus of the debate was on the relative power of persons versus situations, a number of researchers used an analysis of variance design to quantify the amount of influence on behaviors from persons, situations, and their interactions (Bowers, 1973). This design necessarily assumes that the relationships between persons and situations must be independent (Olweus, 1977). However, this assumption was soon challenged in the discussion of modern interactionism, which maintains that the relationships between persons and situations are more likely to be dynamic and reciprocal, rather than static and independent (Endler & Magnusson, 1976a,b).

At the empirical level, an array of studies demonstrated that indeed, persons and situations cannot be independent, as in everyday lives people actively choose to enter or avoid certain situations (Ickes et al., 1997). Moreover, these choices were found to be related to the specific personality traits, self-concepts, social attitudes, and the types of relationships people have (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). For instance, extraverts tend to seek out stimulating social situations more than introverts, and neurotics tend to avoid competitive or social situations (Furnham, 1981).

The underlying principles of person–situation interactions

While some of the earlier studies established meaningful relationships between persons and situations in one time, laboratory settings, a series of studies conducted by Diener, Emmons, and Larsen not only examined the relationships between persons and situations in naturalistic everyday settings, but also unpacked specific principles underlying these relationships (Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984; Emmons & Diener, 1986a,b,c; Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1985, 1986).

In their first study, Diener et al. (1984) asked 42 participants to complete an activity and a mood report at two randomly scheduled times every day for six consecutive weeks. In each report, participants provided information about the types of situations they found themselves in (social-alone, work-recreation, and novel-typical), and their mood states (e.g., happy, depressed, enjoyment, and frustrated) in the situations. A total of 3,512 reports were collected during this period. In addition, two personality measures were administered to all participants. Results of the study showed that first, in naturalistic everyday settings, people's personality characteristics did correlate with choices of situations. For instance, need for achievement positively correlated with work situations and negatively correlated with novel situations, need for order negatively correlated with social and novel situations, and extraversion positively correlated with situations in which subjects recreated socially. Second, however, it was shown that people did not spend more time in situations where they experienced more positive affect (e.g., happy, joyful, and pleased), nor did they spend less time in situations where they experienced more negative affect (e.g., unhappy, frustrated, and angry). Thus, affect cannot explain people's choices of situations.

In the follow-up studies using a similar procedure, the same group of researchers showed that more meaningful relationships can be found among personalities, choices of situations, and affect, when a distinction between chosen and imposed situations was made (Emmons & Diener, 1986a,b; Emmons et al., 1985). For instance, need for achievement correlated positively with feeling productive in chosen work situations, but negatively with feeling productive in imposed work situations. In the last study of this

line of research, Emmons and Diener (1986c) explored whether affect congruence or goal attainment better explains people's choices of situations. The study was divided into three phases. First, each participant generated a list of 20 recurring situations from their everyday lives and each situation included three components of a who, a what, and a where (Pervin, 1978). These situations were subsequently categorized into four major types of situations (social, alone, work, and recreation). Second, participants provided daily reports of their mood states in the situations of longest duration every day, and the degree to which the situations were chosen or imposed. Finally, the importance, relevance, and attainment (satisfaction and frustration) of a list of 17 goals were associated with 20 common situations generated by the participants. Results of the study showed that goal attainment and goal importance best predicted choices of situations, particularly in chosen, as opposed to imposed situations. Affect was not shown to significantly predict choices of situations for participants. In another study, it was found that goal attainment not only predicted the amount of time people chose to spend in certain situations, but also the affect people experienced in those situations (Emmons et al., 1986).

Toward a Goal-Based Conceptualization of Situations

Based upon Milgram's (1965) vision for 'a compelling theory of situations,' our preceding review has considered the three major knowledge traditions on situations: definitions of situations, taxonomies of situations, and interrelationships among persons, situations, and behaviors. A common issue that cuts across these literatures, however, is the lack of a strong theoretical perspective that defines the nature of situations, identifies specific principles of situations, and accounts for the relevant knowledge traditions on situations. In fact, few researchers have attempted to conceptualize and theorize situations in a systematic manner (for exceptions, see Argyle et al., 1981; Holmes, 2002; Kelley et al., 2003; Reis, 2008).

In our conception, *the essence of a situation is its affordance of human goals* (see also, Yang et al., 2006). This perspective can be deduced from three specific lines of research. First, at a meta-theoretical level, persons, situations, and behaviors are separable but interconnected elements; therefore, 'knowledge about any two of these should lead to an understanding of the third' (Funder, 2001, p. 210). Second, human behaviors can be seen as fundamentally goal-directed (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Frese & Sabini, 1985). Finally, human personality is fundamentally goal-driven (e.g., Borkenau, 1990; Cantor, 1990, 1994; Emmons, 1986; Little, 1999; Miller & Read, 1987, 1991; Pervin, 1982). Thus, if persons, situations, and behaviors are intimately connected, and if both persons and behaviors can be well understood in terms of goals, situations can be conceptualized in relation to goals and specifically in terms of their affordances for goal pursuit and goal attainment (see also Argyle et al., 1981; Baron & Boudreau, 1987; Graham, Argyle, & Furnham, 1980; Grant & Dweck, 1999; Miller, Cody, & McLaughlin, 1994; Miller & Read, 1991; Pervin, 1982, 1992; Read & Miller, 1989a,b).

Further, we propose that there are two principles by which the affordance nature of situations manifests itself. Specifically, the principle of *goal processes* refers to what happened, is happening, or might happen to people's goals in the situation. It is described by the ways in which people's goals succeed or fail and the specific trajectories associated with those processes, such as the establishment, planning, striving, monitoring, attainment, revision, and persistence of people's goal pursuit (cf., Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Based upon this principle, people's understanding of the features, attributes, characteristics, qualities, and dimensions of situations should be driven primarily by what happened,

is happening, or might happen to their goals. Thus, one situation is similar to another because they afford people's goal attainment in similar ways or to similar degrees.

The principle of *goal contents* refers to the specific kinds of goals afforded in the situation. It is described by such goals as maintaining physical health and morality, having family and romantic relationships, and establishing interpersonal and social relationships (cf., Chulef, Read, & Walsh, 2001). Based upon this principle, people's understanding of the types, groups, clusters, classes, and categories of situations should be driven by the specific kinds of goals afforded in the situations. Thus, one situation is similar to another because they afford similar kinds of goals. Together, goal processes and goal contents each represent one important aspect of situations. Moreover, it should be pointed out that goal processes and goal contents may interact in complex ways and serve as generative mechanisms for initiating goal pursuit[2].

In relation to the knowledge tradition of situations, it is interesting to note that across the taxonomies developed under the traditions of social, personality, and ecological psychology, there is an apparent correspondence between the major features of situations and various goal processes, and between the major types of situations identified and various goal contents. Although not always the case, the major features of situations identified often reflect what happened, is happening, or might happen to people's goals, and the major types of situations identified often reflect the kinds of goals afforded in the situation. Together, goal contents and goal processes each represents an important aspect of how people understand and mentally organize situations.

Moreover, as illustrated in the studies of person–situation interactions, certain people choose or avoid certain situations because of the kinds of goals afforded in the situations, and what happened, is happening, or might happen to people's goals in the situations. Studies on the relationships between persons and situations have made a strong case for the goal-based perspective on situations. Once people enter certain situations, their goals may further influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the situations. People's active goals and motives may lead people to transform a situation to be more consistent with currently active goals and motives. An academic classroom situation, for instance, affords the pursuit and achievement of various kinds of academic goals. Students who are high on achievement motivation do respond strongly to those affordances. However, students can also transform a prototypical academic situation into a social situation. Whether a particular goal will guide someone's behavior in a given situation will depend on whether that goal 'wins' the competition with other potentially active goals for the control of behavior, and whether the situation looks like it will afford or block the achievement of that goal (e.g., Shah & Kruglanski, 2002). For any given individual, multiple goals may be active, but only some of the goals can be pursued at any one time. Similarly, any given situation will facilitate some goals, inhibit others and be irrelevant to yet others. At the empirical level, some of these dynamic relationships can be captured with existing methodologies of personal projects (Little, 1983; Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2007), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and current concerns (Klinger, 1977). We further suggest that these dynamic relationships can be pursued and simulated in virtual environments with computational modeling techniques (Read & Miller, 1998; Sun, 2008).

Concluding Remarks

An adequate conceptualization of situations needs to theorize about the nature and underlying principles of situations and to connect to the relevant knowledge traditions on

situations. From our point of view, the essence of a situation is its affordance of human goals. Goal processes and goal contents each represents an important underlying principle of how people understand situations. In line with Milgram's (1965) vision for 'a compelling theory of situations,' we have shown that this goal-based approach connects well to the three major knowledge traditions on situations in psychology: definitions of situations, taxonomies of situations, and interrelationships among persons, situations, and behaviors.

Our intention, however, is not to assert that the goal-based approach is the only basis to build an adequate conceptualization of situations. It is our hope that this article will facilitate the ongoing discussion of conceptualizing situations and building ontologies as a community – as has been so fruitful in other sciences. About half a century ago, psychologist and philosopher Egon Brunswik argued that ''proper sampling of situations and problems may in the end be more important than proper sampling of subjects, considering…that individuals are probably on the whole much more alike than are situations'' (Brunswik, 1956, p. 39). Recently, it has also been argued that an important future direction for the field is 'to begin to formulate the variables that psychologically characterize situations' (Funder, 2006, p. 28). We trust this task can and will be accomplished by the collective and interdisciplinary efforts of all social science researchers.

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Short Biography

Yu Yang is Post Doctoral Fellow of Management and Organizations at the Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University. Prior to joining the Johnson School, he received his doctorate from the University of Southern California. Dr. Yang is primarily interested in how cultural processes influence social judgment and social behavior. He has studied culture and mental models of social situations, culture and everyday manifestation of personality traits, and culture and folk theories of groups. More recently, Dr. Yang has started a new research program to understand how people perceive, compete, collaborate, and negotiate with others from other cultures. He has presented his work in such journals as the Asian Journal of Social Psychology, Chinese Social Psychological Review, Journal of Research in Personality, and Merrill-Palmer Quarterly. He has also served as guest editor and editorial board member of the Chinese Social Psychological Review and ad hoc reviewer for the Asian Journal of Social Psychology, Journal of Personality, and Journal of Research in Personality.

Stephen J. Read is Professor of Psychology at the University of Southern California. His major research interests are in person perception, coherence based models of social reasoning, and human personality and motivation, with a specific focus on computational models of personality, attitudes, person perception, and social reasoning. He has published extensively on empirical work on person perception and coherence based reasoning, and he is well known for his work on computational models of social and personality processes. In addition, over the last 15 years, he has focused intensively on the use of interactive media to change risky sexual behavior in men who have sex with men. He is currently funded by NIMH (with Dr. Lynn C. Miller) for a large project to create an online, 3D virtual environment, with intelligent virtual agents, that is designed to teach

men who have sex with men to more successfully negotiate safer sex. In addition, he and Lynn Miller are working on an ONR funded project to create Unmanned Autonomous Vehicles, with human personalities, based on Read and Miller's computational model of personality. The goal of this project is to leverage people's lay knowledge of personality to provide an easy to understand control system for these vehicles. Dr. Read received his PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1981 and joined the faculty at the University of Southern California in 1984 as an assistant professor. He served as Chair of the Department of Psychology for four years from 1997 to 2001 and as Associate Chair from 1994 to 1997.

Lynn C. Miller is Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication and the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern California. In over 60 articles, she has used statistical, interactive, and computational methods to develop and test dynamic models of personality and situations impacting social behavior. PI on interdisciplinary grants totaling over $11 M, with Stephen Read, she has developed and tested interactive interventions and is currently collaborating on a project to develop interactive intelligent agents (with realistic goals, beliefs, actions, and theory of mind) in gaming environments, to prevent risky sexual behavior for at-risk populations. With military/corporate collaborators and Stephen Read, she has developed biologically inspired social computational models/cognitive architectures for intelligent agents with personality and emotion, and applications of this technology for individual, military, and organizational decision-making. She received the Gerald R. Miller Early Career Award from the International Network of Personal Relationships and was a Provost's Fellow at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at USC. Dr. Miller received her PhD in Personality Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1982.

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[1] Murray (1938) pioneered the notion that situations are fundamentally characterized by their directional tendencies. These tendencies, termed *press*, are described by the specific kinds and intensities of effects they have on the individuals. Thus, a fundamental characteristic of press is that one can distinguish between '1, the *alpha press*, which is the press that actually exists, as far as scientific inquiry can determine it; and 2, the *beta press*, which is the subject's own interpretation of the phenomena that he perceives' (Murray, 1938, p. 122).

[2] We thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

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