

# Reinvigorating the Concept of Situation in Social Psychology

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*The concept of situation has a long and venerable history in social psychology. The author argues that recent approaches to the concept of situation have confused certain important elements. Herein, the author proposes that attention to three of these elements will reinvigorate the concept of situation in social psychology: (a) that the analysis of situations should begin with their objective features; (b) that situations should be conceptualized as affordances; and (c) that the interpersonal core of situations, in particular the extent to which they are influenced by relationships, is the proper and most profitable focus for social psychology. These elements are consistent with recent developments in the study of situated social cognition and may help better define social psychology's position within the sciences.*

**Keywords:** *situation; situationism; personality  $\times$  situation interaction; relationships; situated social cognition; interdependence theory*

Probably like most of you, I thoroughly enjoyed the recent film *Borat*. In this mockumentary, Sasha Baron Cohen plays a film journalist from Kazakhstan setting out to show his countrypersons what America is all about. In so doing, he begins each scene with a seemingly benign situation—a dinner party, sharing drinks in an RV campground, joining a feminist discussion group, singing the national anthem at a Virginia rodeo—and then, by virtue of carefully crafted offbeat behavior, proceeds to elicit from his unsuspecting subjects responses that are variously bizarre, embarrassing, ill-mannered, or just plain nasty. We laugh mostly *at* his targets, not *with* them, because their (and presumably our) latent weaknesses of character have been exposed. Film critics have mused about why viewers tend to laugh at these behaviors, rather than feeling pity for the outlandish dilemmas

in which Cohen's victims found themselves. Their usual answer was something like, "We are not troubled because each of them fully deserved it."

Imagine, now, that each of these situations had been presented not on film but in a social-psychological laboratory. Baron Cohen would be the confederate whose behavior was carefully scripted to follow a well-defined model. The responses of each target would be videotaped and then rated to consensus by three independent observers. Participants would also be asked to complete a detailed questionnaire rating their impressions of Baron Cohen, after which they and Baron Cohen would be reunited and debriefed, to reassure them that their behavior was neither immoral nor pathological but instead a typical and not unreasonable response to the confederate's unusual and experimentally scripted behavior. A control condition would be needed, of course, in which the confederate's behavior followed standard norms for polite, socially appropriate behavior. For simplicity, I will call this the Martha Stewart condition.

When reporting results of this experiment, most social psychologists would deftly explain how it reveals

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“the power of the situation,” that is, how situational contexts may elicit unusual and unflattering behavior. The roots of the bizarre behaviors displayed, it would be asserted, are in the experimentally created situations, rather than character flaws or dispositional weaknesses in the participants themselves. Any of us, more or less, would behave similarly in this situation. This would show, as L. Ross and Nisbett (1991) proclaimed in their seminal monograph, that “the social context creates potent forces producing or constraining behavior, . . . forces [that are] often overlooked in lay psychology” (p. 9). Identifying and understanding these forces, L. Ross and Nisbett further argued, was the mission of scientific social psychology. This historically oft-repeated call (e.g., Asch, 1952; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 2006) remains a staple in most social psychology textbooks.

Now, suppose one of these film critics took the social-psychological analysis seriously and asked, “What is it about these situations that elicited this behavior?” As a card-carrying social psychologist, I might answer that the situations were bizarre, inappropriate, unexpected, and utterly unlike anything that these people had ever encountered, but I doubt that a more precise characterization would be possible. That, it seems to me, is a shortcoming of our discipline. On one hand, we trumpet the power of situations and contexts (a concept that few outsiders would deny, at least in abstract terms). Indeed, our research has provided impressive, even incontrovertible, evidence to support this assertion. On the other hand, in the more than half-century since Gordon Allport, Solomon Asch, Kurt Lewin, and others first defined the *social* in social psychology in terms of situations, the field has yet to develop a clear, consensual definition or taxonomy of what situations are, how they might be systematically compared, and which ones are most influential in what ways. In other words, precisely which properties of the situation have been manipulated in my Borat–Martha Stewart experiment?

Kenny, Mohr, and Levesque (2001) have made a similar point, noting that

although social psychologists have emphasized the importance of the situation, they have been less successful in its conceptualization. . . . There is no universally accepted scheme for understanding what is meant by situation. It does not even appear that there are major competing schemes, and all too often the situation is undefined. (p. 129)

I would replace the word *undefined* with *ill-specified*. But at the least, their assessment should raise a few eyebrows.

In this article, I will review what I see as social psychology’s ambivalent history with regard to the nature and effect of situations. I will also point to some of the

more informative and promising approaches in recent work. I will not describe a program of research that resolves this ambivalence, nor will I recommend a particular model for potential converts to adopt. Rather, my goal is more modest: to reinvigorate our commitment to understanding situations and contexts as a core concept in social psychology, and to highlight a few principles that may allow the field to formulate a systematic understanding of situations that is useful not only for our own theorizing and research but also for export to scholars in other disciplines who seek our informed guidance for the purpose of incorporating insights about context into their own studies.

In particular, I will advocate four principles:

- that the conceptual analysis of situations should begin with a focus on its objective properties.
- that the interpersonal core of everyday life provides some of the most influential features of situations.
- that this interpersonal core can and should be studied by examining the effect of relationship contexts on social-psychological phenomena.
- that better conceptualizations of situations will help social psychology establish a more easily identified and more widely accepted place within the behavioral and social sciences.

### A BRIEF AND SELECTIVE REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE SITUATION IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

It is difficult to find the concept of situation in early social psychology. Of the two 1908 volumes traditionally cited as the birth of social psychology (one by the psychologist William McDougall and the other by the sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross), Ross’s is the more social. E. A. Ross (1908) defined social psychology as dealing with “uniformities due to *social* causes, i.e., to *mental contacts* or *mental interactions*. . . . It is *social* only insofar as it arises out of the interplay of minds” (p. 3). Ross explicitly excluded from social psychology what he called “uniformities” attributable to the “conditions of life”—what we would call the physical setting, culture, race, visual cues, and any features of the environment not subject to mental interplay between persons.

The concept of situation makes a formal appearance in Kurt Lewin’s topological psychology of the 1930s and 1940s (e.g., Lewin, 1939, 1943, 1951). It is interesting enough that the personality psychologist Henry A. Murray presaged much of what was to follow by distinguishing *alpha press*—the actual power of an external object to influence behavior, to the extent that scientific inquiry can determine it—from *beta press*—the person’s own interpretation of the phenomena that he or she

perceives (H. A. Murray, 1938, p. 122). But back to Lewin. Lewin sought to represent “the person in the life space” (that is, the behaving self) in terms of formal properties that could be represented with mathematical rigor. Lewin settled on topology for several reasons, some symbolic and others to allow him to depict the life space as a system of multiple and diverse causes and effects that shift or modify behavior in a very dynamic way. (This was done with topological diagrams, involving salient dispositional and environmental factors, using boundaries to represent their separation and arrows to represent forces facilitating or inhibiting behavior.) To Lewin, the causes of behavior had two sources, the Person and the Environment, hence, the axiomatic  $B = f(P, E)$ .  $E$  stood for the psychological environment or, in other words, the psychological significance of the “total concrete situation” for the individual.

Many social psychologists trace their interest in situations to this Lewinian dualism. Thus, when social psychologists write about being interactionists, as most of us do, we imply that  $B = f(P, E, \text{ and } P \times E)$ , treating these terms in the statistical sense, meaning that the effects of  $P$  are independent of  $E$ , the effects of  $E$  are independent of  $P$ , and their interaction is independent of both main effects. This is somewhat ironic, because Lewin saw  $P$  and  $E$  as fully interdependent. Lewin never intended to separate and independently estimate  $P$  and  $E$ . Thus, in 1946, he also wrote,  $E = f(P)$  and  $P = f(E)$ . That is, in describing himself as an interactionist, Lewin did so without isolating the effects of Person and Environment, a task he likely would have considered not only unhelpful but implausible. Rather, Lewin (1946) theorized about how each one affected the other: “The person and his environment have to be considered as *one* constellation of interdependent factors” (pp. 239-240). Thus, although it may not be surprising that, as Funder (2006) recently wrote, “Nowadays, everybody is an interactionist,” what we mean by this term is not quite what Lewin meant.

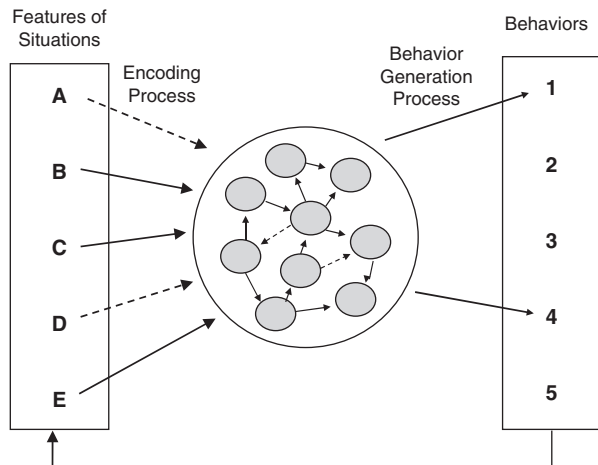
To make his topological analysis work, Lewin had to distinguish the concrete physical environment from the psychological environment or, in other words, what the person makes of the environment. Magnusson (1981) made a similar distinction between what he called “actual environments and situations” and “perceived environments and situations.” To some extent, this has led, as Funder (2006) also recently wrote, to “a good deal of confusion concerning how situations should be conceptualized” (p. 27). Most social psychologists subscribe to L. Ross and Nisbett’s (1991) renowned principle of construal: that the causal analysis of situations should concentrate on the personal and subjective meaning of the situation to the actor. After all, Lewin and his contemporaries (e.g., Allport, 1937; Asch, 1952) had

argued persuasively that the most influential causal factors are the individual’s personal interpretation of what is significant in the situation. Bem and Allen (1974) expressed this idea clearly, noting that “the classification of situations . . . will have to be in terms of the individual’s phenomenology, not the investigator’s” (p. 518). Aronson and Carlsmith (1968) made this the cardinal principle of experimental manipulation.

To clarify the implications of this distinction, I will rely on W. Mischel and Shoda’s (1999) Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS), although my comments are not intended to single out their approach.<sup>1</sup> In fact, as will be apparent shortly, their model is one of the best available alternatives for instantiating this conceptualization. Figure 1 shows the major elements of their approach. Personality is construed not as a generalized or acontextual tendency but as a set of “If . . . then” contingencies that spawn behavior: “If situation  $X$ , then behavior  $Y$ .” This link is mediated by a series of internalized cognitive and affective processes, which are a stable network of mostly automatic associations activated by external events (i.e., the situation, shown in the left-most box). In the CAPS, each individual has a distinctive pattern of responding to features of the social environment, called a signature. Patterns shared by most people are considered normative, which is what most social psychologists call situational effects.

How does one identify the situation that activates cognitive and affective processes? Ideally, existing literature would provide a scheme for describing situations and distinguishing their psychologically active ingredients—in other words, for anticipating precisely which features of situations tend to activate which cognitive-affect processes. However, no such scheme exists. As a shortcut, then, and consistent with the principle of construal, the CAPS model is based on the individual’s personal construal of the situation—if a coworker’s act is perceived to be provocative, if a friend’s offer is experienced as supportive, if an attractive acquaintance’s smile is seen as flirtatious, or if a parent’s limits are felt to be controlling. The features of the “if”—the situation—are appraised by the actor.<sup>2</sup>

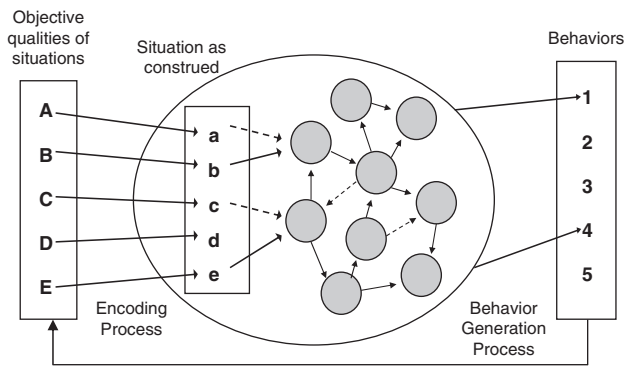
The ambiguity in this analysis is that if one starts with the individual’s construal, the “if” is already part of the “then.” This conclusion follows directly from social cognition research showing that construals depend on the perceiver’s epistemic and motivated goals (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Kruglanski, 1996). A truer assessment of the effect of situations (and ipso facto, a truer assessment of the effect of personality) requires specifying the abstract features of the external activating situation independent of internal processes. That is, the stimulus situation would be assessed without (or, more properly, before) interpretation. Construal would be



**Figure 1** The Cognitive-Affective Personality System.  
SOURCE: Adapted from W. Mischel and Shoda (1999).  
NOTE: A feedback arrow from behavior to situations is included to illustrate that behavior affects the situations that are subsequently encountered (called situation selection in Interdependence Theory).

part of the person's internal processing rather than a way of characterizing the situation. Figure 2 shows how the CAPS model might be reconfigured to represent this idea. The major change in Figure 2 is that situations are described in terms of their objective attributes (represented by uppercase letters), prior to any perception or evaluation by the perceiver. The perceiver's interpretation of the situation's objective attributes (represented by lowercase letters) becomes part of the individual's distinctive pattern of perceiving, the so-called personality signature.

To be sure, the contest between objective depictions and subjective construals of situations has been around since the early days of social psychology—for example, contrast the ecological approach of Barker and Wright (1951) with Allport's (1937) view of situations as "personal." Nevertheless, this debate is all but dormant in modern social psychology, in which many important models in social-personality psychology depend critically and appropriately on appraisals as independent variables, for example, research on whether performance situations are seen to offer threat or challenge (Elliot & McGregor, 2001); on whether interaction partners offer help in a manner experienced as controlling or supportive (Deci & Ryan, 1987); on whether relational events are perceived as signs of rejection or inclusion (Downey & Feldman, 1996); and on whether certain words or pictures activate mental images of safety or anxiety, security or mortality (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Analyses of the effect of construals are useful, important, and valid. Rather, my point is that to



**Figure 2** Proposed conceptual modification of the Cognitive-Affective Personality System.

understand the nature of a given construal, one must first know what actually took place. Thus, to fully appreciate the influence of situations, conceptual analysis must begin at an earlier step.

Before leaving this point, a brief note of generalization is needed. It should not be assumed that this analysis applies only to personality research or to research in which the situation is not experimentally manipulated. Although experimental manipulation has the advantage of providing an objective description of the conditions that have been created, construal is still central to the interpretation of mechanisms by which manipulations affect outcomes. This is evident not only in the discussion of experimentally induced effects but also in the practice of using manipulation checks to determine whether the "situation as manipulated" corresponds to the "situation as construed." When the latter do not conform to the former, manipulations are typically reworked until they do correspond. More contentiously, individuals whose construals do not fit the normative pattern are sometimes dropped from a study as manipulation failures. Construal is, thus, a central component of most experimental research. One contemporary sign of this is Spencer, Zanna, and Fong's (2005) suggestion that manipulation checks (i.e., construals) be considered mediating variables with experimental data.

Moreover, it bears mention that for dependent variables, this distinction provides a core rationale for observational methods. The premise for having independent judges code observational records is that self-reports of behavior are influenced by many diverse biases; to obtain an objective account of what actually transpired during an event, an independent perspective is needed (Weick, 1968). This is not to suggest, however, as is sometimes assumed, that these objective codings provide full and sufficient explanations for the behaviors that transpire. Suppose an investigator believed that a



teenager's construals of her parents' limit setting were capricious and controlling and that this construal was responsible for her noncompliant behavior. How would a researcher be able to conclude whether dispositional (the teenager's oppositional tendencies) or situational (the parents' unreasonable and controlling manner) factors, or both, were operative without an independent perspective? The objective characterization of situations, in other words, makes it possible to identify "what the individual makes of the situation" (Kelley et al., 2003, p. 7).

This state of affairs might be less problematic if we had systematic abstract knowledge about how particular circumstances are interpreted by which types of individuals under what conditions. That would mean, in other words, that the association between situation-as-really-exists and situation-as-construed would be reasonably well defined and well articulated, using systematic conceptual principles, much as the zoologist knows that a one-degree drop in room temperature will lower an animal's core bodily functions by certain amounts. This sort of scrutiny, which entails an additional step in the causal chain of most conceptual analyses, requires having a reasonably detailed abstract conceptual guidebook for describing the psychologically significant features of situations. This might reasonably be called a theory of situations, which is what Kenny et al. (2001), quoted above, felt the field did not have, and what I am suggesting the field needs.

### *Steps Toward a Theory of Situations*

Over the years, several researchers have attempted to develop a theory of situations using a bottom-up taxonomic approach. Although a comprehensive review is beyond the aims of this article, a few representative examples may illustrate the value of this approach.

Forgas (1976) asked 48 adults and Oxford undergraduates to list and describe all of their social interactions, as well as any additional recurrent social activities that had not taken place, over a 24-hour period. The most common episodes were subjected to multidimensional scaling, in which a separate sample of judges was asked to sort these episodes into categories based on similarity. The consensual categories were identified according to how well they fit a series of descriptive adjectives. A three-dimensional solution was found to be optimal: degree of involvement (intimacy) in the episode; subjective self-confidence (knowing how to behave); and pleasantness–unpleasantness.

Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan (1976) also focused on the interpersonal aspects of situations, using a variation of Kelly's (1955) Rep Grid procedure, to develop a list of 45 different dyad types (e.g., close friends, enemies,

guard–prisoner, and student–professor) and 25 adjectives on which these might be differentiated. They then asked 76 persons to rate these dyads on the various adjectives, using multidimensional scaling to infer the underlying dimensions. Four dimensions were obtained: cooperative/friendly versus competitive/hostile, equal versus unequal power, intense versus superficial, and socioemotional/informal versus task-oriented/formal.

More recently, Edwards and Templeton (2005) adopted a semantic approach, based on the lexical hypothesis (Goldberg, 1981), which posits that if a given aspect of the world is important, people will encode it into language; in other words, the more something matters, the more likely that there will be a word for it. They began by asking about 400 students to list what they were doing last night at 3 p.m. or 9 p.m. and then to describe it with adjectives. Students were not limited to interpersonal situations. Other samples rated the more common situations on these and other adjectives. Factor analyses, supplemented by independent multidimensional scaling, supported a three-dimensional structure: positivity–negativity, productivity (whether the situation fosters or hinders goal-directed activity), and effortfulness (amount of effort required to deal with a situation's constraints).<sup>3</sup>

Bottom-up approaches such as these are very useful. Rozin (2001), among others, has highlighted and criticized social psychology's lack of a descriptive database around which empirical observations might be better organized and more clearly reported (at least to outside observers). Descriptive databases surely contribute to theory development. Darwin spent years observing and cataloging Zebra mussels and finches before formulating evolutionary theory. Although descriptive taxonomies are common—and indeed fundamental—in the physical and biological sciences, and closer to home, in personality psychology (see John & Srivastava, 1999, for a review), social psychology has no such catalog. To be sure, taxonomies without theory can be about as intellectually satisfying as the Land's End catalog. Nonetheless, they are an important and, perhaps, even irreplaceable precursor to the development of generalizable and useful theories. At the very least, a taxonomy of situations would identify the more common situations and describe their major features, thereby providing a scheme for investigating their causal characteristics and typical behavioral sequelae, as well as for conceptually integrating diverse phenomena. As Snyder and Cantor (1998) note, our language for describing situations is more impoverished than our language for describing personality:

The psychology of personality has long provided a considerably richer vocabulary and set of theoretical

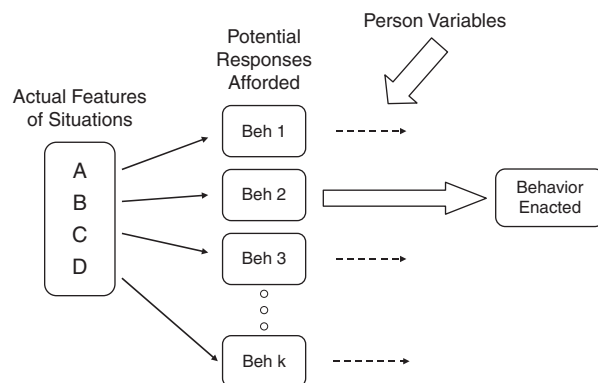
concepts for defining and assessing features of persons than social psychology has provided for conceptualizing and measuring features of situations. (p. 662)

This despite the deep intuitive knowledge and rich evocative language that people possess about everyday situations (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982; Kelley, 1997).

### AN INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL SITUATIONS

In *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations*, published in 2003, Hal Kelley, John Holmes, Norbert Kerr, Caryl Rusbult, Paul van Lange, and I provide a conceptual model for describing the objective features of situations, based on the intellectual heritage of Thibaut and Kelley's Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In contrast to earlier bottom-up taxonomic research, the *Atlas* is a top-down, theory-based approach. Thus, Kelley et al. (2003) specify from theory just which features of the situation are likely to activate which cognitive and affective processes. This, of course, begs the key question, to avoid circularity, How can one know which situational features are more or less likely to activate which processes? To address this question, I borrow a phrase from the cognitive psychologist John Anderson (1991), who, when asked a parallel question about the design of the human mind, answered, "The mind has the structure it has because the world has the structure it has" (p. 428). Anderson meant that the mind has evolved certain structures because those structures permitted our early ancestors to solve critical problems effectively and efficiently. The nature of those problems and their solutions dictated the type of neural architecture that emerged. If speculating about the adaptive problems faced by early humans is a good way to think about the design of the human mind, it is also a good way to think about the abstract structure of situations, especially interpersonal situations.

Situations are social affordances; they represent the "opportunities for acting, interacting, and being acted upon that others provide" (Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997, p. 217), opportunities that are inherent in every social context. A friend in need is an occasion to assist, exploit, or ignore; a job that needs to be done is a chance to divide labor, delegate, or do it oneself; and a romantic partner who prefers to vacation somewhere different from one's personal preference is an opportunity to be generous or pig-headed. In other words, situations have properties that provide a context for the expression of motives, goals, values, and preferences (Kelley et al., 2003). It is also relevant to note that situations only afford certain possibilities; others are impossible. For example,



**Figure 3** How situations afford the expression of person variables.

one cannot display benevolence when the self and a partner both stand to benefit from one's actions, and one cannot display trust when the self is dominant over a subordinate. In the language of affordance, a situation main effect means that a given motive operates more or less universally across persons, whereas a Person  $\times$  Situation interaction means that certain individual differences will be revealed only in certain situations.

The conceptual tool of the *Atlas* is to characterize situations as presenting individuals with behavioral options, each of which makes possible (or "affords") various potential behaviors, the results of which will have tangible consequences for the persons involved. This is depicted in Figure 3. Person variables in this model include any variables that differentiate individuals, for example, traits, preferences, wishes, attitudes, moods, fears, and momentary motives. To ecological psychologists who work in the Gibsonian tradition (e.g., Baron & Boudreau, 1987), this step is sometimes called *feature utilization*—what the individual makes of the situation. The study of situations, then, is the study of which different constellations of features afford, and by which mechanisms people interpret and respond to those features.<sup>4</sup> (This is related to what Interdependence Theory calls "transformation of motivation"—how individuals change their behavior as a function needing to account for interdependence in their actions; e.g., Rusbult & van Lange, 1996.)

Situations have many distinct features, of course—time, place, the color of the walls, background noise, facially displayed affects, task demands, and so on. From the actor's perspective, few of these features matter more than the interpersonal context—who one is with, which goals one is trying to accomplish with that person, how one's own outcomes are linked to the other's outcomes, and one's history with that person and similar others in related situations (Reis & Collins, 2004; Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). From expectancies to attributions,

from motivated goals to socially situated cognition, from social identities to shared emotions, our association with other persons in a given situation plays a key role in determining how that situation is experienced. A critical comment from a dinner companion has different active ingredients and will, therefore, activate different cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes depending on whether it comes from one's adolescent daughter, well-meaning best friend, boss, maternal grandmother, teasing sister, dissertation advisor, insurance agent, therapist, or a stranger (such as Borat himself).

Attention to the interpersonal dimensions of situations makes good theoretical sense. With increasing frequency, theorists recognize that human cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies have been shaped by evolutionary forces to contend with and capitalize on the necessity of living and interacting with others. For example, Cosmides and Tooby (1992) wrote,

The mind consists of a set of adaptations, designed to solve the longstanding adaptive problems humans encountered as huntergatherers. Such a view is not controversial to most behavioral scientists when applied to topics such as vision or balance. Yet adaptationist approaches to human psychology are considered radical—or even transparently false—when applied to most other areas of human thought and action, especially social behavior. Our ancestors . . . needed to construct . . . a social map of the persons, relationships, motives, interactions, emotions, and intentions that made up their social world. (p. 163)

What could be more central to such a map than understanding the nature of one's interdependence with others in the social environment? The term *interdependence* refers to the manner in which individuals influence each other's activities and outcomes. We humans evolved in an intensely social context. Coping successfully with adaptive concerns such as mate selection, reproduction, child rearing, monitoring and besting sexual rivals, resource and food acquisition, forming and maintaining reliable alliances while fending off enemies, and protecting against predators, to name only a few of the more vital examples, required recognition of, and behavioral mechanisms geared toward, the nature of one's interdependence with others. Thus, social relations were critical factors in evolutionary adaptation (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Caporael, 1997; Diamond, 1997; Fiske, 2000; Kenrick & Trost, 1997).

#### *An Abstract Conceptual Analysis of Situations*

Interdependence Theory provides a top-down, abstract conceptual analysis of the fundamental dimensions of situations, relevant to the regulation and coordination of social behavior (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut &

Kelley, 1959). The analysis is called abstract because it is based on the interrelation of each person's goals and outcomes, rather than the persons themselves (e.g., their dispositions or physical features). This analysis can be highly complex. There is, however, an ironic difference between the complexity of Interdependence Theory and the intuitive ease with which people recognize interpersonal situations in everyday life and adjust their behavior accordingly (Kelley, 1997). For example, most of us readily appreciate that it is easier to trust someone with whom we share interests than to trust someone whose interests compete with our own. Similarly, most people try to avoid offending others who hold power over them, more than they worry about offending subordinates. The significance of articulating abstract patterns of interdependence is in allowing the field to describe the dimensions that underlie the organization of social life and the coordination of goal-directed activity.

Although it is beyond the purpose of this article to review Interdependence Theory, it will be useful to briefly describe its basic properties and to illustrate their relevance for understanding social situations. Interdependence Theory characterizes social situations in terms of four dimensions of outcome interdependence:

- the extent to which an individual's outcomes depend on the actions of others;
- whether individuals have mutual or asymmetric power over each other's outcomes;
- whether one individual's outcomes correspond or conflict with the other's; and
- whether partners must coordinate their activities to produce satisfactory outcomes, or whether each one's actions are sufficient to determine the other's outcomes.

Two additional elements of situations are also considered:

- the situation's temporal structure: whether the situation involves interaction over the long term; and
- information certainty: whether partners have the information needed to make good decisions, or whether uncertainty exists about the future.

In *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations*, we show how these six dimensions, both singly and in permutations involving several of them, define 20 of the most common situations encountered in ordinary social life, situations that any of us would immediately recognize. Note again that the approach is top-down: to directly identify, describe, conceptualize, and schematically organize differences among and underlying classes of interpersonal situations.

To illustrate their fundamental importance to social psychology, a few brief examples of each dimension follow.<sup>5</sup>

*Outcome interdependence.* When outcome interdependence is low, parties exert little or no influence on each other's outcomes; high interdependence indicates that one person's outcomes are strongly influenced by the other's actions. All other things being equal, when outcome interdependence is high, people make more individuated, less stereotypic judgments (Fiske, 1993); identify more closely with the other (Rabbie, Schot, & Visser, 1989); attend more and are more attracted to the other (Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976); engage in more prosocial (Batson, 1998) and fewer aggressive (Geen, 1998) acts; make more attempts to persuade the other and are, in turn, more persuasible (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Mackie, Worth, & Asuncion, 1990); are less prejudiced and engage in fewer discriminatory behaviors (Pettigrew, 1998); make more generous attributions for performance (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998); and are more committed to close relationships (Rusbult, 1983).

*Mutuality of outcome interdependence.* When power in a dyad is asymmetric, the more dependent person, *ceteris paribus*, attends more closely to the power holder's behavior (Berscheid et al., 1976) and nonverbal cues (Hall, 1998); has better memory for the other's characteristics and forms more complex, nonstereotypic impressions (Dépret & Fiske, 1993); engages in more perspective taking (Tjosvold & Sagaria, 1978); is more likely to experience anxiety, insecurity, and mistrust and less likely to experience guilt, irritation, and resentment (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999); is more likely to feel embarrassed when helped (Gross, Wallston, & Piliavin, 1979); plays a lesser role in decision making in close relationships (Safilios-Rothschild, 1976); and works harder at favorable self-presentation (Jones, Gergen, & Jones, 1963). Low power in a situation of asymmetric dependence is also more likely to be associated with feelings of lost control and learned helplessness, which over the long term are associated with aversive outcomes (see Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993, for a review). On the other hand, asymmetric interdependence, particularly in the case of conflicting interests, provides an opportunity for the more powerful person to demonstrate empathic concern and altruism, by acting against self-interest (Batson, 1998).

*Outcome correspondence.* Outcome correspondence (also called covariation of interests) is closely related to cooperation and competition. Corresponding interests foster cooperation and are associated with higher levels of trust (Simpson, 2007), better social relations between partners (Sherif, 1966), and prosocial behavior (van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997). A long-standing program of applied research has shown that

cooperative learning situations, in which students' outcomes depend on how well all of them do, are associated with improvements in race relations and school performance (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Johnson & Johnson, 1994). However, in both of these classrooms as well as the classic Sherif (1966) "Robbers Cave" study, within-group cooperation is often paired with between-group competition (e.g., groups work together to achieve better outcomes than other groups), likely because shared group self-interest fosters help and support (Wildschut, Insko, & Gaertner, 2002). Competitive situations, in which one person's outcomes conflict with the other's, may themselves lead to improved individual performance, especially on relatively rote, well-learned tasks for which task completion requires little help from others (Stanne, Johnson, & Johnson, 1999).

*Basis of interdependence.* In *exchange situations*, each partner can effectively control the other's outcomes. This gives rise to the development of so-called moral norms (Turiel, 1983)—norms about responsibility, caregiving, and not hurting others—as well as norms about reciprocity and equity over time and instances ("you benefit me now, I'll benefit you later"; e.g., M. S. Clark & Mills, 1979; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Because exchange situations involve fate control but give advantage to those who can conceal their violations, they give rise to such phenomena as deception, freeloading (Kerr & Bruun, 1983), cheating in social dilemmas (Messick & Brewer, 1983), and suspicion (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). *Coordination situations*, on the other hand, require partners' synchronization of behavior to achieve desirable outcomes, thereby emphasizing processes such as communication and leadership, and other abilities involved in carrying out tasks with others. In an influential paper, Steiner (1972) distinguished two forms of process loss that occur in work groups: one concerned with motivational deficits, and the other concerned with poor organization and deployment of resources. These correspond to exchange and coordination situations, respectively.

*Temporal structure.* Whereas many situations are one-time occurrences whose implications essentially end the moment behavior has been completed, others are extended in time. Such interactions between persons who have ongoing relationships with each other allow for the emergence and application of norms. For example, compared with single-trial bargaining games, in multiple-trial games partners are more likely to trend toward cooperation and to respond generously to their partners' noncooperative errors (van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002). Similarly, in communal relationships, reciprocity may be evident only over time (e.g., M. S. Clark & Mills,



1979). Time-extended situations also allow persons to forego short-term rewards in anticipation of long-term gains. For example, highly committed employees are more likely to engage in personally costly “organizational citizenship behaviors” (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), and more committed partners in close relationships are more likely to make personal sacrifices or to respond prosocially to their partner’s relationship-impairing actions (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Of course, sometimes these investments create social traps—circumstances in which people persist even as their outcomes deteriorate (e.g., Rubin & Brockner, 1975).

Time-extended sequences are intrinsic to the delay of gratification, a self-regulatory strategy in which the less desirable of two current outcomes is chosen in anticipation of a later, larger reward (W. Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996). For example, the “strength model” of regulatory control posits that people’s ability to accept poorer short-term outcomes in the anticipation of greater long-term outcomes varies much as a muscle does, depleting as a function of exertion and growing as a function of rest and training (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). The ability to delay gratification depends on a great many factors, some of them dispositional (e.g., control strategies; Carver & Scheier, 1981), other developmental (H. N. Mischel & Mischel, 1983), and still others based on trust (i.e., expectations) that interaction partners will, over the long haul, “do the right things” (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

*Information certainty.* Situations differ in the availability of information relevant to behavioral choices. For example, uncertainty about future outcomes (i.e., risk) creates a situation in which individuals must choose between loss avoidance and gain seeking. Numerous situational (e.g., framing; Higgins, 1998; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984) and dispositional factors (e.g., optimism, need for closure, and uncertainty orientation; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Scheier & Carver, 1993; Sorrentino, Holmes, Hanna, & Sharp, 1995) influence this preference. Negotiations also involve uncertainty, in that each party is not fully aware of the other’s contingencies and limits; this uncertainty and the attributions it engenders color the negotiation process (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993). Rules of procedural fairness for adjudicating disputes also reflect uncertainty, in the sense that such rules are perceived to be most fair when adopted without individuals’ knowing what their own results will be (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Uncertainty also affords the emergence of trust, whereby individuals who must depend on each other for important outcomes but who cannot know how the other will behave over repeated experiences come to feel confident in the other’s good will (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007).

To conclude this section, let me reiterate the purpose of this analysis. In each case, the nature of the situation encountered, as characterized by one or more of the six dimensions reviewed above, plays a fundamental role in influencing enacted behavior and its underlying social and personality processes. Thus, they provide a systematic framework for organizing and understanding the many diverse behaviors, processes, and phenomena that social psychologists study. Rather than a more-or-less listlike accumulation of variables, then, as the situation is commonly represented in most of the field’s textbooks, this framework provides a systematic and theoretically grounded model of the abstract properties of interpersonal situations. In my opinion, the field would take a giant step forward if, as part of the standard training of graduate students, we provided them with a consensus conceptual model that identified the major dimensions underlying different types of objective situations.

## THE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXT OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

The remainder of this article makes a more general point about the interpersonal nature of situations: that many types of behavior vary, often dramatically so, as a function of our relationship with others involved in that situation. This argument begins with a relatively straightforward idea: that the majority of human activity, social and otherwise, involves interaction with other people with whom we have some type of ongoing relationship, that is, individuals with whom we have history, mental representations of each other, outcomes that are at least partially interdependent, and the expectation of continued interaction. Reis and colleagues (Reis & Collins, 2004; Reis et al., 2000) called this the “relationship context of behavior” and argued that it pervasively influences human behavior and development. The evidence is clear and compelling that people do not respond to a given stimulus in the same way across all relationship contexts: As anyone with an adolescent child knows, a parent’s influence attempts do not have the same force as those of a peer. Thus, to predict and understand social behavior, it is necessary to consider the relationship context in which those behaviors are embedded.

Another traditional definition of social psychology, which can be traced back to McDougall (1908) and E. A. Ross (1908), highlights processes by which thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other people. Social psychology generally studies these processes as they unfold between two individuals who know little more about each other than what is immediately apparent in a novel encounter. To be sure, this sort of research has

proven to be useful, but the idea of relationship contexts suggests that something more is likely to be involved in actual social behavior. People in relationships respond (or not) to each other's wishes, concerns, abilities, and emotional expressions; they modify their intentions so as to be together (or not); they allocate tasks among themselves; they react to each other's behaviors and circumstances, joys and sorrows, misfortunes and happinesses; they empathize, sympathize, imitate, mirror, and try to take each other's perspective (or not); and they consider the fact of their interdependence in organizing everyday life and long-term plans. Most important, this is not only about coordinating action. It is evident that relationship contexts are fundamental to the cognitive and affective mechanisms that mediate between situations and behavior. Indeed, these mediating cognitive and affective mechanisms embody the effect of relationship contexts.

There are, by now, a great many studies demonstrating how social psychological phenomena are influenced by the nature of participants' relationships. In some instances, studies point explicitly to these influences, for example, research examining how interactions or social perceptions differ as a function of the degree of acquaintance. In other instances, the influence of the relationship context is implicit in the design of research, for example, studies that examine social cognition within romantic relationships or social identity within ethnic or national groups, without explicit comparisons to other types of relationships. A few examples should illustrate the more general point. In each case, I highlight a finding that is usually considered fundamental in social psychology (i.e., one that can be found in most basic textbooks). Closer examination reveals that these fundamental principles are moderated, often to the point of reversal, by considering their relationship context.

*Self-serving attributional bias.* Most textbooks report that when judging their own performance, people tend to take credit for success and deny responsibility for failure, relative to similar attributions made for others. Yet, Sedikides et al. (1998) demonstrated that when the participant and other took part in an experimental procedure designed to create closeness, this self-serving bias disappeared.

*The self-referential effect.* According to this principle, memory is enhanced when information is encoded with regard to self rather than to others. In one set of studies, no such advantage was shown when the other was a very close other (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Moreover, Symons and Johnson's (1997) meta-analysis of 65 studies found that the self-referential advantage was twice as large when the other was close

and familiar, as opposed to distant and unfamiliar ( $ds = .20$  and  $.41$ , respectively).

*Actor-observer asymmetry.* This principle asserts that people tend to explain their own behavior with situational explanations, and other people's behavior with person explanations. Based on a meta-analysis of 172 studies, Malle (2006) concluded that this asymmetry was evident primarily when the other was a romantic partner, parent, or close friend ( $d = .25$ ); when the other was a stranger or acquaintance, the effect was negligible ( $d = .07$ ).<sup>6</sup>

*Mood, empathic concern and helping.* The sadder a person in need is, the more help we offer them. But, this is true only in communal relationships. In exchange relationships, the other's mood has no effect on the amount of help offered (M. S. Clark, Ouellette, Powell, & Milberg, 1987). Similarly, Maner and Gailliot (2007) found that empathic concern (a factor linked to helping behavior in most textbooks) was related to the willingness to help kin but unrelated to the willingness to help strangers.

*Attachment and social interaction.* It is commonly reported that individuals high in attachment security tend to interact more intimately in close relationships than individuals high in attachment anxiety or avoidance, as Tidwell, Reis, and Shaver (1996) observed in a diary study conducted with college students. They also found that interaction with opposite-sex persons other than a romantic partner revealed the opposite pattern, namely, that anxious and avoidant individuals reported higher levels of intimacy than secure individuals did. These results support the conclusion that attachment security in part may reflect the ability to differentiate among partners appropriate for intimacy and other attachment-related behaviors. It is interesting that this conclusion is consistent with evidence from studies of institutionalized children about the effect of disinhibited attachment, a pattern in which children seek soothing and other forms of caregiving from whomever is available, as opposed to preferentially from attachment figures (Rutter et al., 2007).

Many other examples are available of studies showing that basic social psychological processes are moderated by the relationship context in which behavior occurs. Table 1 lists a few more of them (the list is far from exhaustive). They span constructs as seemingly individualistic as self-regulation and social judgment, and as collective as intergroup relations, social identity, and social influence. By proposing that relationship contexts are a key, yet often hidden, moderator variable across much of the field's core, I mean to imply something

**TABLE 1:** A Further Sampling of Studies Demonstrating the Effect of Relationship Contexts on Social Psychological Phenomena

Distributed social knowledge is used more effectively by friends and close others than by strangers (Shah & Jehn, 1993; Thompson & Fine, 1999; Wegner, Erber, & Raymond, 1991).
Source confusions (confusing self-relevant information with other-relevant information) are greater for close others, reflecting greater accessibility of self-close other linkages (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). Strangers are more likely to confuse source information about others if those others are believed to be romantic partners (Sedikides, Olsen, & Reis, 1993).
Support from close others tends to be more effective than social support from strangers (R. A. Clark et al., 1998; Matsuzaki, Kojo, & Tanaka, 1993), although, not paradoxically, closeness may exacerbate the harmfulness of ineffective or self-esteem threatening help (Gross, Wallston, & Piliavin, 1979).
Neural responses to a painful electric shock were attenuated when female participants held their husband's hand; reductions were much more limited when holding the hand of a male stranger (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006).
The degree and nature of help varies as a function of genetic relatedness between helper and target (Buss & Kenrick, 1998).
Among the best processes for reducing intergroup prejudice are equal-status contact and affective-intimate friendship (Pettigrew, 1998). Even knowing that an ingroup member has a close friendship with an outgroup member can produce more positive outgroup attitudes (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).
Subliminally priming people with the name of an attachment figure (but not the name of a positive or familiar other) increases altruism and forgiveness and decreases prejudice toward members of outgroups (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005).
Conformity is greater in groups of friends than in groups of strangers (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950; Lott & Lott, 1961).
The foot-in-the-door technique is more effective with friends than with strangers (Millar, 2002).
Self-presentation tends to be self-enhancing to strangers but modest to friends (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995).
Implicit self-esteem (as assessed by the Implicit Association Test) is lower when the self is compared with a close other rather than with a hypothetical other (Karpinski, 2004).
Accessibility of significant-other cues elicits different relational selves, depending on the nature of the self-other relationship, influencing affect, motivation, self-evaluation, and self-regulatory behavior (Andersen & Chen, 2002).
Self-disclosure of highly self-relevant emotional content is appraised as threatening to opposite-sex listeners but challenging to same-sex listeners (Mendes, Reis, Seery, & Blascovich, 2003).
People are more willing to express positive and negative emotions to more responsive, caring, and better-known partners (M. S. Clark, Fitness, & Brissette, 2001).
On highly self-relevant tasks, being outperformed by close others may generate more negative affect and greater self-esteem threat; outperforming others may generate more positive affect and self-esteem boosts (Tesser, 1988). However, with romantic partners, vicarious emotions (pride for their accomplishment, sympathy for their struggle) may temper one's own emotions (Beach et al., 1998; Scinta & Gable, 2005).
When interacting with same-sex partners, men tend to be more agentic than women, and women tend to be more communal than men; when interacting with romantic partners, these sex differences disappear (Suh, Moskowitz, Fournier, & Zuroff, 2004). Similarly, sex differences in intimacy are more pronounced in same-sex interaction than in opposite-sex interaction (Reis, 1998).
Ego threat typically leads to increased aggression among narcissistic individuals, but not when the source of that threat is perceived to be in a unit relationship with the self (Konrath, Bushman, & Campbell, 2006).
Priming with the name of a responsive partner but not more distant positive others allows people to be more open to information about personal liabilities (Kumashiro & Sedikides, 2005).

more than "relationships affect behavior." We often describe social psychological phenomena as if they were universal, meant here in the sense of applying in all contexts. A corollary is that relationship context is sometimes implicit in a phenomenon or theory but ill specified. Either way, by not considering and explicating relationship contexts, we limit the ability of our theories to fully and deeply characterize social behavior.

### THE STUDY OF SITUATIONS AND SITUATED SOCIAL COGNITION

This agenda is entirely consistent with recent developments in what Eliot Smith and Gün Semin (2004, 2007) have called "socially situated cognition," which they rightly describe as a new model for rethinking unstated assumptions that have been prevalent (and constraining) in social cognition research. Smith and Semin's (2007) model challenges the general assumption

that mental representations are abstract and stable and that they are activated and applied by relative automatic context-independent processes. Recent evidence is inconsistent with these expectations, however. Social-cognitive processes have been shown to be adaptive to the perceiver's current social goals, communicative contexts, and bodily states. . . . Theories in the field of social psychology would benefit by taking advantage of [these] insights. (p. 132)

Smith and Semin (2004) offer four specific principles that follow from this perspective. Modified to highlight connections with the approach advocated in this article, these principles are as follows:

1. Social cognition exists for the control of adaptive action, which frequently (if not always) involves regulating and coordinating actions with others. These others are typically persons with whom we have ongoing relationships. Most evolutionary psychologists now believe that social cognition evolved to serve specific

- functions inherent in survival and reproduction, functions that centrally involved mating, kinship, and other forms of social alliances and relationships (Buss & Kenrick, 1998; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992).
2. Social cognition is deeply embodied in human neural-physical architecture, meaning that cognitive processes are embedded in, and inseparable from, the many other human biobehavioral systems that regulate our interaction with the external world. In the list of tasks for which these biobehavioral systems evolved, few are more prominent than the tasks intrinsic to living, working, and reproducing with relationship partners. This principle extends even to relatively low-level functions like perception and action control. For example, our ability to perform two tasks at once may have evolved from the need to perform one task while at the same time monitoring another person's performance (Knöblich & Sebanz, 2006).
  3. Social cognition is an emergent process, arising out of a dynamic process of continuous reciprocal influence between an agent and his or her environment. For example, in social influence processes, listeners and audiences influence each other in a continuous and interactive manner (Mason, Conrey, & Smith, 2007). As Smith and Semin (2004) assert, "Environmental contexts—and particularly features of the communication context, including the relationship of the individual to partners, communicators, audiences, or fellow group members—are among the most important regulators of cognition and action" (p. 85). This is, of course, a central tenet of the Interdependence Theory approach described earlier (Holmes, 2000).
  4. Social cognition goes beyond individual cognition, making use of information accessible in the social environment through various means of "social coupling." There are many specific examples of socially distributed cognition in the literature—for example, research on distributed information processing, socially shared knowledge, and transactive memory—but the key feature will be familiar to all social psychologists: reliance on information that others possess, recognition of the distributed nature of who knows what in the social world (e.g., perspective taking, social roles), and a system of tools for obtaining that information (e.g., language). It is common for these interactions to involve others with whom we have relationships.

Let me be more explicit about a link between this view of situations and what social cognition research might look like. If situations are defined in terms of partners' interdependence with respect to outcomes and goal attainment, it is evident that behavior (i.e., the selection of one course of action from among the various options afforded in that particular situation) should depend to a large extent on what one believes the other will do, that is, on a determination of which actions are likely to produce the best outcomes given the other's anticipated course of action. One would not be open and friendly with a stranger if one expected the stranger to be hostile and aggressive. Instead, people rely on various factors and

processes, from stereotypic and individuated judgments about the other to social norms and personal intuition, to make probabilistic inferences about the other's goals and motives, thereby permitting behavioral choices that are most likely to fulfill whichever motives are salient at that moment (self-protection, self-enhancement, belongingness, etc.). The idea that behavior is contingent on expectations of the other's intent is well established in many areas of social-psychological research. For example, perceptions of the other's intent are a critical determinant of choices in most bargaining and social dilemma games (Messick & Brewer, 1983). Persons in close relationships respond differently to conflicts of interest depending on whether they perceive their partners to be open minded and responsive or self serving and hostile (S. L. Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). And, people are much more likely to approach strangers who they expect will like them rather than not like them (Berscheid & Walster, 1978).

The problem, of course, is to deduce what the other intends, and that is the subject matter of much research and theory in social cognition (although relatively little of it has directly considered the role of interdependent situations in this regard). Philosophers sometimes refer to this as the "Other Minds Problem"—that we cannot know what is in the mind of another person—and it is part of Theory of Mind, a topic that spans disciplines from developmental and social psychology to cognitive science. Neural systems for reasoning about others' goals, perceptions, and emotions begin to develop in early infancy and clear evidence of their operation has been shown around 1 year of age (Saxe, Carey, & Kanwisher, 2004). As these processes mature, judgments about others' goals and motives become ubiquitous, spontaneous, fast, somewhat accurate, and probably unstoppable (Andersen, Moscovitz, Blair, & Nosek, 2007). Many processes contribute to these inferences, some of them automatic but others more deliberate. From the perspective of the present model, the question is, How do the nature of interdependent situations and people's lay understandings of them contribute to inferences about the content of other minds? Part of the answer lies in the concept of affordance described earlier. Lay knowledge of situations includes the idea that certain behaviors are more or less likely in certain circumstances (Kelley, 1992). These are called social norms. For example, university professors expect students to be polite when encountered in class, and less so in a casual conversation at a fraternity party. Similarly, people understand that conformity with the beliefs of a powerful person who controls important outcomes may not indicate internalization, but more likely does when the other has little outcome control. A more complex but conceptually related inference occurs when one expects



another person to violate a social norm, such as by not conforming to the beliefs of a powerful other, which usually is associated with a particularly strong inference of dispositional tendencies (Jones & Davis, 1965). In each of these examples, expected behavior is derived from knowledge of interdependent situations and the behavioral options they afford.

Moreover, as Epley (2008) notes, the real Other Minds Problem is not to make these inferences but to make them accurately. Scores of studies have documented systematic biases and errors in the judgments we make about others (and, of course, there are unsystematic errors, too). In this light, it is interesting to note one such systematic bias, the failure to consider how situational factors may have contributed to others' past behavior (Gilbert, 2002). Past behavior is important for predicting future motives and goals, so that incorrect inferences may lead to forecasting errors. It would also be fruitful to consider how the failure to consider the effect of interdependent situations may contribute to forecasting errors for one's own future behavior (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003).

A particularly important part of the Other Minds Problem concerns metaperception, or beliefs about how others see oneself (Kenny, 1994). These are particularly germane to judging intent in interpersonal situations, inasmuch as the perceived degree of another person's benevolence or antipathy toward oneself is fundamental to many important judgments. This centrality is indicated by studies showing that environmental events, including other people's presence, are characterized as hostile or hospitable within the first 150 msec of an encounter (e.g., Cacioppo & Berntson, 1999) or by research that reconceptualizes self-esteem in terms of perceived relational value to others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The nature and influence of such metaperceptions vary as a function of situations. For example, situations of conflicting interests are more diagnostic of a partner's intentions toward oneself than situations of corresponding interests, inasmuch as the former pits the other's self-interest against one's own, whereas in the latter, they are indistinguishable (Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

Finally, it should be noted that attention to the properties of interdependent situations fits well with recent literature on automatic goal activation (see Fishbach & Ferguson, 2007, for a comprehensive summary). Extensive research shows that goals can be activated automatically by environmental stimuli (e.g., the color of a wall), subtle linguistic cues (e.g., the way a request is worded), and the presence (real or primed) of a relationship partner (e.g., one's father) or members of a social group (e.g., gay persons). Likewise, interdependent situations represent another class of stimuli that activate personal goals. For example, mixed-motive

situations, in which both competitive and cooperative options are available, tend to activate competitive goals in agentic individuals and cooperative goals in communally oriented individuals. A further complexity is that relationships may alter the goal that is activated in a given context. For example, a mixed-motive situation involving one's sibling or a rival is more likely to activate competitive goals than the same situation involving one's romantic partner or mother.

In sum, understanding social cognition requires attention not only to its cognitive aspects, as they occur inside the head, but also to its socially situated aspects—the nature of human situations, the motives, goals, and self-regulatory strategies that they afford, and the way in which individuals respond to these opportunities. Indeed, to the extent that Smith and Semin's (2004) thesis about situated social cognition is correct, these two aspects of social cognition may be fundamentally inseparable, suggesting the need for a theory of situations as a foundation for theories of social cognition.

### CULTURE AND THE PROPERTIES OF SITUATIONS

This analysis has important implications for how we think about, conceptualize, and study the influence of culture on social behavior. Ever since social constructivist arguments began to be voiced in social psychology (see Gergen & Davis, 1985, for a collection of reviews), cross-cultural researchers have argued that the identical situations may be construed quite differently in different cultures. For example, in a so-called "culture of honor," violent responses to personal or family honor are more likely to be seen as justified than outside such cultures (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). At least among social constructivists, it is commonly argued that situations have little or no objective meaning outside of the meaning systems that culture provides.

That situations may be construed differently by individuals from different cultures is incontrovertible. One of the earliest studies examining this idea showed that Japanese students viewed participating in a laboratory experiment as inherently more stressful than did American students (Lazarus, Opton, Tomita, & Kodama, 1966). Innumerable studies since then have documented many and varied differences in situation construal across diverse cultures. Nevertheless, these differences do not contradict our insistence that the analysis of situations should begin with their objective properties; rather, if anything, they demonstrate the conceptual utility of this approach. In Interdependence Theory, the abstract properties of interdependent situations are held to be universal, reflecting as they do the nature of two (or more) persons'

interconnection with respect to achieving their goals. As explained earlier, these situations afford the possible expression of various different behaviors, depending on person factors. The construct of person factors includes what the individual has learned through socialization and experience about appropriate responses to situations. For example, the same social influence attempt ("Please conform to the family's values") would likely be seen as an opportunity to display one's harmony with the group in a collectivistic culture and to demonstrate one's autonomy in an individualistic culture. The abstract structure of the situation (i.e., person with moderate amounts of outcome control requests compliance) is the same but the response activated for that individual differs. Such culture-based responses are typically well learned and automatic.

This model is readily applied to research on the effect of culture on social-psychological processes. For example, Kelley et al. (1970) presented a mixed-motive, incomplete-information bargaining task to American and European students at several sites. American students defined this task in instrumental terms, which led them to construe cooperation as a sign of weakness and passivity. European students, on the other hand, construed the task in moral terms, perceiving cooperation as a morally and socially appropriate behavior. Another, more recent example comes from an extensive program of research by Nisbett, Norenzayan, and their colleagues, which demonstrates that East Asians see the causes of behavior in a holistic way, that is, focusing attention on the relation between an actor and the field in which behavior is embedded, whereas Americans see causality more analytically, in terms of actors' actions and intents (e.g., Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). This perspective difference gives rise to numerous differences in social cognition, social judgment, and behavior (Nisbett, 2003). Although the appraisals differ, the underlying situations are the same. It bears noting that some cross-cultural psychologists have adopted this approach. For example, McAuley, Bond, and Kashima (2002) argued that culturally based taxonomies of dyadic relations could be developed only by distinguishing what they called "objective context variables" from "projections of personality processes" (i.e., subjective appraisals of those contexts).

This position requires that the key abstract features of interdependence, as presented earlier and in Kelley et al. (2003), be universal. Although I am not aware of any direct evidence in this regard (but see Bugental, 2000, for relevant theory), it seems highly likely that the six dimensions described earlier (degree of interdependence, corresponding vs. conflicting interests, etc.) exist in all cultures, as would be necessitated by their proposed evolutionary roots. This position does not, however, require that their prevalence be identical across different

cultures. In fact, another way in which cultures influence behavior is by making certain situations more or less common. For example, in collectivist cultures, in which persons are far more likely to depend on the group for satisfaction of basic needs, situations involving high levels of interdependence and corresponding interests are likely to be more common than in individualist cultures, where individuals are more apt to find themselves pursuing outcomes on their own (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Situation selection is one of the major ways in which person factors influence behavior in this approach (Kelley et al., 2003).

### CONCLUSION: REINTRODUCING SITUATIONS INTO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

In this article, I have tried to argue that renewed emphasis on situations has great potential for the future of social psychology. I have said less about personality psychology, although it should be apparent that the interdependence model and its key concept of affordance, as described earlier, has great potential to integrate the study of social and personality processes. (Interested readers might look at Holmes, 2004, or Reis, Capobianco, and Tsai, 2002, for fuller descriptions of how this functionalist integration of personality and social psychology might look.).

What sort of research might follow from this perspective? Although the possibilities are too numerous to list here, a few promising suggestions might be informative. One of them concerns clearer identification of the abstract patterns of interdependence that are common in social life, so that researchers are better able to manipulate and study them. This would allow scrutiny of the personal and interpersonal motives that are revealed in these situations, along with the most common forms of social cognitions and emotions that accompany them. For example, how do dyads deal with information uncertainty under conditions of corresponding or conflicting interests, or symmetrical or asymmetrical power? Which motives are most likely to be expressed and which affective reactions are most likely to occur under which conditions? And, which hormonal and neural mechanisms instantiate these responses? Another important set of questions would distinguish more exactly the types of situations that are and are not relevant to demonstrating the effects of particular individual differences. For example, a recent paper by Denissen and Penske (in press) reconceptualizes the Big Five dimensions of personality in terms of social situations in which each dimension is (or is not) likely to be activated. Of course, such work exemplifies the value of an integrated social-personality psychology.

We social-personality psychologists often refer to ourselves as scientists who study “basic processes” of social behavior. I have tried to argue that these basic processes are not acontextual and, therefore, should not be studied as such. They operate in certain situational contexts and are irrelevant in others. Basic social processes exist to help regulate the contingencies of living, loving, working, playing, and coordinating activity with others. Understanding how these contingencies influence behavior can and should be central to social psychology’s mission.

This article began with a list of four ideas relevant to revitalizing the concept of situation as a core construct in social psychology. I haven’t said much about the fourth one, helping social psychology establish a more easily identified and more widely accepted home within the behavioral and social sciences. In some respects, this may be the most compelling reason of all.

Social psychologists occasionally wonder whether the field, despite our considerable successes, is becoming marginalized in the family of sciences. Often, the field’s response to adversity is to turn inward, that is, after deploring the events in question, we focus more intently than ever on our own journals, grant panels, and professional meetings. Nevertheless, two interrelated trends leaning in the opposite direction are visible on the immediate horizon of 21st-century science (e.g., Cacioppo, 2007). One is that the most exciting developments will involve interdisciplinary science—that is, research on the boundaries of traditional subject areas—and the other is that they will involve “big science”—very large collaborations among scientists with diverse specialties. Although social psychology is not without certain notable accomplishments in these regards, by and large, as many science administrators have commented, we as a discipline have not been quick to seize these opportunities.

There is irony here. As Shelley Taylor (2004) noted a few years ago, this future is now. Other disciplines are moving rapidly to incorporate interpersonal perspectives into their own work, for example, behavioral economics, political science, behavioral genetics, neuroscience, cognitive science, and medicine (for both etiology and treatment). In some cases, these interdisciplinary integrations have been accomplished with central participation by social psychologists using concepts and methods well established in the social psychology literature. In other instances, our involvement has been peripheral at best—researchers from other fields have appropriated or, more egregiously, reinvented theories, ideas, and phenomena that are intrinsic to social psychology. For example, Mason et al. (2007) describe how scholars in

fields ranging from sociology and economics to cognitive science and physics have recognized the importance

of social influence and have developed models of influence flow in populations and groups—generally without the participation of social psychologists or the incorporation of detailed empirical findings regarding the underlying process. (p. 279)

My thesis is that social psychology as a discipline has in its collective bank of wisdom far more to offer these other specialties than has yet been realized. Systematic and concerted attention to the issues raised in this article is likely to make that bank of wisdom more accessible, useful, and generalizable—it may, in fact, be essential. This can only make social psychology a better and more influential science.

And, if nothing else, when Borat comes to your house for dinner, you’ll know exactly what the situation is.

## NOTES

1. Figure 1 is slightly modified from Holmes’s (2006) adaptation of Figure 7.1 in W. Mischel and Shoda (1999).

2. Strictly speaking, W. Mischel and Shoda (1999) define the “if” in terms of the external environment. However, their model allows for the possibility that cognitive-affective units can be activated “internally, as in self-reflection and rumination” (W. Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 26). For this reason, many theorists believe that in the Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS), “situations, or ifs, are subjectively rather than objectively defined” (e.g., Andersen & Chen, 2002, p. 628). For example, a common “if” example in their work is, “The counselor bossed the kid.” As will be evident later in this article, this is more like a subjective appraisal than an objective situation. Regardless of how their model is viewed, my position should be seen as a critique of the use of subjective appraisals to define situations and not of their work, which in most respects is compatible with the present approach.

3. Their solutions are actually somewhat more complex than this. I have simplified them for ease of presentation.

4. An interesting historical note here is that Sullivan’s (1953) interpersonal theory of personality posited that personality could only be studied in terms of interpersonal situations—in other words, that the appropriate unit of analysis to understand personality was how the individual behaved in relation to one or more other individuals.

5. Most real-life situations actually involve particular combinations of these dimensions. For example, coordination problems are differently manifested depending on whether outcomes conflict or correspond. My discussion focuses on individual dimensions taken singly for clarity. A comprehensive account of the ways in which these dimensions combine to reveal the nature of common situations is provided in Kelley et al. (2003).

6. It is interesting that this result stems from stronger external attributions by actors compared with observers when the other is an intimate. The traditional explanation for the actor–observer asymmetry emphasizes differences in person attributions, which Malle did not find, based on greater familiarity with one’s own history and circumstances than that of another person. The fact that the effect is stronger with intimates contradicts this explanation. Malle (2006) speculates that the asymmetry may be due to linguistic factors, whereby familiar information is omitted in verbal accounts of the self.

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