

## The culture of the situation: The role of situational strength in cultural systems

Michele J. Gelfand and Janetta Lun

*Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, USA*

Bond's insightful analysis puts, at long last, the role of the situation central to the study of culture. As he cogently argues, while psychologists have always acknowledged the role of situations in human behaviour – as far back as Weber (1922), Mead (1934), and Lewin (1943;1946) – there continues to be a much heavier emphasis on the internal properties of individuals (personality, the self) to the neglect of theories and research on dimensions of situations. In fact, criticisms regarding the neglect of the situation began well over half a century ago (Cottrell, 1950; Murray, 1938) and have continued since (Barker, 1968; Bowers, 1973; Goffman, 1963; Mayhew, 1980; McAuley, Bond & Kashima, 2002; Moos, 1973; Pervin, 1978; Seeman, 1997; Ten Berge & De Raad, 1999). As Endler (1993) put it, 'although we have a fairly advanced differential psychology of individual differences, our differential psychology of situations is still in the dark ages' (p. 258). Similarly, in his Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP) Presidential address, Reis (2008) argued that psychology, more generally, should take seriously the study of situations and how they affect psychological processes. The mind, he argued, consists of a set of adaptations designed to solve adaptive problems, one of which is to adapt to everyday situations (Reis, 2008). Cross-cultural and cultural psychologists have also bemoaned the fundamental neglect of the situation and have argued situational analyses should feature more centrally in research on cultural systems (Gelfand, Raver, Nishii, Leslie & Lun *et al.*, 2011; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Oyserman, Kimmelmeier & Coon, 2002; Triandis, 1972).

Bond raises the critical question of: How can we identify objectively defined social situations that are universal? He aptly points out that there is little consensus on the basic dimensions of situations (Wagerman & Funder, 2009), and draws on research on the ecology of perception (Gibson, 1986) to argue that the dimensions of social situations that are most promising are those that relate to fundamental motivational affordances – for example, sociality and status – that are relevant for the human species.

We add to this thoughtful analysis and offer another dimension of situations that is a promising candidate for universality across cultures, that which relates to questions of *individual agency* or the degree to which individuals are afforded latitude versus constraint in everyday recurring situations. Scholars from numerous disciplines have long argued that situations differ in the range of behavioural responses that are considered appropriate, commonly referred to as situational strength (e.g. Goffman, 1963; Mischel, 1977; Price, 1974; Price & Bouffard, 1974; see also Boldt, 1978; Douglas, 1982). When situations are strong, there is a restricted range of behaviour that is deemed appropriate and with high censoring potential, leaving little room for individual discretion in determining behaviour. When situations are weak, by contrast, there is a wide range of behavioural patterns that are acceptable, thereby placing few external constraints on individuals and allowing individual differences to be expressed.

Our work on this dimension of situations (Gelfand, Raver, Nishii, Leslie & Lun, 2011) is consistent with and extends Bond's insightful analysis. Specifically, we have shown that: (i) the dimension of situational strength is likely a universal (providing empirical evidence consistent with the O[S] component in Bond's formula), and that individuals tend to agree about the level of situational strength in their cultural context (providing empirical evidence consistent with the CO[S] component in Bond's formula); (ii) the strength of situations varies widely across national cultures, and such variations are afforded and constrained by the ecological and historical context of nations. This systematic cultural variation suggests that situational structures are not randomly assigned to cultures (similar to Bond's argument that people are not randomly assigned to situations). Put simply, differences in situational strength are adaptive (or at least were at some time in the past) to the constraints and affordances of the natural and historical contexts within which societies are embedded; and finally (iii) the strength of social situations has cross-level consequences for fundamental psychological processes (e.g. self-guides, self-regulation, epistemic needs). We suggest that the extent to which situations are chronically strong versus weak then induces particular chronically accessible processes. An implication of our analysis is that cultural differences in situational constraint may provide new explanations for cultural variation in a wide range of psychological processes, including cultural differences in attributions,

*Correspondence:* Michele J. Gelfand, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA. Email: mgelfand@umd.edu

Received 19 October 2012; accepted 26 November 2012.

attention to context, and emotional regulation, among others. We elaborate on each of these points below, and then return to the synergy between our research and Bond's new formulation.

### Universality and culture-specificity in the strength of situations

We expected that the dimension of situational strength is likely universal (that is, salient in most, if not all cultures) because of a fundamental need that social situations satisfy, namely, to coordinate social action across individual actors. That is, to the extent that situations require strong needs for coordinated social action, they produce more constraint on idiosyncratic behaviour; to the extent that situations do not require much coordinated social action, they produce much more latitude. Evidence for the potential universality of this dimension of situations can be seen in our study of situational constraint across 33 nations (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011). Drawing on Price and Bouffard (1974), we assessed how appropriate 12 behaviours were across 15 situations and created an index of situational strength across 33 nations. We asked questions such as: how appropriate is it to talk in a library; cry in a public park; kiss in a restaurant; curse in an elevator; argue in a classroom; sing on a bus; or read a newspaper in the classroom; among all possible behaviour x situation pairs. Behaviours for each situation were collapsed to obtain a situational constraint score for each situation and collapsed across situations for an overall index of situational constraint. We also asked participants to directly rate the strength of 15 situations by asking them questions such as 'To what extent does this situation require that people monitor their own behaviour or watch what they do' and, 'To what extent does the situation have clear rules regarding appropriate behaviour?'

The results provided evidence that situational constraint is an objectively defined and consensually agreed upon feature of situations across many nations. The situation x behaviour measure of situational constraint was highly correlated with direct ratings of constraint across the 15 situations. Observational ratings of actual behaviours in different situations were correlated with the survey ratings of situations (A. Realo, K. Linnamägi, M. J. Gelfand & P. Skordeli, unpublished data). Speaking to the generality of this situational dimension across cultures, there was a universal rank order of situational constraint across all countries. For example, in all cultures, the strongest situations included job interview, funeral ceremony, and library, whereas the weakest situations included one's bedroom, public park, and party. The average correlation between the rank order of situations across countries was 0.95 (standard deviation [SD] = 0.37). Indeed, the rank order of constraint

across situations was stable not only across different methods and cultures, but also across time. We compared the situational constraint scores in our own data from the U.S. with those reported by Price and Bouffard (1974) more than 30 years ago. Of the eight overlapping situations assessed in both studies, we found that the rank order was highly similar ( $r = 0.92$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, speaking directly to Bond's question as to whether we can achieve consensual descriptions of situations (e.g. CO[S]), we showed that people around the globe generally *agree* on the levels of situational strength within their nations. There were high rwg's and high ICC1 and ICC2 across 33 nations (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011). This evidence suggests that constraint versus latitude is an objective, consensually derived feature of situations that is found across many nations.

### Macro affordances of situational strength across cultures

While situational strength is potentially universal (all cultures have both strong and weak situations), our research also shows that cultures vary in the *degree* to which everyday recurring situations are strong versus weak (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011). The one-way ANOVA produced a highly significant effect indicating high between-nation variability in situational constraint. In this respect, although the rank order of situational constraint is similar across nations, some nations have much higher situational constraint *on average across situations* as compared to others that have much lower constraint. Thus, for example, the strength of a public park is much higher in Pakistan, than in New Zealand, and being in a library is less constraining in Australia than in Japan.

Extending Bond's analysis, further, our work raises an additional question, namely what 'affords' OS in Bond's equation – what explains why there is wide cultural variation in situational constraint around the globe? We predicted that having stronger situations serves a critical function in certain nations; strong situations coordinate social action by reducing the range of permissible behaviour in nations, and this is of greater necessity in nations that experience high (vs. low) societal threats. Data shows that nations vary widely in the degree to which they have strong threats for survival, including human made threats to survival (e.g. a history of territorial threat, high population density, human disease), and natural threats to survival (e.g. a dearth of natural resources, high degree of natural disasters). Our research, indeed, showed that nations with higher (vs. lower) degrees of threat have higher (vs. lower) situational constraint (see Gelfand *et al.*, 2011). In this view, objective features of situations are themselves at least partially afforded by objective features of the macro context of societies which extends Bond's

new formula to include the notion that  $O(S)$ ,  $CO(S) = f E$  (Ecology) of (G) (Groups).

### **Situational strength affordances of micro processes**

Situational strength is not only afforded by macro societal factors, it, in turn, has cross-level consequences for psychological processes. We showed, through hierarchical linear modeling analyses, that individuals who face stronger situations (and, thus, continually experience more limited behavioural options and greater scrutiny and social evaluation of their actions) have self-guides that are more prevention-focused, have higher self-regulatory strength (i.e. higher impulse control), a higher need for structure, and higher self-monitoring ability. This suggests that there is a close correspondence between the overall chronic level of strength (vs. weakness) of social situations in a culture and the psychological processes of individuals within that culture. Put differently, strong situations afford cognition and self-regulation processes which serve to maintain order and coordinate social action in nations that experience much threat. In turn, the chronic motivational structures of individuals reflect and support the nature of situational strength they encounter on a chronic basis.

### **Implications for explaining cultural differences**

Bond rightfully implores us to unpack cross-cultural differences beyond simply 'P' (e.g. individual differences) to include P(S), or how the actor perceives social situations, and the objective normative constraints (O(S), CO(S) in the environment. Inspired by his call, we would suggest that cultural differences in chronic strength of situations may provide an explanation for a wide variety of cultural differences that have received attention in the literature – including causal theories, attention to context, primacy of self-perspective, and behavioural regulation, among others. As a general principle, chronic differences in interdependence and independence, broadly defined, may be understood as adaptations to chronically strong versus weak situations.

For example, cultural differences in dispositional versus situational influence on behaviour may be explained in part by cultural differences in situational strength. Research has repeatedly found that Americans tend to attribute others' action to dispositional over situational causes, whereas East Asians are less likely to commit this over-reliance on dispositional reasons and make more situational attributions for others behaviour (Miller, 1984; Morris & Peng, 1994). Cultural differences in situational constraint versus latitude

provide a logical explanation of these differences: To the extent that individuals chronically face strong situations, as they do in East Asia (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011), they come to reason that others' behaviour is, indeed, more likely to be based on situational than dispositional factors (P[S]). By contrast, individualists make more dispositional attributions because they chronically face weaker situations wherein people are actually behaving according to their own idiosyncratic preferences. In other words, the fact that East Asians make more situational attributions and individualists make dispositional attributions may merely reflect the strong (vs. weak) situational structure they chronically face. In our recent work (J. Lun, M. J. Gelfand & R. Mohr, unpublished data), we have primed the situational strength and show that it affords fewer dispositional attributions.

As another example, cultural differences in situational strength may help explain differences in the degree to which people in different cultures attend to the context. Research has repeatedly shown that people from interdependent cultures have more field dependent perceptual processing (Ji, Peng & Nisbett, 2000; Kitayama, Duffy, Kawamura & Larsen, 2003) and their judgments and memory are more influenced by contextual information (Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Masuda, Ellsworth, Mesquita, Leu, Tanida & Van de Veerdonk, 2008), as compared to people from independent cultures. Recent neural evidence also suggests that interdependents are more sensitive to changes in background stimuli than independents (Lewis, Goto & Kong, 2008). From a situational strength perspective, greater attention and sensitivity to the context is an adaptive reaction to chronic strong situations that are found in East Asian cultures. Put differently, successful social navigation in recurring strong (vs. weak) situations involves attending to the context to ensure that one doesn't violate expectations and invite punishment. By contrast, field information is less informative to those who experience reoccurring weak situations because specific contexts do not have a strong influence on how one should behave. In fact, the actor involved should be the focus as they are likely to act on their own volition. Attention to context has been linked to other structural factors, such as perceptual complexity of physical environment in different countries (Miyamoto, Nisbett & Masuda, 2006). Our situational strength perspective expands this by offering how features of chronically recurring situations afford such processing differences.

Cross-cultural variability in personality may also be linked to cultural differences in situational strength. Strong situations impose greater pressure to align behaviour with specific situational requirements. Accordingly, lower cross-situation consistency, which is found in interdependent cultures (Oishi, Diener, Napa Scollon & Biswas-Diener, 2004; Suh, 2002), may reflect the chronic need to adjust oneself to meet the norms of strong situations. For example, research has shown that Koreans rated themselves more variably on

personality traits across different social situations than Americans (Suh, 2002). It is possible that this may be mediated by high levels of situational strength in Korea as compared to the U.S. (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011).

It is also possible that cultural variation in situational strength is a fruitful mediator of other cultural differences in psychological processes, including the primacy of others' versus self perspectives across cultures (Cohen, Hoshino-Browne & Leung, 2007); prevention versus promotion focus (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim & Sheldon, 2001; Hamilton & Biehal, 2005; Lalwani, Shrum & Chiu, 2009; Lee, Aaker & Gardner, 2000); behavioural inhibition, such as emotional suppression, secondary control, and suppressing desires (Butler, Lee & Gross, 2009; Matsumoto *et al.*, 2008a; Matsumoto, Yoo & Nakagawa, 2008b; Morling & Evered, 2006; Morling, Kitayama & Miyamoto, 2002); and beliefs in a fixed world (Chen, Chiu & Chan, 2009; Chiu, Dweck, Tong & Fu, 1997); among other phenomena. We would expect that the greater the degree of chronically strong (weak) situations, the more these interdependent (independent) affordances should be chronically accessible. Such psychological affordances are functional in meeting the requirements of strong versus weak situations. More generally, it suggests new ways in which culture and psyche 'make each other up' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

In sum, our research has shown that situational constraint is a universal dimension of situations that has cross-cultural variability and has the potential to explain a wide range of cultural differences in psychological processes. Our research provides empirical credence to Bond's new reformulation of situations, specifically the O(S) and CO(S) parameters. A situational strength perspective also

offers some extensions of Bond's formula. For example, it suggests that features of situations O(S), CO(S) are themselves afforded by macro objective features of the ecological and historical environments that societies have faced or  $O(S), CO(S) = f E$  (Ecology) of (G) (Groups). It, thus, begins to explain differences in these parameters, which is important for psychological science. Our analysis also suggests some extensions to Bond's third component, namely P (actor's personality) and P(S) (actor's perceptions of situations). From a situational strength perspective, the influence of P and P(S) should be weaker when situational constraint is high and stronger when situational constraint is low. This suggests that the components in the new formula are not necessarily independent in all cultures. Finally, a situational strength perspective suggests an additional conceptualization for the P (actor's personality) component of the new formula. According to our research (Gelfand *et al.*, 2011), repeated exposure to strong situations may give rise to chronic personality traits (e.g. conscientious, self-control, self-monitoring). Put differently, chronic situations can also shape personality. This would suggest a possible S(P) parameter in Bond's formula.

In conclusion, this is all to say *Bravo* to Bond's insightful analysis, which at long last, brings the role of situations front and center in the analysis of cultural differences.

## Acknowledgement

This research was based on work supported by the U.S. Army Research Office under Grant W911NF-08-1-0144.

## References

- Barker, R. G. (1968). *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and Methods for Understanding the Environment of Human Behaviour*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Boldt, E. D. (1978). Structural tightness and cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 9, 151–165.
- Bowers, K. S. (1973). Situationism in psychology: An analysis and a critique. *Psychological Review*, 80, 307–336.
- Butler, E. A., Lee, T. L. & Gross, J. J. (2009). Does expressing your emotions raise or lower your blood pressure? The answer depends on cultural context. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 40, 510–517.
- Chen, J., Chiu, C. & Chan, S. F. (2009). The cultural effects of job mobility and the belief in a fixed world: Evidence from performance forecast. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 851–865.
- Chiu, C.-Y., Dweck, C. S., Tong, J. Y.-Y. & Fu, J. H.-Y. (1997). Implicit theories and conceptions of morality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 923–940.
- Cohen, D., Hoshino-Browne, E. & Leung, A. K. (2007). Culture and the structure of personal experience: Insider and outsider phenomenologies of the self and social world. In: M. P. Zanna, ed. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 39, pp. 1–67. San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press.
- Cottrell, L. S., Jr (1950). Some neglected problems in social psychology. *American Sociological Review*, 15, 705–712.
- Douglas, M. (1982). Introduction to grid/group analysis. In: M. Douglas, ed. *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*, pp. 1–8. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Elliot, A. J., Chirkov, V. I., Kim, Y. & Sheldon, K. M. (2001). A cross-cultural analysis of avoidance (relative to approach) personal goals. *Psychological Science*, 12, 505–510.
- Endler, N. S. (1993). Personality: An interactional perspective. In: P. J. Hettema & I. J. Deary, eds. *Foundations of Personality*, pp. 251–268. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Gelfand, M., Raver, J., Nishii, L., Leslie, L. & Lun, J. colleagues (2011). Differences between tight and loose cultures: A 33-nation study. *Science*, 332, 1100–1104.
- Gibson, J. J. (1986). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

- Hamilton, R. W. & Biehal, G. J. (2005). Achieving your goals or protecting their future? The effects of self-view on goals and choices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *32*, 277–283.
- Ji, L.-J., Peng, K. & Nisbett, R. E. (2000). Culture, control, and perception of relationships in the environment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 943–955.
- Kitayama, S., Duffy, S., Kawamura, T. & Larsen, J. T. (2003). Perceiving an object and its context in different cultures: A cultural look at New Look. *Psychological Science*, *14*, 201–206.
- Kitayama, S., Markus, H. R., Matsumoto, H. & Norasakkunkit, V. (1997). Individual and collective processes in the construction of the self: Self-enhancement in the United States and self-criticism in Japan. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *72*, 1245–1267.
- Lalwani, A. K., Shrum, L. J. & Chiu, C. (2009). Motivated response styles: The role of cultural values, regulatory focus, and self-consciousness in socially desirable responding. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*, 870–882.
- Lee, A. Y., Aaker, J. L. & Gardner, W. L. (2000). The pleasures and pains of distinct self-construals: The role of interdependence in regulatory focus. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *78*, 1122–1134.
- Lewin, K. (1943). Defining the field at a given time. *Psychological Review*, *50*, 292–310.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Behavior and development as a function of the total situation. In: L. Carmichael, ed. *Manual of Child Psychology*, pp. 791–844. New York: John Wiley.
- Lewis, R. S., Goto, S. G. & Kong, L. L. (2008). Culture and context: East Asian American and European American differences in P3 event-related potentials and self-construal. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *34*, 623–634.
- Markus, H. & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, *98*, 224–253.
- Masuda, T., Ellsworth, P. C., Mesquita, B., Leu, J., Tanida, S. & Van de Veerdonk, E. (2008). Placing the face in context: Cultural differences in the perception of facial emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*, 365–381.
- Masuda, T. & Nisbett, R. E. (2001). Attending holistically versus analytically: Comparing the context sensitivity of Japanese and Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 922–934.
- Matsumoto, D., Yoo, S. H., Fontaine, J., Anguas-Wong, A. M., Arriola, M., Ataca, B., Grossi, E. (2008a). Mapping expressive differences around the world: The relationship between emotional display rules and individualism versus collectivism. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *39*, 55–74.
- Matsumoto, D., Yoo, S. H. & Nakagawa, S. (2008b). Culture, emotion, regulation, and adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *94*, 925–937.
- Mayhew, B. H. (1980). Structuralism versus individualism: Part 1, Shadowboxing in the dark. *Social Forces*, *59*, 335–375.
- McAuley, P., Bond, M. H. & Kashima, E. (2002). Towards defining situations objectively: A culture-level analysis of role dyads in Hong Kong and Australia. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *33*, 363–379.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, J. G. (1984). Culture and the development of everyday social explanation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *46*, 961–978.
- Mischel, W. (1977). The interaction of person and situation. In: D. Magnusson & N. S. Endler, eds. *Personality at the Crossroads: Current Issues in Interactional Psychology*, pp. 333–352. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Miyamoto, Y., Nisbett, R. E. & Masuda, T. (2006). Culture and the physical environment: Holistic versus analytic perceptual affordances. *Psychological Science*, *17*, 113–119.
- Moos, R. H. (1973). Conceptualizations of human environments. *American Psychologist*, *28*, 652–665.
- Morling, B. & Evered, S. (2006). Secondary control reviewed and defined. *Psychological Bulletin*, *132*, 269–296.
- Morling, B., Kitayama, S. & Miyamoto, Y. (2002). Cultural practices emphasize influence in the United States and adjustment in Japan. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *28*, 311–323.
- Morris, M. W. & Peng, K. (1994). Culture and cause: American and Chinese attributions for social and physical events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 949–971.
- Murray, H. A. (1938). *Explorations in Personality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oishi, S., Diener, E., Napa Scollon, C. N. & Biswas-Diener, R. (2004). Cross-situational consistency of affective experiences across cultures. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *86*, 460–472.
- Oyserman, D., Kemmelmeier, M. & Coon, H. (2002). Cultural Psychology, a new look: Reply to Bond (2002), Fiske (2002), Kitayama, (2002), and Miller (2002). *Psychological Bulletin*, *128*, 110–117.
- Pervin, L. A. (1978). Definitions, measurements, and classifications of stimuli, situations, and environments. *Human Ecology*, *6*, 71–105.
- Price, R. H. (1974). The taxonomic classification of behaviors and situations and the problem of behaviour-environment congruence. *Human Relations*, *27*, 567–585.
- Price, R. H. & Bouffard, D. L. (1974). Behavioral appropriateness and situational constraint as dimensions of social behaviour. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *30*, 579–586.
- Reis, H. T. (2008). Reinvigoration the concept of situation in social psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *12*, 311–329.
- Seeman, M. (1997). The elusive situation in social psychology. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *60*, 4–13.
- Suh, E. M. (2002). Culture, identity consistency, and subjective well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *83*, 1378–1391.
- Ten Berge, M. A. & De Raad, B. (1999). Taxonomies of situations from a trait psychological perspective: A review. *European Journal of Personality*, *13*, 337–360.
- Triandis, H. C. (1972). *The Analysis of Subjective Culture*. New York: Wiley.
- Wagerman, S. A. & Funder, D. C. (2009). Personality psychology of situations. In: P. J. Corr & G. Matthews, eds. *The Cambridge Handbook of Personality Psychology*, pp. 27–42. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, M. (1922). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. Tübingen: Mohr. 2 Halbbände.