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Review

Situated selves: A cyclical model of personality expression in context

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A century after the onset of the person–situation debate, personality science increasingly emphasizes that traits are expressed through individuals' dynamic interactions with their environments. This review synthesizes recent advances across four key phases of personality expression: situation selection, situation experience, behavioral state expression, and outcome activation. Drawing on structured situational taxonomies, affordance frameworks, the situational strength theory, we highlight that individuals not only respond to situations but also actively shape and construe them. We discuss emerging questions on how traits influence situation selection and construal, how situational cues regulate behavioral expression, and how new technologies enable real-time, behaviorally grounded assessment. Together, these developments lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive and context-sensitive science of personality.

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> *"Often, it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act."* —*Stanley Milgram* [1]

> *"Behavior is a function of the person and the environment."* — *Kurt Lewin* [2]

These quotes encapsulate the essence of a century-old debate in psychology and related disciplines: the person-situation debate. At its core, the controversy concerned the extent to which behavior is shaped by enduring personality traits versus situational factors. Trait theorists such as Allport, Cattell, Eysenck, Costa, and McCrae emphasized the relative consistency of behavioral expressions across contexts, while situationists like Milgram, Skinner, and Watson argued that behavior is primarily driven by situational factors.

Lewin's [2] influential formula—$B = f(P, S)$—reframed the debate by highlighting that behavior arises from the interaction between person and situation. This insight shifted the field away from an either-or debate toward integrative frameworks [3–6] and a growing consensus around interactionism. Funder [7] proposed the "personality triad" of traits, situations, and behavior as interdependent components, while Fleeson [8] conceptualized traits as density distributions of behavioral states, emphasizing structured within-person variability shaped by situational cues [9].

This review synthesizes how personality expression unfolds through dynamic person-situation transactions [7,10–14]. That is, individuals are not passive recipients of contexts but rather active, situated agents whose dispositions are continuously expressed and regulated through their engagement with the world. We organize this synthesis using a cyclical process model with four phases: situation selection, situation experience, behavioral state expression, and outcome activation (Figure 1).

The upsurge of research on situations and person–situation interactions

Understanding how personality unfolds requires not just focusing on personality but also systematically conceptualizing and measuring situations. As Wilt and Revelle [16] noted, questions such as "how should psychology most fruitfully operationalize the situation?" have become increasingly central to interactionist science [4,17,18]. These calls have fueled a surge in research on situational taxonomies and situational perceptions.

The past decades have witnessed an upsurge of research mapping the psychological structure of situations. As shown in Figure 2, the number of publications referencing "situation" in psychology has grown substantially.

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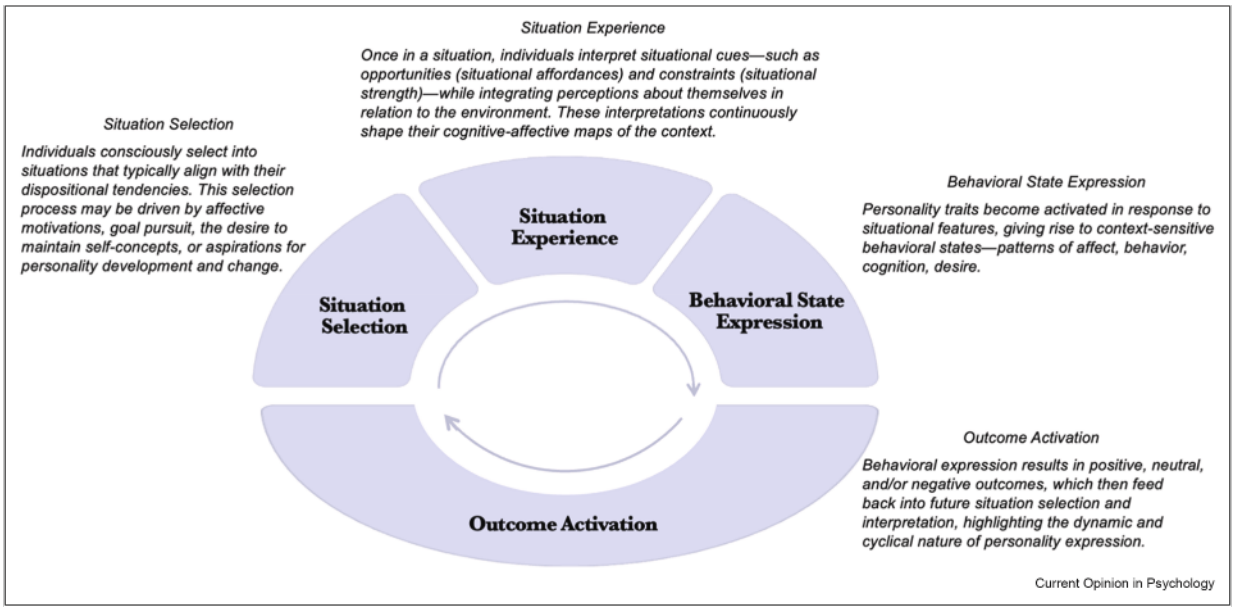
Figure 1



A Cyclical Model of Person–Situation Interplay and Personality Expression.
Note. This model builds on the Situation–Trait–Outcome Activation (STOA) framework [15] and introduces two key elaborations. First, it distinguishes *situation selection* from *situation experience*. Second, it highlights how the outcomes of behavioral expression feed back into future situation selection and construal, illustrating the self-reinforcing and cyclical nature of personality expression over time.

Several situational frameworks have been developed in the past decade, ranging from more inductive taxonomies, such as the DIAMONDS model [19], derived through factor analyses of situational descriptions gathered via the Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ) [20,21], to more deductive frameworks, such as the HEXACO Domain-Specific Situational Affordances framework (DSSA) [15], which was theorized to align with the HEXACO model of personality [22].

Situations are not just random backdrops for trait expression, rather, understanding when and how traits are expressed depends crucially on how situations are selected, perceived, and engaged with. Thus, the move toward structured taxonomies lays the foundation for studying personality in context.

Situation selection

Personality expression often begins before behavioral is enacted—through situation selection. Individuals tend to preferentially enter (or avoid) environments that afford opportunities to express their traits [16,23]. The STOA framework [15] conceptualizes situation selection (or situation activation) as the first phase of the person-situation cycle, preceding trait activation (i.e., traits become expressed in behavioral states) and outcome activation (i.e., behavioral expression results in positive, neutral, and/or negative outcomes).

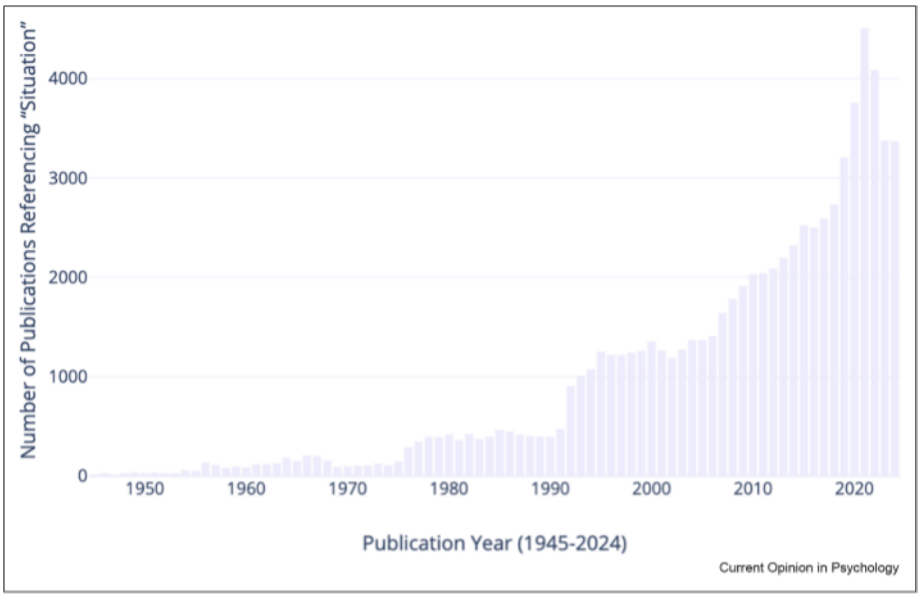
While not all situations are voluntarily chosen—many arise unexpectedly or are imposed by external circumstances—selection is often non-random. Affective motives, goal-striving, self-concept maintenance, and developmental aspirations synergistically guide individuals toward certain situations over others [16]. For instance, people high in self-control may choose meaning-centered over pleasure-driven activities [24]. Extraverts may seek out situations involving social interaction, excitement, and stimulation [25,26], whereas conscientious individuals prefer structured and goal-oriented environments [26,27], for a review, see Refs. [16,23].

Crucially, situation selection is itself an expression of personality. By proactively curating environments, individuals create recurring opportunities for the reinforcement or transformation of their dispositional tendencies. In this sense, selection is not merely a precursor to personality expression—it is a form of expression in its own right.

Situation experience

Following situation selection, personality expression is further shaped by how situations are experienced. This includes both objective features and subjective, often idiosyncratic perceptions in real time. Rauthmann et al. [28] distinguish three related constructs, with *situational experience* referring to individuals' in-situ self-reported

Figure 2



Number of Publications Referencing "Situation" in Psychology (1945–2024).
Note. Search conducted on July 6, 2025, using the term *TS = "situation"* in Web of Science (psychology categories; 1945–2024).

perceptions of the situation, *situational contact* referring to more objective features of the situations that individuals encounter, typically captured through ex-situ ratings or consensual agreement across external raters, and *situational construal* further isolating the subjective interpretation of the situation by controlling self-reports situational perceptions for shared, consensual ratings.

Structured frameworks help model these situational experiences. The HEXACO-DSSA framework [15] links situational opportunities—such as exploitation, duty, or exploration—to specific HEXACO traits (e.g., honesty-humility, conscientiousness, and openness to experience). In line with the idea that 'opportunities make the thief', affordances invite trait-consistent behaviors by presenting cues that resonate with individuals' dispositional tendencies.

Another key construct is situational strength (see Table 1 for a glossary of key situational constructs and associated findings). Initially proposed by Walter Mischel [29], the situational strength hypothesis posits that strong situation—marked by high consequences, stringent constraints, and clear behavioral guidelines—reduce behavioral variability. Recent empirical work from Li and colleagues [11–30] supports this view: behavioral variability, measured as the coefficient of variation, was 23 % lower in strong situations compared to weak ones. Strong situations tend to guide behavior through multiple pathways, including imposing external incentives and penalties (reinforcement learning), activating social norms (and thus reputational concerns), and eliciting internal discomfort when individuals act inconsistently with perceived expectations (cognitive dissonance) [30].

Behavioral state expression and Outcome activation

Behavioral state expression reflects how traits are translated into behaviors—through affect, behavior, cognition, and desire [39]—within situational contexts. According to the trait activation theory [6,35], traits are expressed when situations provide relevant cues or affordances. A recent review found that ~60 % of 262 reported trait activation effects across 60 of 75 empirical studies were significant, suggesting a moderately robust support for the theory's central proposition [35]. One way trait activation functions is via between-situation differences in trait–behavior associations [37]. For instance, Honesty–Humility is more likely to be expressed in situations that afford exploitation than in situations that afford duty. Alternatively, trait–behavior associations may be moderated by trait dimensions, such that depending on the affordances present, some traits are more predictive of behavior than others. For instance, in the presence of affordance of exploitation, Honesty–Humility is likely a stronger predictor of (un)ethical behavior than a less context-relevant trait such as Conscientiousness.

A large-scale meta-analysis [35] provides strong support for both types of moderation, showing that each HEXACO trait is most predictive of its theoretically

Table 1

Key constructs in situation experience and behavioral state expression.

Construct	Short Definition	Empirical Summary	Key References
Situational strength	Degree to which a situation constrains behavior through clear consequences and rules	23 % lower behavioral variance in strong vs. weak situations in experimental social dilemma games [30]	[29–34,41]
Trait activation	Traits are expressed when trait-relevant cues are present	~60 % of 262 effects across 75 studies showed significant trait × situation interactions [35]	[6,35]
Situational affordances	Opportunities for trait expression embedded in situations	Each HEXACO trait was most strongly linked to its theorized behavioral outcome. For instance,	[15,36]
Domain specific situational affordances (DSSA) framework	A psychological situational framework proposed in reference to the HEXACO model of personality, comprising six domain-specific situational affordances	Honesty–Humility correlated –0.48 with exploitation, while correlations with other outcomes ranged from 0.06 to 0.18. Exploitation, in turn, showed weaker links to other traits (ρ = 0.02–0.26) [36].	
Situation Characteristic–State contingencies (SCSC)	Specific individuals' trait expressions are shaped by their unique sensitivity to situational cues	SCSCs improved model fit in nearly all cases (40/40 and 37/40) and showed moderate person × situation effects (r = 0.24-0.25), while between-situation differences also improved fit (25/25 and 21/25), but had smaller effects (r = 0.09-0.11) [37–302]	[37,38]

relevant behavioral domain. For example, Honesty–Humility correlated −0.48 with exploitative behavior, whereas its associations with other outcomes ranged from 0.06 to 0.18, and exploitation was weakly related to other traits (ρ = 0.02–0.26). These findings highlight the critical role of situational trait relevance in shaping behavioral expression.

Beyond trait activation, situational strength also regulates behavior by prescribing expectations. As Mischel [29] proposed—and recently substantiated empirically [30]—strong situations tend to restrict behavioral variance by signaling clear behavioral expectations. However, situational strength and affordances can interact in complex ways: While situational strength may constrain behavior, the simultaneous presence of situational affordances may promote trait expression by inviting trait-relevant behaviors. For example, in scenarios where dishonesty becomes incentivized—thus increasing both situational strength and affordance for exploitation—behavioral variance increased: individuals low in Honesty–Humility were more likely to behave dishonestly [40]. These findings illustrate that behavioral expression reflects a dynamic interplay between traits, affordances, and situational strength.

Importantly, individuals also differ in how they react to situational perceptions. *Situation characteristic–state contingencies* (SCSCs) [38] capture this personalized sensitivity—for instance, while some individuals may reliably become more conscientious in structured situations, others may not. These differences, validated across studies [37], underscore that behavioral state expression is deeply personalized based on how people construe and react to situations.

Finally, the outcomes of behavioral state expression feed back into the cycle. Success, failure, or social (dis) approval can shape future situation selection and construal. For instance, thriving in structured settings may foster a preference for order and predictability, whereas recurring interpersonal conflict may prompt greater vigilance or avoidance in social contexts. These feedback loops contribute to the self-reinforcing nature of personality expression over time.

Emerging substantive directions

Despite significant progress in understanding how personality unfolds across situation selection, experience and behavioral expression, several frontiers remain open.

First, a critical but understudied question concerns how personality profiles drive situation selection. While theories posit that traits guide individuals toward certain environments [15,16,23], empirical work remains limited. Recent work suggests that individuals low in Honesty-Humility may preferentially select into environments that afford opportunities for personal gain, whereas those high in this trait avoid such exploitative contexts [40]. Developing trait-contingent models of situation selection could clarify how dispositions shape individuals' situational landscapes.

Second, the field would benefit from more nuanced conceptualizations and operationalizations of situational trait relevance—often referred to as situational affordances—as well as empirical inquiries into the mechanisms through which such affordances shape personality expression. While frameworks such as the DSSA [15] offer a foundation, more detailed mapping is needed to understand how situations elicit or constrain trait

expression in real-world settings. Related constructs such as person-situation fit, also warrant reexamination. For example, Kritzler et al. [42] found that "neither fit between personality traits and personality states, nor fit between personality states and characteristics of the situation were related to fluctuations in momentary affect" (p. 896), and concluded that such fits may be largely irrelevant. However, the study did not assess whether trait−situation fit influences the expression of personality states. Future research could usefully explore whether trait-situation fit plays a more central role in shaping states, beyond immediate mood fluctuations.

Another promising frontier involves unpacking the temporal dynamics of person-situation interplay. Traits may be triggered by immediate situational cues, but their expression and regulation are shaped by feedback loops—between actions, outcomes, and evolving self-concepts over time. Revelle and Condon's [43] Cues−Tendency−Action (CTA) model highlights how enduring traits, transient states, and momentary motivations interact continuously across time scales. Integrating such time-sensitive models can advance our understanding of how recurring situational experiences shift personality expression.

Emerging methodological directions

Methodological advances have expanded our ability to study personality expression as it unfolds in real life. Experience sampling and diary methods enable capturing in-situ behavioral dynamics and situational perceptions [44,45].

Nevertheless, capturing behavioral states beyond self-report remains a challenge. Emerging tools, such as virtual reality [46,47], mobile sensing [48,49], and game-based paradigms [50] offer scalable, ecologically valid ways to track affect, cognition, and behavior. As Allen et al. [50] argued, understanding the mind may require moving beyond tightly controlled experiments towards more naturalistic yet rich landscape like games. Still, self-reports retain value: recent studies show meaningful target−observer and observer−observer agreement in behavioral state ratings [51].

Together, these developments point to a multimodal future—combining behavioral tracking, physiological monitoring, and context-sensitive assessments to capture personality in action across diverse situations.

Conclusion

Personality expression is a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by continuous interactions between individuals and their environments. Traits not only respond to external cues but also influence the situations people select, perceive, and navigate.

The past decade has seen unprecedented progress in how we conceptualize and measure situations—through situational taxonomies, affordances frameworks, and growing recognition of individual differences in situational construal. These developments highlight that situations are not passive backdrops but integral components of personality expression.

Looking ahead, a complete science of personality in context will require greater attention to how traits and situations co-regulate behavior over time, and invest in tools that capture these unfolding dynamics. Ultimately, studying personality in context is not just about mapping variability but understanding the recursive processes through which people shape—and are shaped by—their worlds.

Author's contribution

CRediT: RL: Conceptualization, Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing − original draft, Writing − review & editing; JW: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing − review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

30. ** Annotation: This large-scale meta-analysis used social dilemma games to empirically test the situational strength framework, showing that strong (vs. weak) situations—marked by high consequences, constraints, and clarity-consistency—restrict variance in behavior. The study refines understanding of how situational forces regulate behavior via reinforcement learning, social norms, reputational concerns, and cognitive dissonance.

37. ** Annotation: This paper proposes an integrative framework distinguishing four types of Person × Situation interactions. Using experience sampling methodology with repeated assessments of situations and states, the authors show that situation–state contingencies are reliably person-specific. That is, individuals differ not only in which states they experience, but in how their states shift in response to situational cues.

42. * Annotation: The authors examined whether state–trait fit (personality states aligning with traits) and state–situation fit (states aligning with situational characteristics) predict within-person fluctuations in positive affect across three intensive longitudinal studies. They found no significant associations, concluding that such fits may be irrelevant for momentary affective experiences.

47. * Annotation: The paper outlines how virtual reality (VR) can advance criminological research by simulating realistic, dynamic environments that closely resemble real-world settings, allowing participants to interact with scenarios in ways that traditional methods (e.g., surveys, vignettes) cannot match. VR thus holds its potential for studying decision-making, moral transgressions, and situational influences in real time.

50. * Annotation: The authors argued that truly understanding the mind requires a paradigm shift away from only using highly controlled and simplified experiments. Game-based paradigms—with scalable, engaging alternatives to traditional controlled experiments—may serve as rich, ecologically valid platforms to study human cognition, behavior, and social interaction in context.