



Personality-driven situation experience, contact, and construal: How people's personality traits predict characteristics of their situations in daily life



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ABSTRACT

In situation perceptions, the objective situation and its unique construal are confounded. We propose a multiple-rater approach where situations are rated by raters *in situ* (who experienced the situations first-hand) and raters *ex situ* (who read participants' factual descriptions of the situations). Two multi-wave studies (Austria: $N = 176$ – 179 , 3 waves; USA: $N = 202$, 4 waves), examined associations between personality traits (Big Five OCEAN) and four sources of ratings of situation characteristics (Situational Eight DIAMONDS), namely (a) *in situ* (situation experience), (b) *ex situ* (situation contact, conservative), (c) what is shared between *in situ* and *ex situ* (situation contact, liberal), and (d) *in situ* controlled for *ex situ* (situation construal). Replicable evidence was found that personality is associated with the situations people encounter as well as their construal of them.

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1. Introduction

People choose and create their surroundings to some degree, and also perceive them differently depending on their personalities (Allport, 1961). For example, extraverts might often find themselves in social interactions. We refer to the process by which this occurs as *situation contact*. In addition, extraverts may see opportunities for social interactions where others would see none. We refer to this process as *situation construal*. Both contact and construal may be, to some extent, a function of the individual's personality. However, they can be difficult to disentangle: In research designs where situations are sampled in people's everyday lives and rated by the people who encountered them (e.g., “I was in a pleasant situation”), they are conflated. As a remedy to this problem, we propose to incorporate different kinds of raters who judge the situation from multiple perspectives. This approach is demonstrated in two large multi-wave studies.

2. Background

2.1. Situation contact

As Allport (1961) observed, “... most people do a good deal to create the situation to which they respond” so that “... the situations we find ourselves in are often the direct product of our previous (and continuing) personalities” (p. 179; see also Buss, 1987; Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997; Plomin, DeFries, & Loehlin, 1977; Roberts & Caspi, 2003; Scarr & McCartney, 1983; Snyder & Ickes, 1985). In our usage, the term “contact” includes (a) the voluntary and deliberate selection of specific situations, (b) involuntary elicitation of reactions to one's own behavior (evocative transactions), (c) deliberate modulations of already existing situations (manipulative transactions), and (d) the purposeful creation of entirely new situations (pro-active transactions).

Some previous research has examined how specific personality traits are related to situational selection (e.g., Emmons & Diener, 1986; Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1986; Furnham, 1981; Holland, 1966; see Ickes et al., 1997, pp. 175–184 for a review of extant literature), evocation (e.g., Bell, 1968; Bell & Harper, 1977; Buss, 1981; Buss, Block, & Block, 1980; Snyder, 1984), and manipulation (e.g., in the mating/courtship domain: Buss, Gomes, Higgins, & Lauterbach, 1987). Nonetheless, most of these studies are limited in two ways.

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First, many studies asked people to report the kinds of situations they encounter (e.g., Furnham, 1981; Mehrabian, 1978). However, such studies cannot disentangle objective aspects of situations from participants' construals of them. Second, many studies preceded recent advances in the study of situations, including the development of methods to assess them in terms of their psychologically relevant characteristics (de Raad, 2004; Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Fleeson, 2007; Rauthmann et al., 2014). Such characteristics can be well measured with the Riverside Situational Q-Sort (RSQ; Wagerman & Funder, 2009; see Morse, Neel, Todd, & Funder, in press; Serfass & Sherman, 2013; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010, 2012, 2013) and parsimoniously captured within an eight-factor structure, the Situational Eight DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al., 2014): Duty (*Does work need to be done?*), Intellect (*Is deep cognitive processing relevant?*), Adversity (*Are there overt threats from external forces?*), Mating (*Is there potential to attract or court sexual/romantic mates?*), pOsitivity (*Are there positive aspects to the situation?*), Negativity (*Could the situation entail negative feelings?*), Deception (*Is dishonesty or mistrust an issue?*), and Sociality (*Is meaningful social interaction possible?*).

The Situational Eight have the advantage that they are compatible with major personality taxonomies, addressing (Johnson's 1999, pp. 450/451) critique that "one of the problems is researchers' failure to use the same kind of descriptive unit for traits and situations". For example, the trait counterpart to Duty is Conscientiousness. Thus, research on personality-driven situation contact is well framed within following question: *Which trait predicts contact with which psychological situation characteristics?* As Johnson's comment implies, answering this question requires that (a) situations be defined in terms of their psychological characteristics and (b) that major dimensions of those characteristics are content-wise "compatible" with major trait dimensions. Thus, the Situational Eight DIAMONDS, which are compatible with the Big Five OCEAN (Openness/Intellect, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism; John & Srivastava, 1999), may provide a good starting point for empirical research.

2.2. Situation experience and construal

People form psychological impressions of situations based on cues in the environment (Brunswik, 1952; Magnusson, 1981; Rauthmann et al., 2014). The resulting situational experience is to some degree shared with others and to some degree distinctive. As Allport (1961) observed, "for some the world is a hostile place where men are evil and dangerous; for others it is a stage for fun and frolic [and] it may appear as a place to do one's duty grimly; or a pasture for cultivating friendship and love" (p. 266). We refer to such unique impressions of situations – independent from and distinctive of how others perceive the situations – as *situation construal*.

For the most part, studies of personality-construal links have been restricted to narrow domains (aggression: Dodge, 1993; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Zelli, Cervone, & Huesmann, 1996; Zelli, Huesmann, & Cervone, 1995; rejection by romantic partners: Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998), experimental interactions (Todd & Funder, 2012), Thematic Apperception Test cards (Serfass & Sherman, 2013), and hypothetical situation vignettes (Rauthmann, 2012). The availability of the DIAMONDS taxonomy (Rauthmann et al., 2014), makes it possible to address the following question concerning personality-driven situation construal: *Which traits predict the unique construal of which situation characteristics?*

2.3. Methodological issues in the study of situation contact and construal

Research concerned with characteristics of situations must necessarily rely on human raters (see Rauthmann et al., 2015).

Generally, there can be raters *in situ* (who experience the situation first-hand as well as being personally involved and affected), *juxta situm* (as confederates or bystanders who observe the situation, but are not personally involved or affected), and *ex situ* (who are not in the setting, personally involved, or affected, but rate the situation based on verbal descriptions, pictures, or video clips).

If people's perceptions of situations are sampled from their daily lives, and thus situations differ *between* people (i.e., each person is in his/her own situation), then defining a given situation solely by one person's perception (e.g., "I was in a pleasant situation") necessarily confounds in which kinds of situations the person was in (contact) and how the person distinctly interpreted them (construal). How can they be analytically separated? We will first outline the hypothetical, ideal approaches to studying situation contact and construal and then propose our multi-rater approach, which attempts to strike a balance among the trade-offs necessary to study contact and construal *simultaneously and economically*.

Situation contact. Ideally, situation contact would be examined *in vivo* where, unlike as in experimental settings (including standardized and hypothetical situations), people can shape their surroundings with real life consequences (Ickes et al., 1997). Further, repeated measurements of naturalistically occurring situations are necessary to account for random fluctuations. While it would be ideal to have several raters *juxta situm* unobtrusively observe and rate participants' situations, this is impossible for both practical and ethical reasons. A work-around is to have participants write down objective, simple, and concrete cues (Rauthmann, 2015; Saucier, Bel-Bahar, & Fernandez, 2007) of the situations they were in, prompted by W-questions: *Where were you? When were you there? Who was with you? What were you (and others) doing? What was happening? Which objects were around you?* (Mehl & Robbins, 2012; Rauthmann et al., 2014, Study 3; Saucier et al., 2007; Sherman et al., 2010, 2012, 2013). A drawback, however, is that many measurements (e.g., 3–5 per day) would increase participants' fatigue. Additionally, it would be quite laborious to have all generated situation vignettes judged by raters *ex situ*.¹

Situation construal. Ideally, situation construal would be examined in designs where the same participants rated the same situations. Then, the variance in situation ratings could be decomposed into sources of the perceiver (= how a perceiver generally sees situations), the situation (= how a situation is consensually seen), and the perceiver × situation interaction (= how a situation is uniquely seen by a specific perceiver) (Rauthmann, 2012). To allow experimental control, such designs usually rely on hypothetical situations (Rauthmann, 2012; see also Serfass & Sherman, 2013) or limit participants' ability to select or shape lab-situations.² Further, it is quite laborious to immerse participants into different standardized lab-situations (cf. Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Todd, 2014). Consequentially, researchers may seek to address construal in real-world situations, but situations will then vary between persons on each measurement point making it impossible to use variance decomposition. A work-around is to have raters *juxta situm* (which would be extremely costly and impractical) or raters *ex situ* who rate situation vignettes (see *Situation contact*). Sherman et al. (2013) already employed the latter more economical case where aggregated *ex situ* ratings – as the "objective", canonico-consensual, or alpha press aspect of situations – were partialled out from *in situ* ratings,

¹ More economic and less straining would be to have the raters *in situ* take a picture of or film their situation, while this material would be later judged by raters *ex situ*. Still, this approach requires many *ex situ* ratings, and there may also be legal and ethical issues involved in recording participants' *in vivo* situations.

² If situations can be presented repeatedly to participants and participants can choose whether or not they enter the situation again, then situation selection may be studied. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

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