

Cambridge University Press
0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations
Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul
A. M. Van Lange
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION AND THEORY

Interpersonal Situations
The Context of Social Behavior

Our goal in writing this Atlas was to provide behavioral scientists with a tool for analyzing and understanding the influence of interpersonal situations on social interaction. We believe that there are important insights about human social behavior to be gained from systematic investigation of the properties of situations. To be sure, “the situation” has long been the object of considerable attention in several of the behavioral sciences, notably social psychology (the discipline that we six authors all call home). Nonetheless, our impression is that this scrutiny has been more intuitive than theoretical, more haphazard than systematic. Furthermore, existing research has tended to emphasize the relatively impersonal aspects of situations even though interpersonal factors are often likely to dominate the individual’s attention and behavior. We maintain that a more comprehensive theoretical approach to the description and analysis of situations, and especially to their interpersonal properties, will do much to advance our understanding of social interaction.

Interdependence theory forms the conceptual skeleton for our analysis. First proposed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) and later extended by Kelley and Thibaut (1978), interdependence theory provides a systematic account of certain key interpersonal properties of situations, as well as the individual’s response to those properties, as the causal determinants of social interaction. The term “interdependence” refers to the manner in which two individuals influence each other’s outcomes in the course of their interaction. This Atlas, however, is only incidentally a primer on interdependence

Harry Reis had primary responsibility for preparation of this chapter.

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

theory; our foremost goal is to apply this theory to the description and analysis of certain common social situations. Each of these situations receives detailed examination in a series of “entries,” as we refer to them throughout this Atlas, which will illustrate to the reader the benefits of considering social situations in terms of the abstract and characteristic properties of interdependence that exist between the interacting partners. Readers will encounter in these entries many important questions that have engaged the curiosity of behavioral scientists for decades. By identifying each situation’s basic properties of interdependence, as well as the elements shared with, and differentiated from, other situations, our analysis sheds new (or as we see it, conceptually clearer) light on these questions. In so doing, we hope to provide readers with a set of conceptual tools for analyzing these and other situations.

1.1 The Concept of Situation in Social Psychology

The American Heritage Dictionary defines situation as “a position or status with regard to conditions and attendant circumstances” and as “a combination of circumstances at a given moment; state of affairs.” As nearly all textbooks show, social psychology takes pride in ascribing to itself the study of “situationism” and “the power of the situation” – that is, to demonstrate that the situational context is a potent force in shaping behavior. In this regard, social psychologists trace their roots to the E in Kurt Lewin’s (1936/1966) paradigmatic equation, $B = f(P, E)$ – Behavior depends on the Person and the Environment. Solomon Asch, for example, stipulated that “most social acts have to be understood in their setting, and lose meaning if isolated. . . . No error in thinking about social facts is more serious than the failure to see their place and function” (1952, p. 61). Similarly, in their classic review of some of the field’s most influential studies, Nisbett and Ross (1991) provide compelling testimony to the explanatory power of situational explanations of behavior.

Current practice in social psychology treats situationism as an exceedingly broad concept, encompassing, for example, the impact of information about a new acquaintance or hypothetical other on thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward that person; the interplay of stylistic and substantive factors on the appeal of persuasive messages; and the degree of deliberateness with which bits of social information are processed. Despite this diversity, or perhaps because of it, the field has been criticized for its failure to develop a comprehensive theoretical model of situations and their

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interpersonal Situations*

5

structure or impact. For example, Kenny, Mohr, and Levesque (2001) echoed a widespread opinion in stating that

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

The absence of such a conceptual framework, as Rozin (2001) has observed, may not be problematic in the short term, but it seems certain to inhibit the long-term conceptual development of a discipline that takes “the situation” as a central conceptual focus (see also Zajonc, 1999).

This Atlas provides such a conceptualization of situations, beginning in chapter 2. However, the theoretical framework that we favor differs from the field’s more colloquial use of the term in two key respects. First, whereas existing studies of situational influences on behavior often focus on impersonal features of the situation, *we emphasize its interpersonal core* – the degree and kind of interdependence between people, the information they have about each other and the situation, and the behavioral options open to them as they interact. We do so for a variety of conceptual and practical reasons, all of which amount to an appreciation for the fundamental importance of social relations in understanding human behavior. These reasons may be evident in a cardinal observation: That from the actor’s perspective, interpersonal factors – who one is with, one’s history with that person and similar others in related situations, what one is trying to accomplish with that person, and how one’s personal outcomes link to the other’s outcomes – are fundamental to differentiating one situation from another and, therefore, to understanding the impact of situations on behavior (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). For example, a critical comment from a dinner companion has very different implications for cognition, emotion, and behavior coming from one’s adolescent daughter, well-meaning best friend, boss, maternal grandfather, dissertation advisor, insurance agent, therapist, or a stranger.

A second distinction intrinsic to our meaning of the term situation involves a *focus on its objective properties*. Social psychologists in large part subscribe to Nisbett and Ross’s (1991) principle of construal: that causal analysis should concentrate on the personal and subjective meaning of the situation to the actor. Although we do not deny the significance of personal construals – indeed, throughout this Atlas, readers will see that “what the

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

individual makes of the situation” is a central ingredient of our analysis – we suggest that the analysis of social interaction must begin at an earlier causal step, namely, with description of the situation’s objective elements (see chapter 2). In this regard, we concur with Gottman and Notarius (2000) who, in a slightly different context, observed that to understand a spouse’s interpretation of an interaction, one must first know what actually took place in that interaction. (For example, to understand an adolescent’s complaint that her parents are unsupportive, it would be useful to observe a support-seeking interaction between them.) To be somewhat more specific, our analysis focuses on a small set of key properties that define situations with interdependence between individuals and that serve as the basis for the interactions that emerge between those individuals. We maintain that the interaction patterns that we commonly observe in everyday life, in fact, may be better understood by clearly differentiating the situation from the interpersonal motives and attitudes that operate on or transform that situation and together shape those interaction patterns. We further maintain that to diagnose the reality of a situation and to understand the behaviors that partners exhibit, it is necessary to determine the interdependent structure of their goals. In other words, as discussed below, the study of interaction can help researchers uncover the person factors that shape the individual’s response to situations.

Although this analysis begins with an objective assessment of situations, it is not inconsistent with theories that emphasize the individual’s personal construal of those situations. As an illustration, one may consider the well-known Milgram obedience experiments, in which an insistent authority figure (the experimenter) repeatedly demanded that subjects administer increasingly painful, and eventually seemingly lethal, electric shocks to a peer who, unbeknownst to the subjects, was an experimental confederate and who in actuality received no shocks. The fact that a large percentage of the subjects complied with those instructions is often cited as evidence of “the power of the situation” – in other words, that the experimenter’s demands somehow “caused” the subjects’ obedient behavior. We propose instead that the situation created in this experiment, defined in terms of the subjects’ relationship with the authoritative domineering experimenter and the putative dependent peer, afforded subjects with an opportunity to select one of two interaction patterns: to obediently shock the peer or to resist the experimenter’s entreaties and thereby act in accord with more humane principles. The choice reflects “what the subject makes of the situation”; that is, the subject’s considered response to the objective conditions inherent in this situation, as it has been devised by the

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interpersonal Situations*

7

researchers. Indeed, part of what fascinates us about this classic work is that in the base situation, the experimenter has little if any objective means to compel the subject to comply with his demands – the subject must transform an objectively harmless refusal to comply into an act of disobedience to authority, or an act of compliance that is objectively harmless to the self into an act of seeming violence toward another human being. As we show in chapter 3, a full situational analysis involves explicit differentiation of the objective properties of the situation (e.g., a source of social influence with some degree of social status or authority; acts that clearly will inflict pain on another person) from the interpersonal motives and attitudes that shape the individual's response to those properties. Thus, rather than demonstrating "the power of the situation," to our way of thinking, this research demonstrates "the power of what the person makes of the situation."

Our analysis of the situation focuses on three aspects of interdependence: the ways in which partners affect each other's outcomes, how they share information with each other, and the serial ordering of their responses. Of course, there are other ways in which situations may be described, involving various other interpersonal and impersonal attributes. We emphasize these particular properties because of their fundamental and pervasive impact on social interaction. Social interaction is for many researchers the central topic of social psychology (e.g., Hinde, 1997; Holmes, 2000; Kelley et al., 1983; Reis et al., 2000). Kelley (2000), for example, asserted that "the proper study of social psychology is the study of interaction and its immediate determinants and consequences" (p. 11). Nevertheless, over many years interaction has drifted from the center of the field to its periphery (Barone, 1999), reflecting the field's growing emphasis on individualistic, intrapsychic processes (Steiner, 1986). Zajonc (1998) critically highlighted this trend in observing that social psychologists "need to look less at the mind and more at interactions." The infrastructure needed for such redirection includes a more comprehensive and differentiated description than currently exists of the basic patterns of social interdependence that arise regularly in common everyday situations.

We find the absence of a systematic map of interpersonal situations somewhat ironic. We have been repeatedly struck by people's intuitive ability to recognize situations in their own lives without any sort of formal training in interdependence analysis and, moreover, usually without the ability to articulate the abstract properties that underlie such recognition. For example, most people readily appreciate that situations with shared interests are more likely to foster cooperative interaction than are situations with conflicting interests. And, most people intuitively grasp

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that when one partner's outcomes depend strongly on the other's behavior, the more dependent individual must take pains to avoid offending the more powerful other. The ability to distinguish situations from one another has functional value for the individual because it facilitates effective social interaction; that is, if one is aware that such interdependencies exist, one may adjust one's behavior accordingly. On the other hand, misrecognizing the structure of an existing situation may result in interactions that are awkward, uncomfortable, poorly coordinated, quarrelsome, or dangerous. The presentation in this Atlas is organized around prototypes of common situations in order to capitalize on people's implicit ability to recognize patterns of interdependence.

We speculate that an ability to recognize certain interpersonal situations might have evolutionary roots. Cosmides and Tooby (1992) instruct us that

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

What could be more central to such a map, we submit, than understanding precisely how one is interdependent with others in the social environment? Coping effectively with this interdependence is, after all, central to successful resolution of such adaptive concerns as mate selection, reproduction, child rearing, monitoring and besting sexual rivals, resource and food acquisition, forming and maintaining reliable alliances while fending off competitors, and protection against predators, to name some of the more significant examples. (See Kenrick & Trost, 1997, for a more general discussion of the role of social relations in evolutionary adaptation.)

If there is adaptive significance in recognizing the abstract patterns of interdependence that are present in everyday social relations, then learning to recognize them becomes an important developmental task. Certain socialization practices and experiences are designed to teach children how to distinguish among situations and to behave accordingly once identified. Bugental (2000) has described some of these practices in proposing a typology of fundamental and distinct relationship domains, each one of which is linked to specialized neural "modules." Clearly, the ability to understand abstract patterns of interaction, as well as their likely determinants and

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Interpersonal Situations*

9

consequences, involves many complex cognitive judgments and insights. For instance (and as the entries in this Atlas will illustrate), the individual must be able to discern which situation she is in and which she is not in; must appreciate the values, norms, dispositions, and motives relevant to the existing situation; must be able to predict the likely behavior of interaction partners in this situation; must anticipate potential unfoldings of events over time; and must also imagine each of these from the partner's perspective. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that the complexity of analyzing interpersonal situations has given theorists more than their share of intellectual headaches!

In short, as with its intellectual parent, interdependence theory, this Atlas takes as its guiding premise the idea that the systematic analysis of interpersonal situations offers a potentially fruitful tool for understanding the patterns of social interaction that both behavioral scientists and lay persons observe in everyday life.

1.1.1 The Situation and the Person

The analysis of situations is sometimes thought to contradict, or at least to be independent of, the analysis of person factors. Even the oft-cited $P \times S$ (Person \times Situation) interactionist perspective implies that the characteristics of situations and of person factors are somehow separable and distinct. Throughout this volume, we take a different approach. We suggest that situations and person factors are inextricably linked such that each cannot be understood in isolation from the other.

The term "person factors," as is more fully explained in chapter 3, refers to any properties of the individual that come into play when he/she is aware of and responsive to the situation. Thus this rather broad term includes motives, values, personality traits, habits, attitudes, goals, preferences, and defenses, both in regard to the individual's general orientation to the social world and to his or her orientation to a specific role, partner, or relationship. Person factors are a necessary component of the study of social interaction because they determine the individual's perception of and response to the objective properties of the situation. That is, because situations present the individual with behavioral options, each of which has tangible consequences for the self and the other, they make possible (or "afford," to use terminology proposed by Gibson, 1979) the expression of relevant person factors in behavior – for example, an existing vulnerability of one's partner to oneself affords possible responses of exploitation or support, the choice between which will depend on relevant person factors. On the other hand, our analysis suggests that the influence of

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

“person factors” is difficult to diagnose when the situation compels a particular behavior. Thus, for example, we would describe a person as cooperative only when he or she pursued prosocial goals in situations that do not demand such behavior. “Person factors,” in other words, serve to determine “what the actor makes” of the existing interdependent situation, and their impact is reflected directly in the interaction that ensues.

The idea that situations provide a context in which person factors may be revealed is central to the personality theory of Mischel and Shoda (1995). They theorize that the features of situations activate particular and relevant individual difference variables, which in turn trigger the cognitions and emotions that lead to a behavioral response. This process is idiographic at several levels: the selection of certain situations from among myriad possibilities; the situational features that are most salient to a given person; the “cognitive-affective mediating units” that are activated for that person; and the dynamic way in which these levels interact. Central to our analysis is their notion that personality be conceptualized as a predictable pattern of variability across situations; that is, as a series of *if X exists, then response Y is more likely* contingencies. For example, Shoda, Mischel, and Wright (1994) examined children’s behavior as a function of certain eliciting conditions – for example, *if “peer teased, provoked, or threatened,” then “child was verbally aggressive.”* Our analysis also uses the logic of *if . . . then* contingencies, but we define the antecedents and consequents somewhat more narrowly: the X refers to the objective properties of situations, whereas the Y refers to interpersonal behavior.

This model of person factors emphasizes the manner in which individual differences are fundamentally and inextricably rooted in situations. Interestingly, it resembles the East Asian, collectivist conception of the person as being situated in a broad social context. As Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan (1999) discuss, whereas in the Western world causal accounts tend to locate responsibility primarily in the attributes of the individual, Eastern explanations of behavior tend to stress the individual’s response to the social environment. This difference can be seen, for example, in the fact that whereas we in Western psychology have an extensive, highly articulate, and well-differentiated vocabulary for describing individual differences (especially personality), our language for describing situations is vague and poorly developed (Snyder & Cantor, 1998). In fact, the authors of this Atlas came squarely face-to-face with this inadequacy in our rather protracted discussions about the names for the various entries. As readers may guess, we struggled to find names that would be descriptive and accurate, and that would evoke unambiguous referents in the reader’s mind. It is far

Cambridge University Press

0521812526 - An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

Harold H. Kelly, John G. Holmes, Norbert L. Kerr, Harry T. Reis, Caryl E. Rusbult and Paul A. M. Van Lange

Excerpt

[More information](#)

easier to find names for individual attributes, as terms like “extraversion,” “conscientiousness,” and “self-esteem” plainly reveal. Another hope for this Atlas is that it will contribute to a lexicon of situations.

1.2 Why an “Atlas”?

Readers may wonder why we refer to this volume as an atlas. The name is intended to be more than an evocative allusion. An atlas is a collection of maps or charts that systematically illustrates its subject by representing one or more of its properties in relation to the same properties of neighboring or otherwise similar subjects. Thus there are atlases that depict particular places by describing their geography – longitude and latitude, rivers and lakes, roadways, boundaries, and so forth – and their localized segments – states, cities, and census tracts. There are also atlases that display variation along specific dimensions – for example, elevation maps, rainfall maps, population density maps, and maps that display the distribution of ethnicities or religions within an area. Each map or chart portrays its subject in sharp detail; the collection thereof provides a multidimensional space in which each individual entry can be located in relation to every other entry. In so doing, the collection demonstrates the nearness or distance (i.e., similarities and differences) among the various components.

Much as a geographical atlas may sharpen its reader’s working knowledge of a place, an atlas of interpersonal situations may sharpen our perceptions by providing detailed descriptions of each situation, while simultaneously indicating its location with reference to other situations. Thus our discussion of each situation includes a detailed account of its defining properties and an analysis of its relationship to neighboring (i.e., conceptually similar) situations. Each entry provides a representation (like a map) intended to facilitate the reader’s identification and delineation of that situation. In combination, the collective Atlas organizes its topical domain – interpersonal situations – into a conceptually bounded series of distinct and basic situations that we hope will illuminate some of the basic dimensions of all interpersonal situations. The entries, in short, are specialized maps of particular interpersonal situations; the full Atlas displays the structure of the social world, a mosaic of such situations.

In making each situation the centerpiece of scrutiny, our analysis borrows loosely from a Roschian approach to learning. Rosch’s work on object categorization demonstrates that people tend to learn and think about objects at intermediate (or, as she put it, “basic”) levels of abstraction – for example, chairs (Rosch, Mervis, Gray, Johnson, & Boyes-Braem, 1976;