The Person-situation Debate and the Assessment of Situations

David C. FUNDER
University of California, Riverside

Esther GUILLAUME
University of California, Riverside

Sakiko KUMAGAI
Ritsumeikan University

Shizuka KAWAMOTO
Ritsumeikan University

Tatsuya SATO
Ritsumeikan University

While the person-situation debate was largely based on a misunderstanding of the magnitude of the correlations that characterize relations between personality traits and behavior, it drew much-needed attention to the importance of situations. However, few attempts have been made to understand the important elements of situations in relation to behavior. Current work developing the Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ) aims to provide a useful way to conceptualize and measure the behaviorally important attributes of situations. A current project is applying this method cross-culturally. New data from the US and Japan show that behavioral correlates of two elements of the situation—the presence of a member of the opposite sex and the experience of being criticized by others—have largely similar behavioral correlates between genders and across cultures. These analyses illustrate how the RSQ illuminates the connections between situations and behavior. Future research will extend such analyses to more situational attributes and other cultures around the world.

Key words:　personality, situations, behaviors, cross-cultural research

Personality traits determine behavior, but what people do also depends critically on the situation. The relative importance of these two influences has long been a contentious issue in personality psychology (Kenrick & Funder, 1988). The first purpose of the present article will be to briefly survey the current state of this debate. Ironically, despite the frequent claims about the importance of situations—especially in comparison to the importance of personality—very little progress has been made over the years in identifying and assessing the specific aspects of situations that make them psychologically important. Therefore, the second part of this article will describe a new research program aiming to improve the conceptualization and psychological assessment of situations, presenting current work considering how the effects of situations on behaviors might be the same or different across diverse cultures around the world.

The Person-Situation Debate

The "person-situation debate" was long and complex, and we will not attempt to review all of its history here. Instead, we simply point to one its landmarks, which was the publication of Mischel's (1968) volume *Personality and Assessment* including the following passage: " ⋯ the phrase 'personality coefficient' might be coined to describe the correlation between .20 and .30 ⋯ when virtually any

personality dimension inferred from a questionnaire is related to almost any … external criterion" (Mischel, 1968, p. 78).

This viewpoint became known as the "situationist" position (Bowers, 1973). A fellow-adherent to this position, Richard Nisbett, later raised the putative limit for the predictive power of personality to about $r=.40$ (Nisbett, 1980, p. 124). The claim of such a limit to the predictive power of personality immediately raises two questions: (1) Is a correlation between .30 and .40 small or large? (2) Are correlations between attributes of *situations* and behavior substantially higher than correlations between personality traits and behavior?

Evaluating the Size of a Correlation

To consider the first question, a long (but questionable) tradition in psychological data analysis is to square the correlation between a predictor variable and a criterion, yielding the variance in the criterion "explained" by the predictor. In the case of the personality coefficient, the correlation between the predictor, personality, and the criterion, behavior, seldom exceeds .40. Through conventional calculation, this figure means that "only" 16% of the variance in behavior is explained by personality traits, which does not sound like much. However, this traditional analysis has several problems. On technical grounds, it actually makes little sense to square correlation coefficients in order to estimate the power of the relationship they describe (Ozer, 1985). A more informative way to appreciate the size of correlations is to use appropriate comparisons.

The Binomial Effect Size Display (BESD), developed by Rosenthal and Rubin (1982), provides a useful means for comparisons. The BESD is illustrated in Tables 1, 2 and 3. It describes the relationship between a predictor and a criterion at different levels of the correlation coefficient, by assuming half of a hypothetical sample of 200

Table 1　Binomial Effect Size Display of a Correlation $r=.00$

Criterion (Predictor)	Above Median	Below Median	Total
Above Median	50	50	100
Below Median	50	50	100
Total	100	100	200

Table 2　Binomial Effect Size Display of a Correlation $r=.40$

Criterion (Predictor)	Above Median	Below Median	Total
Above Median	70	30	100
Below Median	30	70	100
Total	100	100	200

Table 3　Binomial Effect Size Display of a Correlation $r=.30$

Criterion (Predictor)	Above Median	Below Median	Total
Above Median	65	35	100
Below Median	35	65	100
Total	100	100	200

people is above and below the median value of the predictor and criterion variable (an assumption that is true by definition). The question answered by the BESD is, how many people are above and below the median value of the criterion, as a function of whether they are above or below the median on the predictor? Table 1 shows the answer in the case of $r=.0$ between the predictor and criterion, in which case the chances of being above or below the median on the criterion is 50–50, regardless of whether an individual is above or below the median on the predictor—the predictor provides no information about the criterion. More interesting is Table 2, which shows the case of a predictor-criterion correlation of .40, which is the alleged upper limit of the personality coefficient. If an individual is above the median on the predictor, he or she has a 70% chance of being above the median on the criterion; conversely, if he or she is below the median on the predictor, the individual has a 70% chance of also being below the median on the criterion. If the correlation is .30, this figure remains a still-impressive 65%.

The BESD has direct implications for interpreting the personality coefficient. It implies that even if this coefficient does lie in range of .30 to .40 (as propounded by prominent adherents of the situationist position), personality variables can still predict behavioral criteria with a degree of accuracy likely to yield predictions that are correct about twice as often as they are wrong. It remains surprising that so few research psychologists seem to know this.

Comparing Personality with Situational Effects

The magnitude of personality correlation coefficients can also be illuminated with a different kind of comparison—with relationships in other domains known to be substantial. For example, it is well known that cities at higher elevations tend to have lower temperatures, on average, because the air is thinner. The correlation describing this relationship, based on weather station records, is $-.34$ (Meyer et al., 2001). In a more psychological vein, Funder and Ozer (1983) examined three classical studies in social psychology that demonstrated effects of situational variables on behaviors. One demonstration by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) uncovered the "reverse incentive effect," that smaller incentives lead to greater attitude change in the forced compliance paradigm. A second example came from the classical studies of bystander intervention by John Darley and his colleagues (Darley & Baston, 1967; Darley & Latané, 1968), which showed that people were less likely to stop and help others in need when in a hurry, or if other bystanders were present. The final example was the classical series of studies by Milgram (1974), which demonstrated how obedience to commands that harmed an innocent victim was more likely to occur if the authority figure was close by or the victim far away. In each case, the size of the effects of the situational variables on behaviors, translated using simple arithmetic to the metric of the correlation coefficient, was between $r=.30$ and $r=.40$.

As the BESD shows, these effect sizes sufficiently imply that knowledge of incentive, the degree to which someone is in a hurry, or the distance of an authority figure giving orders, all usefully predict behaviors. The effects of these classic studies—all of which are basic topics of every textbook in social psychology—are remarkably close in magnitude to the putative personality

coefficient.

Lessons from the Personality Coefficient

The coining of the phrase "personality coefficient" led to decades of confusion, not all of which has been alleviated, to this day. The phrase was misleading in that correlations in the range from .30 to .40 *are* useful for behavioral prediction, and the sizes of some of the effects of situations contained in the literature of social psychology are of equivalent, or even smaller magnitude. One comprehensive review concluded that the average size of the effect of situational variables on behaviors, in social psychological experiments, is $r = .21$ (Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003).

Still, the phrase taught the field at least two important lessons. First, it appropriately drew attention away from statistical "significance levels," which are fraught with interpretive problems (Rozeboom, 1960; Dienes, 2011), and towards more informative measures of effect size (Wilkinson & The Task Force on Statistical Inference, 1999). Second, it focused attention on behavioral measures as criteria for personality variables, rather than merely using questionnaire responses to predict other questionnaire responses. As Mischel (1968) emphasized, there is no substitute in psychological research for observing behavior directly (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007).

Persons *and* Situations

A persistent assumption underlying the person-situation debate was that the two factors compete in the determination of behavior: The more important one of them was, the less important the other one must be. But this assumption is false. As people adjust their behavior to each situation they encounter, they also maintain their individual differences.

A demonstration by my former student, Randy Colvin, and myself (Funder & Colvin, 1991; Funder, 2006), examined how behaviors adjust from one situation to the next. In this study, 140 undergraduate students, 70 of each sex, were brought to the lab in opposite-sex pairs. In the first session, they simply sat down and chatted freely for a few minutes. A few weeks later the participants returned to the lab for a similar, brief, unstructured conversation, but paired with a different opposite-sex partner. Their behaviors were recorded on video, and research assistants coded the behaviors of the participants using the Riverside Behavioral Q-sort (RBQ; Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000).

One very simple analysis is to compare the mean levels of each of the 62 RBQ items between the two sessions. Of these, 11 were significantly different at $p < .01$, as seen in Table 4. Participants appeared relaxed and happy, and seemed to enjoy themselves more in the second session than in the first. The reason seems obvious: The first session was a strange and somewhat anxiety-provoking experience because the participants were unacquainted with the people and setting. In the second session, the setting and the research assistants were familiar, and the participants knew what would happen. This is a powerful effect of what might otherwise seem like a minor element of the situation. Although the events were identical, simply having the experience repeated was enough to change the situation sufficiently to yield large and visible behavioral differences. This kind of finding is often used throughout social psychology to demonstrate the power of the situation, and rightly so.

Table 4 The Effect of the Situation: Mean Differences in Behavior between Familiar and Unfamiliar Experiment Sessions

Behavioral Q-sort Item	Session 1	Session 2	*t*
Items Higher at Session 1			
Talks at rather than with partner	3.98	3.51	4.96
Exhibits an awkward interpersonal style	4.19	3.60	4.50
Shows physical signs of tension or anxiety	5.19	4.66	3.76
Shows lack of interest in the interaction	3.98	3.55	3.33
Keeps partner at a distance	4.81	4.40	2.97
Expresses insecurity or sensitivity	4.77	4.49	2.93
Behaves in a fearful or timid manner	3.98	3.64	2.85
Items Higher at Session 2			
Exhibits social skills	5.94	6.46	4.65
Appears to be relaxed and comfortable	5.56	6.13	3.98
Says or does interesting things	5.78	6.08	2.79
Is expressive in face, voice or gestures	5.11	5.42	2.68

Note. $N = 140$, $df = 138$. All differences are significant at $p < .01$. Table is adapted and abbreviated from Funder & Colvin (1991). Explorations in behavioral consistency: Properties of persons, situations and behaviors. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, p. 783, published by the American Psychological Association.

But, what about the power of individual differences? The very same data can answer this question as well. Each of the 62 items can be correlated, one at a time, across the 140 participants to assess the degree to which someone who was, for example, *relatively* fearful in Session 1 (i.e., more fearful than most other participants) was also *relatively* fearful in Session 2. Behavioral consistency was quite powerful, with 37 of the 62 items yielding cross-situational consistency correlations significant at $p < .001$, and 25 of these were *higher* than .40 (see Table 5). To a highly consistent degree, the same people who were relatively loud, awkward, fearful, expressive, cheerful and so forth in the first session, acted in a similar manner in the second, several weeks later.

The lesson from these findings is that situations and persons are not at odds in the determination of behaviors. Large mean differences in behaviors across situations or between experimental conditions do not necessarily imply that individual differences are not consistent. People change their behaviors across situations, but they also maintain their individuality. If on one occasion you are the most cheerful person in the room, the odds are very good you are more cheerful than most people in many other situations as well.

Assessing Situations

Psychologists have long acknowledged that personality is a function of the person and the situation, and in other writings these three variables—the person, behavior, and the situation—have been called the "personality triad" (Funder, 2006). Psychology has a long tradition and a rich treasury of methods for assessing personality traits, and a smaller but reasonable number of ways to assess behaviors (including the RBQ). However, surprisingly little has been done to develop a technology for assessing situations. Many writers and many demonstrations, including the one just summarized, make the point that situations are important. But the neglected question is, precisely *what* about situations makes

Table 5 The Effect of the Person: Cross-situational Consistency Correlations between Familiar and Unfamiliar Experimental Sessions

Behavioral Q-sort Item	r
Speaks in a loud voice	.70
Behaves in a fearful or timid manner	.65
Laughs frequently	.63
Is expressive in face, voice or gestures	.63
Is reserved an unexpressive	.62
Exhibits an awkward interpersonal style	.60
Smiles frequently	.60
Behaves in a cheerful manner	.60
Has high enthusiasm and energy level	.59
Speaks quickly	.59
Exhibits social skills	.58
Engages in constant eye contact with partner	.57
Expresses insecurity or insensitivity	.56
Appears to regard self physically attractive	.55
Shows lack of interest in the interaction	.54
Appears to be relaxed and comfortable	.48
Exhibits condescending behavior	.47
Shows physical signs of tension or anxiety	.45
Is unusual or unconventional in appearance	.45
Exhibits high degree of intelligence	.44
Acts in an irritable fashion	.43
Behaves in a masculine or feminine style or manner	.43
Seems to genuinely enjoy interaction with partner	.42
Speaks fluently and expresses ideas well	.42
Initiates humor	.41
Expresses cynicism or skepticism	.40

Note. $N=140$. All correlations are significant at $p<.001$ (two tailed). Table is adapted and abbreviated from Funder & Colvin, 1991, Table 2, p. 780.

them important? In other words, what are the psychologically important attributes of situations? Past research on this question has generally focused on attempts to determine the number of basic types of situations (see Wagerman & Funder, 2009, for a review). However, this question may be premature, just as it would have been premature to seek the Big Five 70 years ago, when the enterprise of personality assessment was just beginning. Our current research seeks to develop a useful assessment instrument for assessing the psychologically important aspects of situations.

Situations can be conceived at three different levels (Block & Block, 1981). One level is physical or environmental, and includes variables such as the temperature, the number of people present, the size of the open space, and so forth. While these variables are sometimes behaviorally important, they are in general not particularly interesting, psychologically. Alternatively, situations can be conceived in terms of each individual's experience. If two people are in the same situation at the same time but experience it differently, one might say that they are, in some sense, in psychologically "different" situations. This analysis is correct but can also lead to circularity. If a situation must be defined differently for every individual, then the situation in effect disappears and its analysis becomes reabsorbed into the study of personality.

The most useful level of analysis, therefore, is at the level of consensus; that is, the characteristics of a situation about which most observers would agree. In this view, situations can be assessed much as persons are, and rated by independent judges. These judges of personality may not agree perfectly, but well enough to make the aggregate of their ratings analytically and predictively useful. In the same vein, situations can be assessed in terms of how people in general rate their properties. To allow such ratings, the Riverside Situational Q-sort (RSQ) was developed. Participants in situations or observers place its 89 items (in the current version) into a forced-choice, 9-step distribution ranging from "highly uncharacteristic" to "highly characteristic."

Analyses using such data were published in two recent papers, which reported a number of findings that could not have been obtained in the absence of a comprehensive technique, such as the

RSQ, for situational assessment. Findings included: People are more behaviorally consistent across situations that are similar; people encounter situations that are more similar to each other than they are to situations encountered by other people; people are consistent in their behaviors over and above situational similarity; people who manifest more behavioral consistency across situations tend to be psychologically well-adjusted (Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010, 2012). Current studies are gathering data concerning how people "construe" situations or, in other words, the ways in which people may perceive the same situation differently.

A new endeavor, The International Situations Project, is beginning to take this enterprise worldwide. Through the use of our custom-built website, www.internationalsituationsproject.com, individuals in different cultures describe a situation they experienced the previous day. They use the RSQ to describe the situation, and the RBQ to describe their behaviors in that situation. As of this writing, data is being gathered in the United States, Japan, China, Italy, and Iraq. Additional collaborators soon to gather data are in Estonia, Germany, Denmark, Singapore, the Netherlands, Australia, and Canada, among other countries. Because cross-cultural research in personality is relatively rare, and because research on the assessment of situations is even more uncommon, the findings from this project will be literally unprecedented. They will illuminate the degree to which people in different cultures experience the same or different situations on a daily basis, their behaviors, and the ways in which situations are connected to behaviors across cultures. The research is frankly exploratory. Literally nothing is currently known about these issues, so everything

we find will be "news."

Because the research is currently in progress, data analyses are preliminary. Early results illustrate the kind of information the RSQ can provide. In both the United States (Riverside, California) and Japan (Kyoto), university students logged onto our research website, and described the situation they experienced the previous evening at 7 p.m. After writing out brief descriptions, they completed the RSQ, rating the degree to which each of 89 items characterized the situation. Finally, participants described their behaviors in the situation using the 68 items of the RBQ[1]. While these data are of course self-report, they provide a window into the kinds of situations experienced by American and Japanese college students.

Many analyses are possible from these data. One of the simplest is examine the relationship between situational variables and behaviors by examining the RBQ correlates of each of the RSQ items. This analysis generates 6052 correlations (89 RSQ items by 68 RBQ items), which would be overwhelming, so for the sake of simple illustration, Tables 6 and 7 summarize the principal behavioral correlates of only two RSQ items.

Table 6 shows behavioral correlates of RSQ item #73, which reads, "Members of the opposite sex are present," as obtained in the Japanese and California samples. Perhaps surprisingly, the behavioral correlates of this element of the situation are highly similar across gender within both cultures. The (vector) correlation between the pattern of correlations among males and females, across the 68 RBQ items, was $r = .80$ in Japan and ,

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1) This version of the RBQ is a revision from the 62 item set used in the research described earlier.

Table 6　Behavioral (RBQ) Correlates of Situational Attribute: "Members of the opposite sex are present" (RSQ Item #73)

RBQ Item No.	Behavior (RBQ item)	Japan ($n=229$)	California ($n=339$)
Positive Correlates			
59	Engages in constant eye contact with someone.	.47***	.20***
58	Makes or approaches physical contact with other(s).	.46***	.24***
12	Seems to like other(s) present.	.42***	.12*
28	Seems likable. (to other(s) present)	.42***	.26***
7	Exhibits social skills.	.30***	.10†
32	Expresses warmth.	.29***	.17**
20	Is talkative.	.27***	.08
37	Is expressive in face, voice or gestures.	.24***	.13*
30	Appears to regard self as physically attractive.	.23***	.18***
52	Offers advice.	.23***	.07
18	Expresses agreement frequently.	.22***	−.02
10	Smiles frequently.	.13*	.17**
49	Behaves in a cheerful manner.	.04	.16**
Negative Correlates			
47	Expresses self-pity or feelings of victimization.	−.31***	−.18***
66	Acts in a self-indulgent manner.	−.28***	.04
44	Says negative things about self.	−.27***	−.18***
46	Blames others.	−.25***	−.14*
19	Expresses criticism. (of anybody or anything)	−.24***	−.14*
38	Expresses interest in fantasy or daydreams.	−.24***	−.15**
40	Keeps other(s) at a distance.	−.24***	−.02
64	Concentrates on or works hard at a task.	−.23***	−.12*
57	Speaks sarcastically.	−.21**	−.07
23	Exhibits a high degree of intelligence	−.20**	−.05
31	Acts irritated.	−.20**	−.12*
50	Gives up when faced with obstacles.	−.20**	−.16**
67	Exhibits physical discomfort or pain.	−.20**	−.09
39	Expresses guilt.	−.19**	−.17**
36	Behaves in a fearful or timid manner.	−.19**	−.11*
34	Expresses hostility.	−.11	−.16**
4	Tries to control situation.	−.11*	−.14**

Note.　†$p<.10$, *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$
Item content is abbreviated.

$r=.67$ in California. The overall pattern of correlations is similar across cultures as well (Japan–California vector $r=.75$). Table 6 shows that in both Japan and California, when members of the opposite sex are present, people report making relatively constant eye contact and physical contact, seeming to like the other person, expressing warmth, and feeling physically attractive, among other behaviors. Participants are relatively unlikely, in both cultures, to feel sorry for themselves, say negative things, or express criticism. The Table shows all of the RSQ items with significance at the $p<.05$ level[2] for both cultures. While

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2) The *p*-levels in Tables 6 and 7 should be interpreted with extreme caution because of the number of statistical tests performed and interdependence among the RBQ items. They are used here only as conventional benchmarks to determine with correlations, out of the 67 computed, to display in each table.

Table 7   Behavioral (RBQ) Correlates of Situational Attribute: "*P* is being criticized, directly or indirectly" (RSQ Item #16)

RBQ Item No.	Behavior (RBQ item)	Japan (*n*=229)	California (*n*=339)
Positive Correlates			
27	Exhibits condescending behavior.	.27***	.01
31	Acts irritated.	.27***	.12*
34	Expresses hostility.	.26***	.18**
19	Expresses criticism.	.25***	.19***
44	Says negative things about the self.	.25***	.18**
46	Blames others.	.25***	.11*
4	Tries to control situation.	.10	.24***
33	Tries to undermine, sabotage or obstruct.	.23***	.04
13	Exhibits awkward interpersonal style.	.14*	.22***
22	Shows physical signs of tension or anxiety.	.19**	.12*
14	Compares self to others(s).	.09	.19***
60	Seems detached from situation.	.03	.19***
21	Expresses insecurity.	.18**	.14**
39	Expresses guilt.	.16*	.15**
5	Dominates situation.	.09	.16**
47	Expresses self-pity or feelings of victimization.	.09	.15**
Negative Correlates			
62	Acts playful.	−.12†	−.26***
16	Appears to regard self as physically attractive.	−.25***	−.05
12	Seems to like other (s) present.	−.23***	−.06
49	Behaves in a cheerful manner.	−.17**	−.22***
28	Seems likable.	−.22**	−.16**
32	Expresses warmth.	−.20**	−.13*
51	Behaves in a masculine style or manner.	−.20**	−.04
68	Behaves in feminine style or manner.	−.20**	−.02
25	Initiates humor.	−.04	−.15**

Note.   †*p*<.10, *p*<.05, **p*<.01, ****p*<.001
Item content is abbreviated.

not exactly the same in Japan and California, the positive correlations in one culture tend to be positive in the other, and the same is true about negative correlations.

Table 7 shows behavioral correlates of RSQ item #16, which reads, "*P* is being criticized, directly or indirectly." (*P* refers to the individual providing the situational report.) For this item as well, the behavioral correlates are fairly similar between genders, and within each culture (in Japan, vector *r*=.57; in California, *r*=.62). The table illustrates that in both cultures (vector *r*=.69), people in such a situation are relatively likely to report acting irritated, expressing hostility, and saying negative things about other people. They are also relatively unlikely, when being criticized, to reporting being cheerful, warm, or particularly likable.

These findings may not seem surprising, but they are reassuringly consistent with common sense, providing what may be the first comparison of behavioral correlates of situational variables between Japan and the U.S. Many more analyses remain to be done, and while the first findings reflect more similarities than differences between the two cultures, it is reasonable to expect that

findings yet to be discovered will show interesting differences. The larger point is that the RSQ provides a method, at long last, to move psychology beyond the person-situation debate by examining situations in the same manner personality attributes have been examined for many years. Personality psychology performed thousands of studies on personality traits and their associations with behaviors, yet few examined such associations across cultures. Our present research aims to do the same with situational attributes, examining how they are associated with behaviors within and across the diverse cultures of the world.

Conclusion

The person-situation debate was prolonged longer than necessary because the magnitude of correlations in the "personality coefficient" range of .30 to .40 was misunderstood. Moreover, the argument that situations are important were, strangely, unaccompanied by research showing *which* attributes of situations were important for behavior. The purpose of the Riverside Situational Q-sort is to fill in these gaps, by providing a tool that allows situations to be compared with one another, and to identify the aspects critical for behaviors. The present article reports a preliminary analysis of new data that show how the behaviors associated with two elements of situations appear to be largely the same in the U.S. and Japan. Future research will examine these similarities and differences in more detail, and seek to expand psychology's understanding of the important ways in which situations are important for behavior.

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