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Psychological situations illuminate the meaning of human behavior: Recent advances and application to social influence processes

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Abstract

Psychologists have long sought to understand how people experience, think, and communicate about situations. Psychology's protracted journey toward understanding psychological situations recently took a momentous turn toward more rigorous conceptualization and measurement of situational characteristics along multiple dimensions. We provide a selective review of recent developments in research on psychological situations and highlight the value that these recent contributions deliver for researchers interested in human cognition, emotion, and behavior. We illustrate this value with an application of insights and instruments from the CAPTION and DIAMONDS models to social influence processes in groups. Specifically, we demonstrate how utilizing validated multidimensional scales of situational characteristics can illuminate the psychological meaning of brokering behaviors. We conclude by discussing current challenges and promising future directions for research on psychological situations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a precise conceptualization of situations has enthralled psychologists since the field's inception as a scientific area of investigation. Though Lewin's (1935) early analysis of environmental influences on human behavior prompted scholars to pay close attention to the power of situations, his terminology (e.g., "life space", "force field") left open the question: "Exactly what do we put in the 'situation' term ...?" (Kelley, 1991, p. 212). This ambiguity has led some scholars to observe that "the idea of the situation is handled in the most happy-go-lucky way" (Goffman, 1964, p. 63), and motivated others to articulate a vision of "a compelling theory of situations which will, first, present a language in terms of which situations can be defined ... and then point to the manner in which defined

properties of situations are transformed into psychological forces in the individual" (Milgram, 1965, p. 74). In many ways, the field's pursuit of a precise conceptualization of situations continues to this day (Yang, Read, & Miller, 2009).

The need for rigorous ways of conceptualizing and measuring situations and for a deep understanding of how situations influence emotion, cognition, and behavior, inspired numerous meaningful contributions (e.g., Eckes, 1995; Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Forgas, 1976; Kelley et al., 2003; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Pervin, 1978; Price, 1974; Seeman, 1997; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010). Nonetheless, progress on conceptualizing situations remained slow (Kenny, Mohr, & Levesque, 2001), leading scholars to conclude that, in general "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" (Reis, 2008, p. 312). In the past 5 years, however, research on psychological situations has blossomed, with multiple research teams providing novel answers to the question of how people experience, think, and communicate about situations. Here, we highlight some of the value that these recent advances can deliver, with a particular application to the domain of social influence.

2 | DEFINING PSYCHOLOGICAL SITUATIONS AND THEIR ELEMENTS

Recent research has contributed a sharper definition of psychological situations (Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015). Building on recent conceptualizations, we define psychological situations as the *subjective meanings individuals attach to sensory inputs from their immediate environment*. In two words, a psychological situation is an individual's *understood context* (Johns, 2006). This definition emphasizes that psychological situations capture subjective interpretations of a setting's objective properties and hence builds on Lewin's notion of "cognitive restructuring of the field" (Kelley, 1991) and Nisbett and Ross's (1991) "principle of construal." People experience situations through their interpretation of objective circumstances, which translates those circumstances into the psychologically active ingredients that then influence affect, cognition, and behavior (March, 1994; Weick, 1988; Yang et al., 2009).

Emerging models focus on subjective construal because decades of scholarly research highlight the importance of understanding how individuals make sense of their physical and social environments. For example, studying students' perceptions of their college environment, Battistich and Thompson (1980) concluded: "The most striking finding of the present research is the extent to which situations are perceived in terms of subjective, connotative factors rather than more objective, structural characteristics. With few exceptions, such factors as interpersonal relationships, behavioral uncertainty or constraint, and affective reactions were more salient to these college students in distinguishing social situations than physical settings ... or the particular activity involved" (p. 80). Importantly, constructivism is not synonymous with either phenomenology or idiosyncrasy. Reality typically constrains individuals' mental representations of their circumstances in discernable ways, and groups of individuals are often able to achieve consensus around a shared interpretation of their common situation. However, current models acknowledge meaningful variability in mental representations of the same real situation (e.g., a bilateral negotiation: Halevy, Chou, & Murnighan, 2012; an intergroup conflict: Halevy, Sagiv, Roccas, & Bornstein, 2006), reflecting the view that "psychological experiences of situations matter" (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2018a, b, p. 367; see that paper also for a more thorough discussion of different objective and subjective approaches to the study of situations).

2.1 | The path to sense-making

2.1.1 | Situational cues, situational characteristics, and situation classes

Individuals consistently strive to make sense of their natural and social environments. The process of sense-making begins with a set of objective circumstances, and it ends with a comprehensible situation that (a) is psychologically meaningful, (b) can be communicated to others, and (c) can be used to explain cognition and emotion and motivate action (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The process of sense-making thus begins with *situational cues*, the

objective, physical raw material that individuals attend to and process as they construct the situational gestalt. For example, Gerpott, Balliet, Columbus, Molho, and de Vries (2017) showed that individuals attach situational meaning to other people's nonverbal cues. Specifically, they found that individuals inferred greater situational conflict upon seeing someone with crossed arms and greater situational power and certainty from targets standing up as compared with sitting down. Thus, these nonverbal behaviors serve as situational cues that shape individuals' understanding of their situation. Individuals faced with the same set of situational cues may attend to and interpret these cues either similarly or idiosyncratically, giving rise either to shared or distinct psychological situations.

Looking ahead to the conclusion of the sense-making process, this process yields perceived *situation classes*, which are the nouns people use to distinguish and label different types of situations: for example, a conflict, a party, or a negotiation (Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001; Van Heck, 1984). Situation classes are often taxonomies of broad contexts for action and interaction, such as joint working, sport, and rituals (Parrigon, Woo, Tay, & Wang, 2017). In between cues and classes, in the middle of the sense-making process, people note the perceived qualities of situations—their *characteristics*. If situational cues and situation classes are the starting point and end point of the sense-making journey, then situational characteristics are the emergent experiences that individuals encounter on the sense-making path from situation cues to situation classes. Individuals typically use adjectives or short descriptions, such as pleasant, complex, or typical, to denote situational characteristics (Edwards & Templeton, 2005; Parrigon et al., 2017).

We propose that psychological characteristics constitute the basic level in mental representations of situations. To use an analogy from research on object perception and categorization, consider the hierarchical categorization process in which “kitchen chair”, “chair”, and “furniture” capture the subordinate, basic, and superordinate levels of object categorization, respectively (Rosch, 1978). We propose that (a) situational cues capture the subordinate level; (b) situational characteristics—which are broader in scope, more abstract, and more subjective than situational cues—capture the basic level; and (c) situation classes capture the superordinate level. Thus, it makes sense for emerging models of psychological situations to focus on situational characteristics, rather than situational cues or situation classes, because this basic level of mental representation is most salient in human thinking and communication.

3 | MULTIDIMENSIONAL MODELS OF SITUATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Recent years witnessed a spike in scholarly interest in developing and validating new multidimensional models and measures of psychological situations. For example, in the past 5 years, different teams have proposed and empirically tested the following novel models of psychological situations: The CAPTION model (Parrigon et al., 2017), the DIAMONDS model (Rauthmann et al., 2014), the SAAP model (Situational Affordances for Adaptive Problems; Brown, Neel, & Sherman, 2015), the Situation 5 (Horstmann & Ziegler, 2019), and the SIS model (Situational Interdependence Scale; Gerpott et al., 2017). These models represent different theoretical perspectives, were derived and developed in different ways, and vary considerably in their scope and aim (for comparative reviews and discussions of the different models see: Horstmann, Rauthmann, & Sherman, 2017; Parrigon, Woo, & Tay, 2018; Rauthman & Sherman, 2018a, 2018b; Reis, 2018).

Given the quick pace with which new ideas and findings are now accumulating, our aim here is not to provide an exhaustive review. Rather than taking a still photo of a rapidly moving field, we aim to articulate the value that emerging multidimensional models of psychological situations and the novel research tools that they provide can deliver for psychologists and other social scientists interested in human emotion, cognition, and behavior. Even as researchers continue to debate and refine the multidimensional structure and content dimensions of psychological situations, these different research teams have already provided insights and measurement tools that offer new opportunities. Here, we illustrate how broad dimensions of situational characteristics can inform our understanding of the psychological meaning of human behavior, focusing specifically on the two broadest models—CAPTION and DIAMONDS. Specifically, we demonstrate the usefulness of these models for advancing knowledge on social influence processes in groups.

3.1 | CAPTION and DIAMONDS

Of the many multidimensional models of situational characteristics currently available to researchers, we focus here on two. The DIAMONDS and CAPTION models stand out for two main reasons. First, they are exceptionally broad in their content, covering situational characteristics that are relevant to how people *think* (with dimensions such as Intellect and Complexity), *feel* (with dimensions such as Positivity and Negativity/Positive valence and Negative valence) and *interact* with others around them (with dimensions such as Mating, Sociality, Deception, Adversity, and Humor). In other words, the models (separately and collectively) address cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of situations. Second, these two models aim to be all encompassing and hence are applicable across numerous contexts that may be of interest to psychologists and other social scientists. Thus, we chose these two models because they are especially comprehensive with respect to both content and contexts.

3.2 | DIAMONDS: A personality-based model of situational characteristics

The introduction of the DIAMONDS model (Rauthmann et al., 2014) constituted a watershed point in the recent surge of scholarly interest in psychological situations. The DIAMONDS model stipulates that the essence of a psychological situation is how much it affords or constrains the manifestation of different personality traits (Rauthmann et al., 2014). The model assumes that individuals think about situational characteristics in much the same way they think about personal characteristics. Consistent with this assumption, Rauthmann, Sherman, and their colleagues modeled their measure of situational characteristics, the Riverside Situational Q-Sort, after a personality measure, the California Adult Q-Sort (Rauthmann et al., 2014; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2016a, 2016b).

In developing and validating this scale, the researchers concluded that individuals experience situations along eight dimensions: Duty—the extent to which a situation requires fulfilling obligations, completing tasks, or attending to problems (example item: “a job needs to be done”); Intellect—the extent to which a situation is intellectually stimulating or calls for deep information processing (e.g., “situation includes intellectual or cognitive stimuli”); Adversity—the extent to which a situation is threatening, competitive, or interpersonally disagreeable (e.g., “being dominated or bossed around”); Mating—the extent to which the situation enables or promotes romantic or sexual relations (e.g., “potential sexual or romantic partners are present”); Positivity—the extent to which a situation is “pleasant, fun, enjoyable, playful” and also “simple, clear, and easy-to-navigate” (Rauthmann et al., 2014, p. 708; example item: “situation is humorous”); Negativity—the extent to which a situation “may elicit any sort of negative feeling (e.g., frustration, anxiety, tension, guilt, anger, etc.)” (Rauthmann et al., 2014, p. 708; example item: “situation could entail stress or trauma”); Deception—the extent to which a situation is characterized by distrust, disloyalty, hostility, or lying (e.g., “A person or activity could be undermined or sabotaged”); and Sociality—the extent to which a situation enables positive social interaction, communication, and connectedness (e.g., “close personal relationships are present or could develop”). Across multiple studies, the DIAMONDS research team demonstrated the utility of this framework, the psychometric qualities of the RSQ, and how the DIAMONDS dimensions relate to Big Five traits and different behaviors.

Although a recent contribution, the DIAMONDS model has stimulated considerable empirical research. The model has proven useful for understanding how people experience and perceive situations and for studying how situational characteristics relate to personality and to behavior (e.g., Brown & Rauthmann, 2016; Rauthmann, Jones, & Sherman, 2016; Rauthmann, Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2015; Serfass & Sherman, 2015; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015). With respect to explaining human behavior, Sherman et al. (2015) demonstrated that situational characteristics along the DIAMONDS dimensions explain unique variance in social behavior above and beyond the variance explained by broad dimensions of personality. For example, consider their findings for two behaviors that attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years: honesty (Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012; Weisel & Shalvi, 2015) and dominance (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Halevy, Chou, Cohen, & Livingston,

2012). Sherman et al. (2015) found that situational deception negatively predicted behavioral honesty above and beyond trait honesty–humility. Moreover, situational deception and trait honesty–humility interacted in shaping honest behavior. With regard to dominance, trait extraversion positively predicted dominant behavior whereas situational adversity negatively predicted dominant behavior, each explaining unique variance in dominant behavior.

3.3 | CAPTION: A lexically-derived model of situational characteristics

Unlike the DIAMONDS model, which is based in personality psychology, the CAPTION model proceeds from the assumption that naturally occurring language about situations reflects important features of situations. Based on this assumption, Parrigon et al. (2017) identified thousands of potentially relevant adjectives from a corpus of millions of words and reduced this sample, first using expert and lay ratings, then through data reduction techniques, to identify the multidimensional structure of psychological situations. Based on the dimensions that emerged, they developed and validated a short self-report measure and used neural-network models to validate their multidimensional solution in a large sample of naturally occurring language. Finally, they tested how well the identified dimensions explained variance in criterion variables, above and beyond previously identified dimensions of situational variability.

These efforts yielded the seven CAPTION dimensions: Complexity—the extent to which a situation entails stimuli that are challenging to process (example adjectives: “analytical” and “scholarly”); Adversity—the extent to which a situation is effortful, difficult, and taxing (e.g., “exhausting” and “stressful”); Positive Valence—the extent to which a situation is characterized by interpersonal warmth, affiliation and intimacy (e.g., “loving” and “affectionate”); Negative Valence—the extent to which a situation is harmful or disgusting (e.g., “malicious” and “repulsive”); Typicality—the extent to which a situation is routine, common, and familiar (e.g., “regular” and “normal”); Importance—the extent to which a situation supports pursuit and attainment of personal goals (e.g., “effective” and “beneficial”); and Humor—the extent to which a situation is amusing or entertaining (e.g., “silly” and “funny”).

Parrigon et al. (2017) demonstrated that the CAPTION dimensions explain considerable variance in a range of criteria, above and beyond other predictors. For example, the CAPTION dimensions explained considerable portions of the variance in positive affect and negative affect, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and intrinsic motivation. Notably, for most outcome variables explored, the relative predictive performance of the CAPTION dimensions surpassed that of the DIAMONDS dimensions; the only exception was satisfaction of the need for control, in which DIAMONDS dimensions explained more variance than the CAPTION dimensions (Parrigon et al., 2017).

3.4 | Comparing the DIAMONDS and CAPTION models

The DIAMONDS and CAPTION models share many similarities, of which we highlight five that we find particularly important. First, they share an assumption of constructivism, acknowledging that individuals may perceive and experience the same objective set of stimuli (i.e., situation cues) differently, either because they attend to different stimuli or because they attach different meanings to the same stimuli. For instance, the sound of a crying baby may go unnoticed by one person, evoke empathy in a second, and elicit annoyance in a third. As Ellsworth (2013) noted, “in general, my situation is not your situation” (p. 126; cf. Yang et al., 2009). Second, both models rely on multiple continuous dimensions to capture situational characteristics, in concert with a broader shift in the field's focus over recent decades from discrete situation classes (e.g., Forgas, 1976; Pervin, 1976; Price, 1974; cf. Halevy & Katz, 2013; Halevy & Phillips, 2015) to continuous situation characteristics (e.g., Eckes, 1995; Edwards & Templeton, 2005).

Third, there are obvious commonalities among the models' dimensions despite the fact that DIAMONDS was derived from a measure of individual differences and CAPTION was derived from lexical analysis of adjectives. As noted above, both models capture cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of situations. The associations of the DIAMONDS and CAPTION dimensions with positive and negative affect are particularly notable (Horstmann & Ziegler, 2019; Parrigon et al., 2017). Indeed, Rauthmann (2016) noted that positivity and negativity may be superordinate

dimensions of situational characteristics, with all other dimensions substantiating and differentiating among different ways in which a situation is positive or negative (i.e., distinguishing different kinds of rewards and opportunities or different kinds of threats and obstacles that individuals perceive in the situation). We revisit the critical role of valence in shaping individuals' experiences of their situations in the final section of this paper.

Fourth, the DIAMONDS and CAPTION dimensions show overlaps specifically in domains that mirror the Big Five personality dimensions (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2018a), suggesting that individuals may perceive persons and situations along similar dimensions. And fifth and finally, the DIAMONDS and CAPTION dimensions are relevant for understanding how individuals perceive multiple challenges related to successful goal pursuit in social contexts. Specifically, CAPTION focuses on challenges related to managing stressors in one's natural and social environment through the Adversity and Negative Valence dimensions, and DIAMONDS focuses on challenges related to social relations through the Adversity, Mating, and Deception dimensions (for more thorough consideration of motivational and evolutionary perspectives on situations, see: Balliet, Tybur, & Van Lange, 2017; Brown et al., 2015; de Vries, Tybur, Pollet, & van Vugt, 2016).

These commonalities notwithstanding, there are also substantial differences between the DIAMONDS and CAPTION models, as others before us have noted (Parrington et al., 2017; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2018a). In terms of content coverage, for example, Deception emerged as a distinct dimension only in the DIAMONDS model, whereas Humor emerged as a distinct dimension only in the CAPTION model. Previous research that explored the correlations among the DIAMONDS and CAPTION dimensions of situational characteristics (Parrington et al., 2017, Study 6) found moderate-to-strong associations between certain dimensions (e.g., the CAPTION Complexity and DIAMONDS Intellect dimensions) but also showed that some dimensions (e.g., the CAPTION Typicality dimension) were only weakly correlated with dimensions proposed in the other model. These empirical patterns point to areas in which these models, which aspire to be comprehensive in content and contexts, do not seem to overlap and hence raise theoretical questions that remain unresolved (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2018a).

3.5 | Utilizing situational characteristics to understand social influence processes

Researchers with a particular interest in psychological situations, per se, may already be familiar with these models and their similarities and differences. Our main goal in this paper is to illustrate how researchers who are interested in advancing knowledge about specific psychological phenomena can use these models in their own subfields. To showcase the exciting opportunities that theories of psychological situations offer researchers, we discuss below a recent study that used the DIAMONDS and CAPTION dimensions to illuminate the meaning of social influence processes in groups. Specifically, we illustrate below the meaning that individuals attach to the circumstances in which they engage in brokering behavior.

Brokering behaviors capture the actions through which individuals influence, manage, or facilitate others' interactions and relationships (Halevy, Halali, & Zlatev, 2018; Obstfeld, Borgatti, & Davis, 2014). Brokering behaviors are often helpful (Stovel & Shaw, 2012). For example, individuals often act as informal matchmakers or refer people they know for jobs. These social and professional introductions help bridge gaps in the social structure by connecting disconnected others in the broker's network (Burt, Kilduff, & Tasselli, 2013). As another example, people may act as third-party conflict managers—that is, informal mediators or arbitrators—helping others overcome disagreements or resolve disputes, thereby restoring trust and promoting cooperation (Nakashima, Halali, & Halevy, 2017; Zhang, Gino, & Norton, 2017). Other brokering behaviors are harmful: Behaviors such as gossiping maliciously or limiting others' opportunities to interact can undermine cooperation and breed hostility and conflict in groups (Case & Maner, 2014; Posner, Spier, & Vermeule, 2010).

We propose that emerging models of psychological situations can add value to longstanding research traditions by uncovering the subjective meaning that actors and observers attach to different behaviors and the circumstances in which they emerge. A recent study (Halevy, Halali, & Cohen, 2018) applied the validated CAPTION and

DIAMONDS measures to make such a contribution to the social networks literature. Specifically, that study explored how individuals perceive the circumstances in which they act as brokers (Halevy et al., 2018; see online supporting materials for all materials and findings). We briefly describe that study here to illustrate how other subfields could similarly benefit from applying comprehensive models of situational characteristics.

In the aforementioned study, the researchers randomly assigned individuals to recall and write a short paragraph about a time in which they acted as intermediaries (i.e., connected disconnected others in their network), conciliators (i.e., helped others manage or resolve their disagreement), or dividers (i.e., instigated animosity and rivalry between others). After writing the short essay, participants reported their perceptions of the situation they had just described using the validated CAPTION and DIAMONDS measures (Parrigon et al., 2017; Rauthmann et al., 2014). Participants' essays (see examples in Table 1) and ratings of situational characteristics (summarized in Figures 1a and 1b) illustrate how the CAPTION and DIAMONDS measures can both comprehensively and parsimoniously capture the subjective meaning of individuals' personal experiences with brokering.

As the table and figures below illustrate, although intermediary, conciliatory, and divisive brokering behaviors share certain similarities, their CAPTION and DIAMONDS profiles also indicate meaningful differences. For example, all brokering behaviors emerged in situations characterized by similar levels of sociality, intellect, and complexity. At the same time, brokering behaviors were associated with very different emotional profiles. Divisive behaviors occurred in situations characterized by higher negative valence and lower importance than intermediary and conciliatory behaviors. Whereas intermediary behaviors were associated with more positivity/positive valence than divisive behaviors, conciliatory behaviors were not associated with greater positivity compared to divisive behaviors. Different brokering behaviors also seemed to emerge in different kinds of relational contexts, with conciliatory behaviors emerging in situations characterized by higher levels of situational duty than either intermediary or divisive behaviors, and divisive behaviors being associated with higher levels of situational deception and humor.

TABLE 1 Excerpts from essays written by participants who recalled acting as intermediaries, conciliators, or dividers (Halevy et al., 2018; online supporting materials)

Intermediaries
"I made an email introduction between one of my coworkers who is potentially looking for a new job, and my former roommate who has a startup in need of someone with his skills."
"I have two friends. I introduced them to foster a romantic relationship. We had dinner together. I felt good."
"... our department happy hour last week ... introduced one of my best friends to a guy ... As the person who knew both I felt responsible for helping them realize any similarities or common interests."
Conciliators
"I was at Starbucks ... the customer in front of me was having an argument with the barrister. The customer insisted that he had received a dollar less change than he was supposed to have gotten back. I decided to step in and mediate ..."
"I acted as mediator in a dispute between two close friends. I talked to each individually and emphasized the positive things the other said about their friendship."
"Conflict between my parents. Allowed each of them to express their thoughts and feelings ..."
Dividers
"There is a girl who often gets parts in student films that a friend and I try out for. We do not feel that she is better suited for the parts than us and often wonder at her relationship with the director. When we were in my room one day with a third friend ... we talked about the girl and got our friend "on our side" using gossip and jokes stemming from jealousy. I did not feel very guilty ... We were just joking around."
"... one of my friends was considering breaking up with their partner ... I thought that they did not have a very good relationship ..., I encouraged the breakup ..."
"I am not on good terms with my sister. Whenever I hear my parents talking about things she's doing/has done, I sometimes will criticize her to get my parents to also think about her actions in a negative light. For example, my parents will comment how she does not let her kids eat processed foods, and I'll say something about how strict and overly controlling she is."

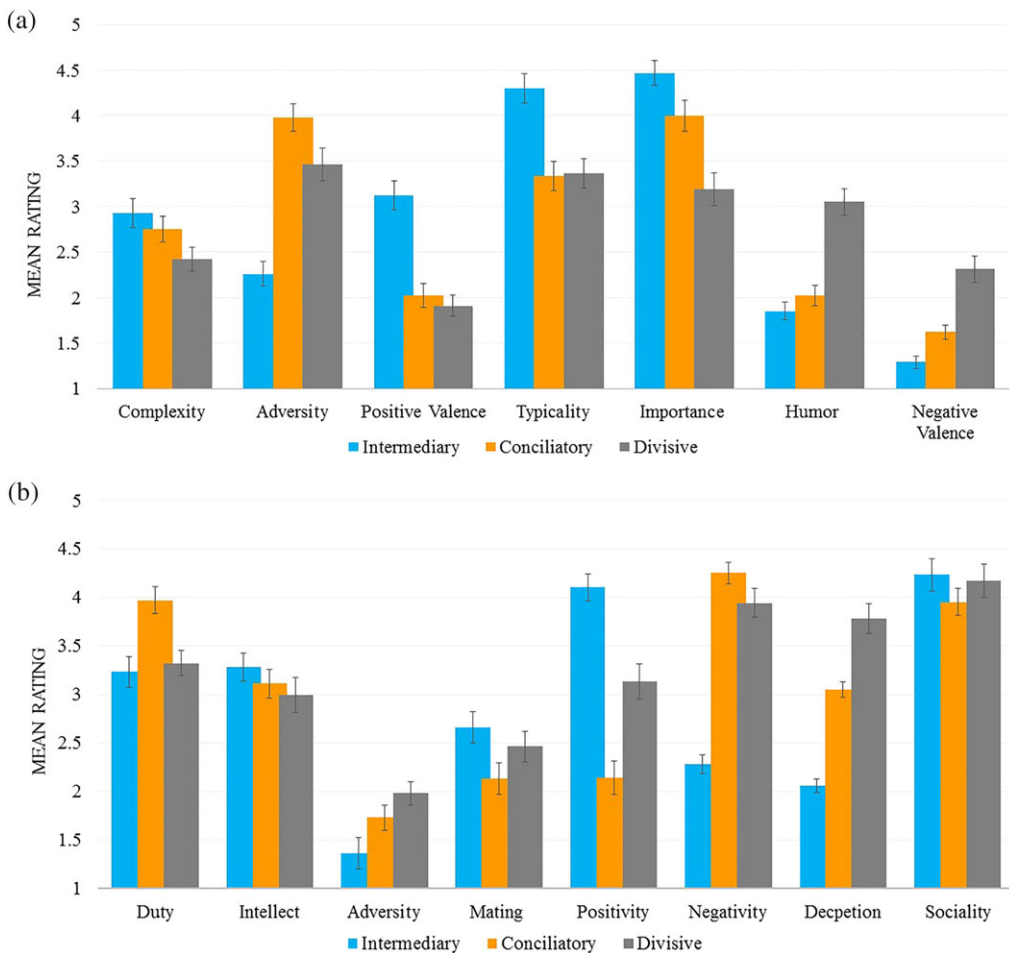


FIGURE 1 (a) Ratings of situations amenable to intermediary, conciliatory and divisive brokering on the CAPTION dimensions of situational characteristics. (b) Ratings of situations amenable to intermediary, conciliatory, and divisive brokering on the DIAMONDS dimensions of situational characteristics

This particular application highlights two potential benefits of using validated measures of situational characteristics. First, it shows how utilizing validated measures of situational characteristics can promote a better understanding of the psychological meaning of a ubiquitous behavioral phenomenon—here, the meaning that brokers attach to the situations in which they engage in different brokering activities. For instance, the finding that conciliatory brokering behaviors are associated with relatively low levels of situational positivity (as compared with the other two kinds of brokering behaviors) illuminates the emotional toll that third party conflict managers experience. Similarly, the finding that conciliatory behaviors are associated with relatively high levels of social duty identifies an important motivation underlying the propensity to engage in conciliatory brokering.

Second, better insight into brokers' perceptions of their circumstances can help researchers interested in social networks and social influence derive novel hypotheses pertaining to when, why, and how individuals who occupy brokerage positions in the social structure engage in different brokering behaviors. For example, the finding that divisive brokering behaviors tend to emerge in situations characterized by higher levels of humor and deception could help researchers develop and test new models concerning the social and political contexts in which harmful brokers pursue actions to undermine others' relationships. Understanding when, why, and how individuals engage in divisive brokering could also help researchers develop and test interventions designed to curb this harmful social behavior.

4 | OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research into the fundamental dimensions of situations holds multiple opportunities and challenges. We first discuss opportunities and challenges that are relevant primarily to researchers interested in addressing questions concerning the structure and contents of psychological situations. We then take, as we did above, the perspective of researchers interested in advancing psychological knowledge in their own subfields using tools from research on psychological situations, and address opportunities and challenges for these researchers.

4.1 | Opportunities and challenges for research into the nature of psychological situations

4.1.1 | Refining the contents of multidimensional models of psychological situations

The foremost task facing researchers interested in psychological situations is to refine and integrate the contributions reviewed above—to help distinct streams of research converge on a coherent, comprehensive, and replicable set of dimensions (or else clarify why this is not a desirable or feasible goal). Doing so will help the field develop a common language for describing and analyzing psychological situations. Making progress on this broad challenge will require researchers to address many specific questions about the discrepancies between different models. For instance, why does deception emerge as a fundamental dimension of psychological situations in a personality-based model (DIAMONDS) but not in a lexically-based model (CAPTION)? Similarly, why does humor emerge as a distinct dimension in a lexically based model but get subsumed under Positivity in a personality-based model? Future research could clarify whether deception and/or humor are indeed fundamental dimensions of situations and address other areas where current models do not overlap.

Future research will also need to clarify how these all-encompassing models relate to prior theories about situations, both domain-specific theories and broad foundational constructs. In principle, the all-encompassing frameworks should subsume the content domains covered by domain-specific models, but it will take researchers some work to elucidate these relationships. Furthermore, some constructs in prior literature are currently not part of the comprehensive models of situations reviewed above. For example, consider the foundational concept of situational strength, which captures the extent to which person variables versus situation variables shape individual behavior (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Lissek, Pine, & Grillon, 2006; Mischel, 1977; Swann & Jetten, 2017). Is situational strength a meta-dimension—perhaps one that moderates the extent to which other dimensions influence behavior—or is situational strength itself subsumed in one of the dimensions (and if so, in which one)? Addressing these and related questions is necessary to integrate insights and concepts already embedded in our understanding of psychological situations with emerging multidimensional models.

4.1.2 | Clarifying the role of emotion in psychological situations

Emotional experience is an essential element in people's experience and perception of situations and hence features prominently across different models of psychological situations. In DIAMONDS, it is manifested in the Positivity and Negativity dimensions; in CAPTION, it is manifested in the Positive Valence and Negative Valence dimensions. Moreover, Rauthmann (2016) proposed a hierarchical theoretical structure of psychological situations in which the DIAMONDS Positivity and Negativity dimensions constitute superordinate, higher-order dimensions, and the remaining six dimensions each constitute subordinate, lower-order manifestations of either Positivity (Mating, Sociality, Intellect) or Negativity (Duty, Adversity, Deception, Intellect). Notably, the manner in which emotions are currently represented in current multidimensional models of psychological situations mirrors a rich literature on cognitive appraisal models of emotion. An important challenge for future research involves clarifying the relations between emerging multidimensional models of psychological situations and longstanding appraisal models of

emotion, which overlap substantially with the content dimensions of models like DIAMONDS and CAPTION (cf. Horstmann & Ziegler, 2019).

Similar to the DIAMONDS and CAPTION models, cognitive appraisal models of emotion aim to explain which aspects of the immediate context matter the most to people (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & Ten Shure, 1989; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). According to these models, situations are fleeting, ever-changing processes that can be approximated based on multiple continuous dimensions, including their novelty (typicality), valence, certainty, goal conduciveness, agency, and control (Ellsworth, 2013). Of course, these proposed dimensions of situational variation strikingly resemble the dimensions of DIAMONDS and CAPTION. Cognitive appraisal models of emotion also share another important characteristic with multidimensional models of psychological situations: their constructivist approach. In particular, cognitive appraisal models of emotions stipulate that people's emotions depend on the subjective meaning that they attach to situations, through constructing and making sense of circumstances in their immediate environment (experienced situations), recalled environment (remembered situations) or imagined environment (counterfactual or future situations).

Given these similarities, we propose that an especially fruitful direction for research on psychological situations would be to incorporate concepts and findings from research on cognitive appraisals and emotion regulation. For example, people use various processes to regulate their own and others' emotions (Gross, 2015); to what extent people use similar processes to regulate the ways in which they and others experience their situations? Finally, individuals vary in their emotional intelligence (Schutte et al., 1998); do they also vary stably in their "situational intelligence" or their ability to read and regulate situations? As these examples illustrate, diving deeper into the domain of affect (including beyond cognitive appraisal models of emotion) can enrich future research on psychological situations.

4.1.3 | Advancing process (in addition to content) models of psychological situations

As noted above, emotion researchers have developed both content theories of emotion (e.g., cognitive appraisal models) and process theories of emotion (e.g., models of emotion regulation). As our review highlights, research on psychological situations has focused primarily on clarifying the contents of people's experiences, paying relatively little attention to how people's experiences of situations emerge and change over time. Thus, one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for future research on psychological situations entails theorizing about, and empirically exploring, how individuals engage dynamically with situations.

The multidimensional models we have reviewed focus on identifying static content, without specifying how individuals act on situations. Existing literature on emotion regulation suggests some directions for research on this topic. Gross (1998, 2015) proposed that individuals engage with situations by selecting them (i.e., choosing which situations to avoid versus approach); modifying them (e.g., by acting as brokers: Halevy & Halali, 2015; Halevy, Halali, & Cohen, 2018); selectively attending to some stimuli while ignoring others (e.g., smelling daffodils while overlooking the sewage running by); interpreting situations to give them a particular meaning (e.g., reappraising an obstacle as a challenge, not a threat); or modifying their behavioral response to situations (e.g., suppressing their dominant emotional reaction), which has the potential to further change the situation.

These processes are clearly relevant to understanding the ways in which people construct and create their own situations. Generally, taking a step back from emotion regulation, we know that people construe situations (e.g., as moral versus economic situations: Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004), choose among alternative situations (e.g., whether to compete in a particular context: Cain, Moore, & Haran, 2015; Camerer & Lovallo, 1999) and change situations (e.g., through providing incentives for others' behavior: Nakashima et al., 2017). Future research may therefore integrate existing insights on the content dimensions of psychological situations with existing knowledge on how individuals act on situations (i.e., choose, construe, and change). For instance, future research may explore the extent to which different content dimensions differ in the extent to which they lend themselves to different processes (e.g., cognitive reappraisal).

4.2 | Opportunities and challenges for applying insights and tools related to psychological situations

We see an incredible opportunity in using existing validated scales to illuminate the psychological meaning of contexts and behaviors pertinent to specific lines of research. As illustrated above in our discussion of brokering, researchers can enhance their understanding and generate new theoretical directions using these tools. Opportunities for this kind of applications are almost infinite. Below, we highlight three additional opportunities and challenges in this category.

4.2.1 | Establishing whether experimental procedures address the cue, characteristic, or class level

Utilizing the concepts of situational cues, characteristics, and classes may benefit experimental researchers by giving them a more precise way to describe their procedures. Sometimes we want to manipulate a situational cue, such as time pressure (e.g., De Dreu, 2003). Sometimes, we want participants to perceive or experience the situation as having a particular characteristic, such as humorous (e.g., Bitterly, Brooks, & Schweitzer, 2017). Finally, sometimes, we want the situation we produce in the laboratory to represent a class of situations, such as a team negotiation (e.g., Halevy, 2008). Using this precise common language to describe our experimental procedures can help researchers compare procedures across studies and will clarify the relation of hypotheses to operationalization. It also has implications for the scope of each manipulation: Manipulating situation cues means narrower experimental manipulations, whereas manipulating situation classes requires more extensive experimental manipulations. Having identified the scope of their experimental manipulation, researchers could then use manipulation checks at the appropriate level. For example, when researchers want to manipulate the presence versus absence of a situational cue, attention checks, timing measures, or recall items can be adequate. In contrast, when researchers want to manipulate situational characteristics, such as adversity, humor, or deception, validated scales that assess these situational characteristics (from the CAPTION and DIAMONDS measures) would be more suitable.

4.2.2 | Better understanding the meaning of specific experimental procedures

Clearly, for many years experimental psychologists have been manipulating situations systematically and effectively without relying on comprehensive, multidimensional models of situational characteristics (Krueger, 2015). However, armed with the insights and tools reviewed in this paper, experimental researchers can now better understand the situational meaning that research participants attach to commonly used experimental procedures, such as being assigned to low- versus high-power roles (e.g., Anicich, Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2015) or experiencing social exclusion in a virtual ball-tossing game (e.g., Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). The CAPTION and DIAMONDS scales enable experimental researchers to examine which dimensions of situational characteristics vary when they prime participants with boardroom tables and briefcases (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004) or label a Prisoner's Dilemma game as the "Wall Street Game" versus the "Community Game" (Lieberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004).

4.2.3 | Developing a common language across different subfields and disciplines

This enhanced understanding could particularly benefit researchers collaborating across different fields (e.g., social psychology, management, and behavioral economics). Many research questions are currently studied by scientists from multiple disciplines. For instance, social scientists from multiple disciplines study questions related to social hierarchy and equality, cooperation and competition, morality and immorality, and often use experimental methods when doing so. Despite these shared research interests and methodological tools, scientists from different disciplines, or even different sub-disciplines, often use different words to describe the same construct (e.g., leadership and conflict).

Comprehensive models of psychological situations provide researchers with a common language for describing experimental environments and their psychological meaning for participants across disciplinary boundaries. Such a common language will facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations and cross-fertilization between disciplines.

5 | CONCLUSION

Humans experience, think, and communicate about situations in wonderfully rich and complex ways. Recent years witnessed substantial progress in research on psychological situations. Here, we discussed and illustrated the value that emerging research on psychological situations can deliver to a wide range of researchers across the social sciences. Though the journey toward a comprehensive theory of psychological situations remains incomplete, many opportunities are currently readily available to researchers. We hope that the current paper illuminates some paths for those interested in utilizing psychological situations to enhance our understanding of human behavior, cognition, and emotion.

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