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The Strong Situation Hypothesis

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A conventional wisdom in personality and social psychology and organizational behavior is that personality matters most in weak situations and least in strong situations. The authors trace the origins of this claim and examine the evidence for the personality-dampening effect of strong situations. The authors identify the gap between claim and evidence and suggest an agenda for future research.

Keywords: *constraints; organizational behavior; personality; situations; social psychology*

Max Weber (1958) described bureaucracies as iron cages, impersonal sets of procedures that turn variegated behaviors into fixed routines. Iron cages are said to clarify expectations, reduce the latitude for discretion, limit the opportunities for personal caprice, systematize the way in which behavior is enacted, and render behavior predictable. This notion is supported by a wealth of studies showing that bureaucracies can be powerful settings that do constrain behavior (e.g., Jackall, 1988; Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004); other studies have shown how highly restrictive cages can be built by the occupants themselves (see e.g., Barker, 1993, 1999).

Personality has been depicted in much the same way: Like individuals constrained by iron cages, the impact of personality is said to be muted when the situation is strong. Such situations are said to limit the expression of individual personalities, rendering them practically irrelevant. This position has been repeatedly stated in a variety of fields, leading us to expect that we would find studies that measure or manipulate situation strength, measure theoretically relevant personality factors, and show clearly interpretable interactions between situation strength and the impact of personality factors on theoretically relevant behavior. Instead, we found a handful of studies with weak effects and another handful with unconvincing experimental designs.

THE CONCEPT OF SITUATION STRENGTH

A controversy that preoccupied some personality and social psychologists and organizational behavior scholars during the 1970s was the importance of personality and situation in predicting behavior (Bowers, 1973). Accumulating evidence had pointed to the modest predictive power of personality across situations (Mischel, 1968) and later to the similarly modest predictive power of (ostensively powerful) situations (Funder & Ozer, 1983). A partial consensus was reached via the potential explanatory power of the Lewinian interactionist perspective, that is, behavior is the product of both personality and situation (Endler & Parker, 1992; Weiss & Adler, 1984).

Variations in situations certainly have powerful effects on many social and organizational behaviors. Individuals can be induced to act in very different ways when the situation is judiciously altered (see e.g., Cialdini, 2008; Johns, 2006, for examples of the powerful effects of both small and large changes in situations and contexts). These main effects reflect the power of the situation to cause behavior. Instead, our focus here is on exploring how situations can moderate the relations between personality and behavior. Although several aspects of situations have been identified as likely constraints on the expression of personality (see e.g., Marshall & Brown, 2006, on the salience of the situation; Zimbardo, 2007, on situation novelty), the degree of situational constraint on personality is best known by the term *situational strength*.

The personality theorist Walter Mischel helped define this concept by asking: "When are situations most likely

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to exert powerful effects and, conversely, when are person variables likely to be most influential?" (Mischel, 1977, p. 346). His answer: Situations are likely to matter most when situations are strong, and conversely, personality is likely to matter most when situations are weak. His reasoning: Strong situations constrain options and provide clear signals about what is expected. Uniform expectancies restrict the degree of behavioral variability across individuals, which in turn limit observed personality-behavior relations. In contrast, behaviors are more likely to reflect relevant personality traits when signals and constraints are weak.

Mischel (1977) used traffic lights and Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs) to illustrate strong and weak situations. Knowing whether the light is red or green is a better predictor of driver behavior than are personality differences among drivers: In other words, statistical analysis would yield a main effect for the situation and no effect for personality. Conversely, a TAT exemplifies a weak situation: A story written in response to TAT cues depends more on the individual storyteller than it does on the individual picture cue; here, statistical analysis should yield a stronger main effect for personality than for situation.

Although they may be useful illustrations, traffic lights and TATs better represent two main effects—the former for situations, the latter for persons. Interestingly, empirical research on these variables provides evidence for person by situation interactions. For example, studies of drivers have shown that personality factors such as dominance and sensation seeking are useful for predicting moving violations such as running red lights (Trimpop & Kirkcaldy, 1997), and achievement scores on TATs reflect the joint effects of persons, cues, and arousal conditions (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953).

In short, Mischel's traffic light and TAT examples may have caused confusion in the literature and stalled research on the hypothesis. The strong situation hypothesis refers to a moderating effect in which differences in the strength of the situation affect the degree to which personality influences behavior. But the color of a traffic light is a powerful situation that produces a main effect for situations, while differences among individual responses to TATs can produce main effects for persons. The two examples are difficult to compare on a metric that ranges from low to high situation strength. Responses to traffic lights and TATs differ in so many ways that it is hard to see how such illustrations illuminate the hypothesis.

However, traffic light scenarios could be reframed as a test of the hypothesis by comparing the effects of personality on responses to a stronger (red) and weaker (yellow) situation. Results of Trimpop and Kirkcaldy (1997) suggest that such a study would yield a main effect for the situation and a Person × Situation interaction. Similarly, differences in the ambiguity of TAT cues could be used to test the hypothesis. More versus less ambiguous cues could be used to operationalize weak and strong situations, with more ambiguous cues producing larger variance in the responses and less ambiguous cues producing little variance in responses. In sum, we argue that varying the color of traffic lights or the ambiguity of TAT cues are much clearer illustrations of stronger and weak situations than Mischel's original examples.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENTS

We can identify five conceptual developments in the hypothesized relationship between situation strength, personality, and behavior: (a) the definition of situation strength, (b) connections to the demand characteristic concept, (c) applications of the situation strength construct to collectivities, (d) work on the meaning and consequences of situations, and (e) the transformation of the situation strength idea from hypothesis to conventional wisdom.

The initial conceptual development was Mischel's (1977) definition of strong situations as ones that meet four criteria: Strong situations "lead everyone to construe the particular events the same way, induce *uniform* expectancies regarding the most appropriate response pattern, provide adequate incentives for the performance of that response pattern and require skills that everyone has to the same extent" (Mischel, 1977, p. 347). Conversely, weak situations "are not uniformly encoded, do not generate uniform expectancies concerning desired behavior, do not offer sufficient incentives for its performance, or fail to provide the learning conditions required for successful genesis of behavior" (Mischel, 1977, p. 347).

The four criteria affect the strength of the situation in different ways. Common construal and uniform expectancies affect the strength of the situation by providing clear cues about what the situation demands. Adequate incentives and requisite skills affect the strength of the situation by removing barriers that might prevent the demanded behavior from occurring. Thus, strong situations are those in which everyone knows what to do and why and how to do it.

The second conceptual development was the connection made between strong situations and demand characteristics. After Mischel (1968) suggested that differences in strong and weak situations may explain variance in personality-behavior associations, Alexander and Knight (1971) likened strong situations to being in a theatrical production in which the script provides

strong cues about what to do. Thus, strong situations are like being an actor in a tightly scripted Billy Wilder film (e.g., *Some Like It Hot*; Wilder, 1959); weak situations are like the ones faced by an actor trying to figure out how to enact a sketchy Jim Jarmusch plot outline (e.g., *Coffee and Cigarettes*; Jarmusch, 2004). Tight scripts are akin to Orne's (1962) description of demand characteristics in experimental settings: The participant reads the situation and provides the response that he or she believes the experimenter is looking for.

This conceptual development is consistent with the concern among assessment psychologists that valid personality variance is reduced under conditions of strong impression management (e.g., Paulhus, 1991). The research is clear that individual personality items show less variance when they are extremely high or low in social desirability (John & Robins, 1993). More generally, when participants perceive a strong pressure to respond in a certain direction on an item or questionnaire, then its validity for measuring personality suffers.

Third, the strong situation construct has been extended to collective levels that are governed by norms (e.g., groups and organizations). O'Reilly and Chatman (1996) used Mischel's depiction of stronger and weaker situations to describe stronger and weaker organizational cultures. Strong organizational cultures, defined as the pattern of shared assumptions, norms, and values, define a normative order that is said to increase behavioral consistency, act as a form of social control, help organizational members see things the same way, and guide them to respond in consort. O'Reilly and Chatman pointed out that certain organizations, including cults and religious, self-help, and business organizations, try to foster strong organizational cultures in order to promote uniformity of response. In a similar vein, Tosi (2002) suggested that there is less personality-driven behavior in tightly organized mechanistic organizations and more personality-driven behavior in loosely organized organic organizations.

The fourth development has been the elaboration of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus built around the meaning and consequences of behavior in situations. These developments include the idea that situations have many features, the summations of which become prototypes that determine the strength of if . . . then contingencies (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982; Wright & Mischel, 1988). Strong situations have more precise if . . . then contingencies, weak situations less clear-cut if . . . then contingencies. Subsequent conceptual expansions include (a) the ways in which departures from if . . . then contingencies affect dispositional attributions, with the larger departures in weak situations resulting in stronger dispositional attributions (Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1989); (b) how strong situations are more demanding and stressful than weak situations (Shoda et al., 1993a) and evoke more spontaneous—less cognitively mediated—responses (Shoda et al., 1993b); and (c) the idea that the effects of situations depend upon how individuals encode and understand the situation (Shoda & Mischel, 2000). This latter development highlights the fact that it is the perceived situation that matters.

Mischel (2004) recently expanded his account of the cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS). CAPS recasts behavioral consistency in terms of distinctive processing dynamics that include both the disposition of actors and their perceptions of the situation. He suggested that the study of person-situation interactions is akin to studying chemistry: "Understanding and empirically assessing each individual's cognitive-affective system may be a step toward being able to predict the 'chemistry' of interpersonal systems, as well as that of the individual in interaction with the important situations of life" (Mischel, 2004, p. 16). These conceptual developments present a sophisticated way of thinking about personality, situations, and their interactions.

During the intervening 30 years, the situation strength hypothesis has been transformed from hypothesis to conventional wisdom. It has been institutionalized as an axiom in textbooks—particularly those in organizational behavior (e.g., Johns & Saks, 2001; McShane, 2004)—and in the popular press (e.g., Gladwell, 2000). Put baldly: "It has been well known for some time that dispositional effects are likely to be strongest in relatively weak situations and weakest in relatively strong situations" (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989, p. 387). We will argue that this transformation from hypothesis to dogma is based more on the plausibility of the hypothesis and sheer repetition than on any empirical evidence.

These developments mean that we now have an operational definition of situational strength, an account of how the strengths of if . . . then contingencies differ in stronger and weaker situations, a cognitive-affective processing system that may explain ways in which individuals interpret behavior across situations, connections to an older tradition in experimental psychology, extensions to collectivities such as organizations, and the belief that the hypothesized relationship between situations, personality, and behavior has been established.

EVIDENCE

We did not find a body of research to support the situation strength hypothesis. Although the hypothesis has provided a conceptual framework for addressing a range of applied questions (e.g., Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005; Konovsky & Organ, 1996; Tett &

Burnett, 2003), including some in distal fields (e.g., in engineering; see Hanna, Backhouse, & Burns, 2004), there is little evidence for it.

We are not the first to raise doubts about the hypothesis. House and Baetz (1979) noted that Elms (cited in Milgram, 1964) analyzed personality scores from participants in Milgram's studies of obedience. Several months after the laboratory phase, Elms and Milgram collected scores from defiant participants in both the remote and voice feedback conditions (Milgram's classic Experiments 1 and 2) "where pressures of obedience were greatest" (Elms & Milgram, 1966, p. 283); data from obedient participants were collected from those who went all the way to 450 volts in the proximity and touch-proximity conditions (Milgram's Experiments 3 and 4) where "the pressures for defiance was greatest" (Elms & Milgram, 1966, p. 283). Obedient participants were found to score higher on authoritarianism and lower on social responsibility. These findings might have raised doubts about the strong situation hypothesis, given that Milgram's (1962) stated goal was "to study behavior in a strong situation of deep consequence for the participants."

In our view, a study must meet three criteria to provide a test of the strong situation hypothesis. First, the study must include suitable indicators of the four dimensions of situation strength as well as relevant measures of both personality and behavior, preferably overt rather than intended behavior. All theoretically relevant personality variables should be included, a position that we will elaborate later. Our second criterion is that the study includes confirmation of variance in situation strength. Our third criterion is a statistical analysis powerful enough to demonstrate differential effects of personality in strong and weak situations. Only when the hypothesized differential personality effects are found in strong and weak situations can it be claimed that the situation strength hypothesis has been supported.

Studies of Sensitivity to Situational Constraints

We begin our review of the evidence with a study by Price and Bouffard (1974), not because its purpose was to test the strong situation hypothesis, but because it has been repeatedly cited as an illustration of situational constraints on behavior (e.g., by Mischel, 1977). Price and Bouffard asked participants to assess the appropriateness of 15 behaviors (e.g., running, kissing, belching, laughing) in 15 situations (e.g., in class, church, elevators, restrooms). Participants reported that some situations were highly constraining (e.g., church, job interviews) and some were not very constraining at all (e.g., a park, one's own room). Some behaviors that were seen as generally acceptable were regarded as unacceptable in some

settings (e.g., eating in church) and some behaviors that were regarded as generally inappropriate were seen as acceptable in some situations (e.g., belching in one's own room). In short, people reported they were sensitive to situational constraints when judging the acceptability of behaviors. The Hough and Schneider (1996) review summarized these findings with the phrase "funerals and weddings are strong situations; being alone in one's bedroom is not" (p. 68). Although the Price and Bouffard study confirmed people's reports of sensitivity to situational cues, there was no assessment of situation strength or personality. Therefore, the study was not capable of showing that behaviors are more and less influenced by personality across situations differing in strength.

Schutte, Kenrick, and Sadalla (1985) followed in this tradition. Their participants assessed the likelihood that they would enact each of Price and Bouffard's (1974) 15 behaviors across three situations that differed in apparent strength of constraint: high (a job interview), moderate (a bar), and low (a park). The authors hypothesized that high self-monitors would be more responsive to situational constraints than would low self-monitors. Results showed that the range of predicted behavior reliably differed across the three presumed levels of constraint—widest in a park, narrowest in a job interview. However, participant's level of self-monitoring did not interact with situation strength. While again demonstrating that people say they are sensitive to situational constraints, the study failed to support the hypothesis that the effect of personality is more pronounced in weaker situations than in stronger situations.

One other study in this tradition demonstrated that people do have implicit theories about the situations in which personality effects are most and least likely to be observed. Kenrick, McCreath, Govern, King, and Bordin (1990) found that the inclination to socialize is more evident in play or entertainment settings than in religious settings. The finding does support the face validity of the situational strength hypothesis, but it does not actually test it. However, the study hints at a key notion: Although it may be unproductive to study friendliness at a funeral, that situation may be ideal for the study of emotionality.

The three studies described previously all showed that people say they are sensitive to situational constraints. However, none satisfy the three criteria for an adequate test of the situation strength hypothesis. First, only one measured a relevant aspect of personality, and none measured situation strength or actual behavior. Second, while there was some apparent variation in situation constraint, there was no confirmation of the variance in situation strength. Finally, there was no direct evaluation of whether personality has more impact on

behavior in weak situations than in strong ones. Only the failure of self-monitoring to moderate the situation-hypothesized behavior in the Schutte et al. (1985) study foreshadows the lack of support for the hypothesis in more direct tests detailed in the following.

Direct Tests of the Situation Strength Hypothesis

We found four studies that attempt to directly test the hypothesis that the effects of personality are more evident in weak situations than in strong situations. Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss (1973) used artificial feedback on performance on an intelligence test as a manipulation of situation strength. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions that purported to test their conceptual ability: (a) success on the test, (b) failure on the test, and (c) merely being shown how the test operated (control group). While the feedback was artificial, the tasks posed were varied and the feedback appeared believable. Mischel et al. (1973) argued that the success condition is strong because it includes the most potent experimental treatment and that the control condition is weak because it lacks any experimental treatment. Participants were classified as either repressors or sensitizers on the basis of standard personality testing. After the intelligence test, participants were given the opportunity to look up further information about their personal assets and liabilities; the amount of time spent on each comprised the study's dependent variable.

The authors reported that differences in what repressors and sensitizers paid attention to were greatest in the control condition and least in the success condition, although this interaction was not statistically significant. With reference to the criteria established previously, situation strength was not measured, the manipulation of situation strength was not based on the situation strength hypothesis, and the analysis showed statistically insignificant results.

A study by Monson, Hesley, and Chernick (1982, Study 1) sought to assess whether personality can be used to predict a single-act criterion if situational characteristics are taken into account. The experiment first assessed whether participants were extroverts or introverts. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: forced extroversion (where confederates induced participants to become involved in conversation), forced introversion (where confederates excluded participants from conversation), and neutral (where confederates facilitated neither extroverted nor introverted behavior). As expected, the results showed significantly more talking by extroverts than by introverts and significantly more talking in the forced extroversion condition than in either the forced introversion or neutral conditions. More germane to the situation

strength hypothesis, a significant interaction between these two variables indicated that extroverts and introverts differed more in their talking in the neutral condition than they did in either of the other two conditions.

While these results appear to support the strong situation hypothesis, confidence in them is reduced by two methodological concerns. First, the manipulation of situation strength involved varying the behavior of confederates, and while there were appropriate manipulation checks on the effects of these behaviors, there were no measures of Mischel's (1977) four dimensions of situation strength for participants in the three conditions. Second, the assessment of personality was based on participants' self-reports about whether they were extroverts or introverts, rather than on a standardized personality measure.

The third study (Beaty, Cleveland, & Murphy, 2001) used lab and field methods to assess the claim by focusing on contextual performance, which includes behaviors that would help coworkers complete their assigned tasks. In the lab study, participants read one of four scenarios (strong task situation, strong contextual situation, strong task and contextual situation, weak situation) and were asked to answer a series of multiple-choice questions on how they would respond to the situation. After responding to the questions, participants completed a personality measure. In the field study, supervisors rated the extent to which their subordinates engaged in task performance—the completion of the assigned task—and contextual performance—aiding coworkers in the completion of their assigned tasks. The subordinates completed both a work activities scale to assess situation strength and a personality measure.

As in the first two studies discussed earlier, the measure of situation strength did not include the complete set of factors outlined by Mischel (1977): Hence our first criterion was not met. With respect to the second criterion, a manipulation check in the scenario study determined that participants were aware of the expectations in the three strong situations (84% in the strong task situation, 74% in the strong contextual situation, and 97.5% in the strong task and contextual situation). However, in the weak situation condition, 60% of the participants indicated that both task and contextual performance were important, while only 10% indicated that they were not sure what was most important. Although participants in the strong situation clearly knew what was important, most in the "weak situation" thought they did as well, casting doubt on the validity of the manipulation of situation strength. In the field study, there was no manipulation check reported on the alleged variation in situation strength. With regard to our third criterion, the Beaty et al. (2001) study provided good analysis of the different effects of personality on contextual performance in

strong and weak situations, problems with measurement and manipulation of situation strength notwithstanding. However, the results must be considered unconvincing given that the interaction between personality and situation was significant for only one of the personality dimensions included in the lab study and for none in the field study. The study does meet our third criterion of providing an appropriate test of different effects of personality in strong and weak situations.

Closest to satisfying our criteria is an experiment by Withey, Gellatly, and Annett (2005): They measured the Big Five personality factors and then manipulated two dimensions of situation strength. Participants read scenarios that gave either strong or ambiguous cues about whether it would be futile to try to solve a problem. Following the manipulation, participants responded to a five-item measure of situation strength that measured the dimensions of consistent construals and clear expectations of what is appropriate. This manipulation check showed reliable differences in the levels of situation strength. The dependent variable in the study was participants' assessment of how much effort they thought they would expend to solve the problem. The authors found that the correlations between two of the five personality variables (emotional stability and conscientiousness) and the dependent variable differed between the strong and weak situations. A significant interaction term in regression analysis was reported for only one of the five personality dimensions (emotional stability).

This study provides the most direct assessment to date of the situation strength hypothesis. It supports the idea that personality matters more in weak situations than in strong situations. But four points detract from the study being an ideal test of the hypothesis: (a) Only two of Mischel's (1977) dimensions were measured, (b) it was not made clear why the Big Five factors of personality are theoretically relevant, (c) there was no measure of actual behavior, and (d) the statistical results were weak. Together these undermine the study as a test of the hypothesis.

These four studies represent the most direct tests of the hypothesis that situation strength moderates the effects of personality on behavior. Using our three criteria, the four studies provide some support for the hypothesis, but each has limitations. Of particular note are the consistent failures to confirm Mischel's (1977) four dimensions of situation strength and then measure actual behavior. We conclude that there are no well-designed studies that test the hypothesis.

Indirect Tests of the Situation Strength Hypothesis

Six other studies have claimed relevance to the situation strength hypothesis even though they fail to directly assess the moderating effect of situation on the impact of personality. The logic of these studies is that some naturally occurring aspects of situations (e.g., variations in job autonomy) are proxies for situation strength.

Gellatly and Irving (2001) found that autonomy on the job moderated the effects of some dimensions of personality on contextual performance, while Barrick and Mount (1993) found that autonomy moderated the effects of personality on supervisory ratings of job performance, showing that the personality dimensions of extroversion and conscientiousness were related to job performance only when participants had autonomy in their positions. In addition, the effects of personality (need for achievement) on motivational processes (e.g., goal commitment and self-efficacy) have been found to be more pronounced when participants had freedom to set their own goals (e.g., Gellatly, 1996; Hollenbeck, Williams, & Klein, 1989). The studies by Barrack and Mount and Gellatly and Irving did provide some suggestive support for the hypothesis using autonomy as a surrogate for situation strength. The claim for autonomy as a surrogate is understandable, given that there is some conceptual similarity between the two. We cannot agree, however, that autonomy is a direct measure of Mischel's concept of situation strength. Again, it is not obvious that autonomy is related to universal construal, uniform expectancies, adequate incentives, and required skills.

Hollenbeck et al. (1989) found that volition moderated the effect of personality on goal commitment, while George and Zhou (2001) found that the valence of positive feedback moderated the effects of some dimensions of personality on creative behavior. Adkins and Naumann (2001) argued that sales promotions, when they were in place, effectively removed situational constraints on performance. Indeed, there was greater variance in performance under conditions of sales promotions. Moreover, the relation between performance and the value placed on achievement was moderated by situational constraint. The results were interpreted as support for the situational strength hypothesis, despite the absence of any measure of personality.

Finally, Robie, Born, and Schmit (2001) found different results for participants who were given general instructions about completing a personality inventory than was found for the group of participants told that they were completing the inventory as part of an application for a job that they really wanted. Variance in personality measures was greater in the applicant condition than in the general instructions condition. Although not explicitly stated by the authors, it could be argued that the applicant condition represents a stronger situation that reduces the effects of personality.

These six studies have all been portrayed as supporting the hypothesis, though most did not seem designed

to test it. Rather, situation strength seems to have been offered as a way of interpreting the findings after the fact. As with the direct tests of the hypothesis reviewed earlier, there are problems in meeting each of our three criteria. Few of the six studies measured and demonstrated variation in situation strength; nor were the study designs appropriate for testing the hypothesis that the effects of personality are greater in weak than in strong situations. As with the more direct tests, some of the studies provide suggestive evidence in favor of the hypothesis. However, we must conclude that none of them satisfactorily meet the criteria that we established for a convincing test of the hypothesis.

TESTING THE STRONG SITUATION HYPOTHESIS

We contend that the 13 studies reviewed previously, which we believe constitute the full body of published studies presented (by their authors or others) as tests of the strong situation hypothesis, fail to achieve that goal. None of the studies can be regarded as adequate tests, and of those that constitute (partial) tests, none offers clear support. Thus, despite its 30-year history, it remains only a hypothesis. Nonetheless, with time, the situational strength hypothesis has become dogma in several fields.

The Milgram Experiments

In this section we outline what an adequate test might look like and some conceptual and methodological questions to be addressed in such tests. Consider three situations, each based on the Milgram (1964) studies of obedience. Participants are assessed on two theoretically relevant personality factors (authoritarianism and empathy) prior to—and decoupled from—the experiment. In all three conditions, the "learner's" first demand to be let out occurs at 150 volts and continues with the standard prompts and escalating cries (Milgram, 1964, pp. 56-57). In the first condition—Milgram's Experiment 14—the learner says he or she is afraid of shocks but would be willing to participate if he or she could first see someone else do the experiment, at which point the "experimenter" volunteers to become the learner. In the second—Milgram's Experiment 3—the learner is in the same room as the "teacher." In the third—a variant on Milgram's Experiment 3—the learner is in the same room as the teacher, but with two changes: The cover story is that the study is for the personal benefit of the experimenter (not the scientific study of memory) and the teacher is required to perform a different moderately difficult task before each shock is delivered.

These three conditions could be used to test the strong situation hypothesis. We would expect that participants in a between-subjects pilot study would assess the three situations in dramatically different ways on Mischel's (1977) four dimensions of situation strength. The first condition—in which the experimenter becomes the learner—should be seen as the strongest situation because all participants would construe the situation the same way (with the forces of empathy and obedience both pointing in the same direction), have uniform expectancies about how to respond (to break off at the first demand to be let out), have an adequate incentive (the scientific study of memory), and have the (physical) skill to perform the shocks. Participants in the second (proximate) condition should see the situation as one of more moderate strength, with variance in how they construe the situation (since empathy and obedience are in conflict), variance in their expectancies about how to respond, but have a clear incentive to take part (aiding science), and have the (physical) ability to administer each shock. Participants in the third situation—proximate with no scientific purpose and barriers to administer shocks—will be in the weakest situation, with variance in how they construe the situation (empathy and obedience are again in conflict) and expectancies (about continuing or breaking off), little incentive to take part, and high variance in their ability to perform each shock.

We expect that the two personality factors (authoritarianism and empathy) will be differentially related to behavior across the three situations, both for statistical and theoretical reasons. Statistically, with zero variance in the dependent variable observed in the original Experiment 14—all 40 teachers broke off at 150 volts—there can be no observed relation between personality and behavior (whereas 40% of the teachers in the original Experiment 3 went all the way to 450 volts). This statistical account may be close to what Mischel intended in his original formulation: If everyone sees things in exactly the same way then everyone will do the same thing (assuming that they can), with the result that there can be no association between personality and behavior. Statistically, such "room effects" (i.e., ceiling effects with behavioral base rates of 100% or floor effects with behavioral base rates of zero) guarantee a zero correlation. The anticipated results for this first condition would thus support the situation strength hypothesis, here as tautology.

The theoretically interesting portions of the room lie between the floor and the ceiling. The theoretical expectation is that authoritarianism and empathy will predict behavior more strongly in the third condition than in the second because the third condition is weaker. We believe that this would provide a clear test of the situation

strength hypothesis. In addition, the three conditions may provide a direct test of the Shoda et al. (1993a) claim that strong situations are more stressful than weak situations. But with obedience and empathy in conflict in the moderate and weaker conditions, it may turn out that strong situations are less stressful because they pose a lesser dilemma for participants.

The recent report of a quasi-replication of one of Milgram's conditions suggests that such a test may be possible, albeit in modified form (Burger, 2007). In addition to examining obedience in laboratory settings, other candidates for tests of the hypothesis would be experimental studies of power (e.g., Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001), helping behavior among employees who work in stronger and weaker cultures (e.g., Saffold, 1988; Sørensen, 2002), and conformity in organizations that differ in the degree of formalization (e.g., Aryee, Chen, & Budhwar, 2004; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Issues to Be Addressed

We believe that convincing tests of the hypothesis are possible and that four issues need to be addressed in such tests: (a) the competing effects of base rates and situation strength, (b) the importance of appropriately pairing situations and personality, (c) the role of personality in situational construal, and (d) the relative status of the four dimensions of situation strength.

First, it will be important to tease out the competing effects of base rates and situation strength. In the extreme case—behavior base rates of zero or 100% and/or no variance in personality—the hypothesis is not a hypothesis but a statistical artifact. The hypothesis is testable in the vast range of variance in personality and behavioral base rates in between. What would be particularly useful would be to construct designs that independently vary situation strength and behavioral base rates, from low to intermediate to high. Such a design, either in the field or in a laboratory setting, would allow the disentangling of situation strength and base rates. For example, we would expect to see a stronger personality-behavior relationship in weaker situations than in stronger situations, despite equality in their behavioral base rates.

Second, greater care should be taken in pairing situations and personality constructs. While the Withey et al. (2005) study of intended behavior may be the closest we have to an adequate test of the hypothesis, the choice of the Big Five personality factors may not have been ideal. An unclear rationale for the pairing makes it difficult to interpret support for the null hypothesis, as in the Withey et al. study. Fleeson (2001, 2007) and Marshall and Brown (2006) highlighted the role of salience in the situation-personality-behavior relationship.

Fleeson (2007) showed that trait-behavior relations are contingent on psychologically active aspects of situations, where psychologically active aspects of situations are those that are relevant to the individual, including importance to the individual's goals of the moment. In a similar vein, Marshall and Brown showed that individuals who are high on a personality trait are more sensitive to situations that evoke that trait. For example, a moderate level of provocation may be sufficient to evoke an aggressive response in someone high in aggressiveness, but it may take a much higher level of provocation to evoke aggression in an individual low in aggressiveness. Both point to the importance of carefully pairing situations and personality for future tests of the situation strength hypothesis.

A third issue is that perceptions of situations may be filtered through personality. Seemingly identical situations may be experienced very differently by participants. The partial transcripts from the Milgram (1964) studies are forceful reminders of the substantial variance in how participants saw their degree of choice in what was designed to be identical situations. Compare the words of two of the "teachers" in Experiment 2 (the voice feedback condition): "Jan Rensaleer"—"I *do* have a choice" (p. 51), with those of "Morris Braverman"— "do I have to follow these instructions literally?" (p. 53). This issue of situation perception has the potential to make testing the hypothesis more complex because personality variables (here, perhaps, authoritarianism) may interact with operationalizing the four dimensions of situation strength.

Fourth, the relative importance of Mischel's (1977) four dimensions and whether each dimension is necessary or sufficient are both unclear. Each of the four dimensions should be assessed in a between-subjects design, either as manipulation checks with an adequate sample of participants in a pilot laboratory study or as questionnaire items in a pilot field study. Establishing the strength of a situation a priori will allow the assessment of the relationship of each of the dimensions to the situation. Sample items might include variations on the following: "I think everyone would interpret this situation the same way" (universal construal), "I think everyone would agree on how to react in this situation" (uniform response expectancies), "I expect to be adequately rewarded (or not punished) for doing the right thing in this situation" (adequate incentives), and "I think everyone has the ability to do the right thing in this situation" (universal ability). Once operationalized, it would then be useful to see if it is necessary to meet all four criteria for a situation to be defined as strong. Such an assessment may show several things. For example, it may be that the fourth dimension—universal skill—is a sufficient but not necessary condition and peripheral

to making a situation strong. As another example, the relationship among the dimensions can be assessed to determine whether they make unique contributions to the strength of a situation or whether two or more of them can be combined as one dimension. Furthermore, it would be useful to know if the dimensions are exhaustive and whether they are additive, multiplicative, or compensatory. With regard to exhaustiveness, it seems likely that the degree of monitoring may also contribute to how strong the situation is for participants: Closely watched participants may be more compliant to demands than are those who are not monitored.

Cautionary Notes

Before concluding we offer three explanations for why the hypothesis has not been adequately tested and a conjecture about why the hypothesis may not be true. First, it may not have been adequately tested because it appeals to those of us who have excused our own behavior by complaining that we had no choice, that the situation tied our hands. It serves as an exculpatory trope used to save face (and to justify horrendous crimes; Arendt, 1963).

Second, the hypothesis may not have attracted attention as a research question because it fails the dual tests of being falsifiable and interesting: It is nonfalsifiable because any failure to support can be attributed to operational failures; it is uninteresting in the sense that confirming it would not be especially noteworthy—after all, it seems self-evident (Davis, 1971). The consequence is the same: no research attention.

Third, a convincing test of the hypothesis may be difficult because laboratory and field studies surely understate the strength of truly strong situations. Consider the plight of individuals compelled to act within the oppressive strictures of slavery (see e.g., Bales & Trodd, 2008; Bowe, 2007) and torture (Pran, 1997). Slaves and those being tortured are likely to experience uniform construals and expectations, have more than adequate incentives for compliance, and have the skills to act. In comparison to these situations, the operationalizations of strong situations used by laboratory experimenters and field researchers are pallid simulacra. The consequence of this is that failure to confirm the hypothesis may be discounted because the strong situation is not truly strong.

Finally, we must also entertain the possibility that the hypothesis has never been fully supported because it is wrong. Anecdotal evidence about individuals such as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela points to the possibility that only the most trying situations permit the display of great character. Indeed, there is empirical evidence supporting the notion that strong situations are precisely the ones in which personality matters most (Caspi & Moffit, 1993). Individual differences in courage, for example, are manifested only in extreme situations (Rachman, 1990). Hence, correlations between certain elements of personality and behavior may actually be higher in extreme situations than in any less demanding situation.

CONCLUSIONS

We have argued that the fields of personality and social psychology and organizational behavior have prematurely accepted the claim that situation strength moderates the relationship between personality and theoretically relevant behaviors. We have tried to show that there is little empirical basis for accepting this as a substantive claim. What is needed are studies that include (a) a range of situation strengths that are clearly measured or manipulated, (b) measures of all relevant personality factors, and (c) statistical analyses capable of confirming whether the ability of those personality factors to predict theoretically relevant behaviors is moderated by the strength of the situation.

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