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Similar Perceptions, Similar Reactions: An Idiographic Approach to Cross-Situational Coherence

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The study provides a test of the interactionist concept of behavioral coherence across situations. Following an approach suggested by D. Magnusson and B. Ekehammer (1978, *Journal of Research in Personality*, 12, 41-48), individual correlations between self-reported behavior patterns and perceived similarity ratings across anxiety-provoking situations are obtained as measures of coherence. Unlike the Magnusson and Ekehammer study, the present measures of situation cognition and behavior are based on an *idiographic* sampling of anxiety-provoking situations. As a step toward concept-based measurement of situation cognition, further measures of perceived situational similarity are derived from the script, prototype, and social episodes models in social psychology and correlated with cross-situational similarity of behavioral profiles. It is demonstrated, in comparison with the findings of Magnusson and Ekehammer, that correlations between similarity ratings and behavior patterns increase substantially as a result of an idiographic sampling of situations. Moreover, it is shown that "script," "prototype," and "social episode" measures can be utilized to investigate the covariation between situation cognition and behavior, thus contributing to the clarification of the principles of cognitive representation of situational experience. © 1986 Academic Press, Inc.

Examining the role of the cognitive representation of situations as a mediator between objective situational properties and individual behavior is generally recognized as a central task in contemporary personality psychology (e.g., Endler & Magnusson, 1976, p. 967; Magnusson, 1974, p. 125; Mischel, 1979, p. 742). However, little empirical research is available to date which locates the problem of how individuals perceive and *assign meaning* to the situations they encounter and respond to within the context of personality theory (Pervin, 1981).

One of the few studies examining the cross-situational correspondence

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between situation perception and behavior was conducted by Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978). Starting from the interactionist tenet that "on the situation side, the psychological meaning of situations for the individual is the important determining factor" (Magnusson & Endler, 1977, p. 4), they investigated the question of "Similar Situations—Similar Behaviors?" by looking for intraindividual correspondence between situation perception and behavior across a range of anxiety-provoking situations.

The present research provides a conceptual extension of Magnusson and Ekehammar's (1978) idiographic approach in that it introduces an individual sampling of anxiety-provoking situations for each person. Furthermore, it stresses the limitations of global, atheoretical ratings of situational similarity as measures of situation cognition and provides tentative evidence in favor of theoretically founded measures of situational meaning.

Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) examined the congruence between how individuals perceive situations and how they actually react in the same situations. To this end, they investigated the covariation between situation perception and behavior across a range of 12 anxiety-provoking situations covering 4 types of stressful situations. Individual correlations between perceptual similarity and similarity in reaction profiles (as expressed by four different indices) were computed for each of the 39 subjects. Magnusson and Ekehammar found that for the four indices of profile similarity, between 67 and 85% of the intrasubject correlations were in the expected direction, and 33 to 44%, respectively, were statistically significant. The average correlations between situation perception and situation reaction ranged from .11 to .17.

Despite these fairly low correlations, Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) conclude that their findings corroborate the interactionist emphasis on the subjective meaning of situations as determinants of behavioral regularities. Their study is one of the few to address empirically the interactionist reconceptualization of the consistency issue in which the situation is explicitly recognized as an integral part of personality theory.

The interactionist model of personality dismisses the concepts of absolute and relative consistency which were at the core of traditional, trait-based approaches to personality. Instead, the concept of *coherence* is introduced, which postulates that a person's behavior "changes from situation to situation in a lawful, consistent, and idiographically predictable way" (Magnusson, 1976, p. 257). The most important component of this reconceptualization of the consistency issue is the term "idiographically predictable." The implication is that any analysis of behavioral coherence in terms of the above definition must satisfy at least two basic conditions: (1) First, a methodology is required which allows inferences regarding individual persons independent of sample or population norms. This position is also strongly advocated by Lamiell (1981) in his "idiothetic

model of personality.” (2) Second, the interactionist emphasis on the “psychological situation” implies that the situations studied have to be subjectively meaningful in terms of the individual’s experience.

RATIONALE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

While Magnusson and Ekehammar did take the first requirement into account by using an individual correlational approach, they failed to meet the second one. Their study was idiographic to the extent that individual correlations were obtained for each subject. However, a strong nomothetic element was retained, since they presented an identical set of situations to all subjects, thus treating situations as having the same meaning across subjects.

The present study suggests a more adequate idiographic test of the interactionist notion of coherence. This is done by sampling a personally relevant set of anxiety-provoking situations for each subject to form the basis of the cognitive and behavioral measures. Again, the prediction is that a person’s behavior will be similar across situations to the extent that these situations are perceived (i.e., cognitively represented) to be similar.

Although an increase in covariation between situation cognition and behavior may be expected by the use of personally relevant stimulus situations, important conceptual problems still remain to be addressed. Global rating scale measures of perceived situational similarity are uninformative in terms of the structural principles underlying the cognitive organization of situational experience. What are the properties that people have in mind when they rate two situations as being similar or different? To what extent are different cognitive representations of situations related to behavioral profiles in these situations?

Thus, despite the prominent role that the perceived situation occupies in the interactionist model of personality, it still requires considerable conceptual analysis. Rather than relying on global, atheoretical measures of perceived situational similarity, theoretical conceptualizations of situation cognition are required which specify principles of the cognitive organization of situational experience. As a first step toward this task, concept-based measures were derived in the present study from three recent theoretical models developed in cognitive social psychology: the *prototype* approach to situation categorization (Cantor et al., 1982), the *social episodes* model (Forgas, 1982), and the *script* approach to the cognitive representation of dynamic event sequences (Abelson, 1981).

None of these models of situation cognition was originally developed to address the issue of cross-situational coherence. However, they specify principles of perceived situational similarity which may be applied to this problem. They are used in the present study to provide different measures of situation cognition which are then correlated with behavioral

similarities across situations. Only those aspects of the three models which are most central to the problem at hand are discussed.

Three Models of Situation Cognition

Developed as a model of natural language classification, the *prototype approach* defines the similarity between objects or instances of a given category by the number of characteristic features which the objects or instances share in common. Situational similarity may thus be conceptualized as the result of a comparison process in which the person looks at the characteristic features of the respective situations. The greater the number of shared features, the higher the similarity.

Cantor, Mischel, and Schwartz (1982) conducted the first study applying the prototype approach to the categorization of social situations. They presented subjects with a taxonomy of four broad situation categories (social, cultural, stressful, and ideological) specified on three levels of abstraction (e.g., being in a social situation, being at a party, being at a birthday party). For each situation category, subjects generated lists of characteristic attributes from which the category prototypes—defined as consensual feature lists—were derived. Comparing the feature lists of different situations, Cantor et al. (1982) demonstrated that situations in each of the four broad classes of the taxonomy were regarded as significantly more similar to other situations within their class than to situations belonging to one of the remaining three general categories. In contrast to direct similarity ratings, this approach provides information about the criteria by which situations are perceived to be similar.

The *social episode model* (Forgas, 1979, 1982) is concerned with discovering the dimensions underlying both individual and cultural representations of stereotypic interaction sequences. The cognitive structure of this implicit situational knowledge is represented in the episode space. The major empirical objective of episode research therefore lies in the modeling of consensual episode spaces.

In the standard empirical paradigm, episodes or situations—preselected for a particular social group on the basis of weekly diaries—are rated on a number of bipolar evaluative attributes which are in turn subjected to multidimensional analysis. Situational similarity is defined in terms of the overall similarity between attribute profiles for the respective situations. Employing this paradigm, Forgas and his co-workers have explored the cognitive representations of aggressive episodes and formal vs informal episodes as well as differences in episode cognition between housewives and students, members of a university department, and members of different sports teams.

Finally, the *script concept* postulates that situational information is stored and processed in the form of scripts which individuals develop in the course of their experiences with the situation. This scripted knowledge

specifies "appropriate sequences of events in a particular context" (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 41). According to the script model, social situations are cognitively represented in terms of characteristic (inter-) actions rather than characteristic features or attributes.

Empirical studies of the cognitive representation of scripted knowledge in which subjects were required to reproduce event sequences demonstrated that people not only show a strong tendency toward false recognition of nonmentioned but highly central events, but also tend to rearrange a distorted causal ordering of events when reproducing script-based stories. Due to its dynamic nature, scripted knowledge specifies action rules for appropriate behavior which can be used directly as guidelines for individual behavior. According to the script model of cognitive representation, situations are similar to the extent that they share characteristic actions and events (Abelson, 1981, p. 725).

Based on the reconceptualization of the consistency issue presented above, the present study examines the proposition that *there is a systematic cross-situational covariation between situation cognition and behavior*, which can be operationally defined in terms of the intraindividual correlation between similarity profiles in the perception of and behavior in different situations.

By introducing measures of situation cognition which are derived from theoretical models of social cognition, the present study aims to contribute to a conceptual analysis of the *psychological meaning of situations for the individual*. Each of the three models described above focuses on different aspects of the cognitive representation of situational experience.

The prototype approach is primarily concerned with the aspect of situation categorization. According to this model, situations are classified into natural (i.e., fuzzy) categories based on a comparison of their characteristic features. Perceived situational similarity is regarded as a function of the amount of feature overlap between the respective situations. The emphasis is on how different situations within a given category (e.g., the category of anxiety-provoking situations) are related to one another, rather than on the different types of features (persons, objects, behaviors, norms, etc.) by which situations are characterized.

Unlike the prototype model, the script approach emphasizes the importance of a particular class of features, namely characteristic actions and events, which define a situation. According to this view, the cognitive representation of situations in terms of causal and temporal sequences of events provides a frame of reference on which subsequent experiences of the same or similar situations can rely. Accordingly, the script model is more concerned with specific elements of situation cognition and their causal and temporal ordering *within* the situation. At the same time, the issue of similarity *between* different situations is of less theoretical concern

to the script approach. As an operational definition of similarity between scripts, the idea of feature overlap is adapted from the prototype model.

Finally, the social episodes model stresses the dimensionality of situation cognition which is reflected in the concept of "episode space." Empirical studies modeling the episode spaces of various social groups suggest that situations are represented in terms of the affective, emotional reactions they elicit rather than being characterized by a set of objective, observable characteristics or events. Situational similarity is conceptualized by the social episode model as a function of the dimensional structure underlying the cognitive representation of situational experience. Thus, a major empirical objective of the social episode approach is to identify and interpret the relevant dimensions which determine the psychological meaning of situations for the individual.

Due to these differences in theoretical focus, the measures of situation cognition derived from each of the three models are likely to be differentially related to behavioral patterns across situations. Thus, the present study aims to provide a first step toward exploring the differences between the three structural models in terms of their covariation with behavior across situations.

METHOD

Sample

Twenty-five psychology undergraduates participated in the study on a voluntary basis. Two subjects had to be excluded later because of incomplete data.

Procedure

Overview. Subjects were required to attend three separate sessions over a period of 3 weeks. In the first session, subjects were asked to generate a list of anxiety-provoking situations which they had encountered in the past. In the second session, they described their behavioral responses to each of these situations. In the final session, the cognitive representations of the same set of situations were measured.

Eliciting anxiety-provoking situations. To sample individually valid anxiety-provoking situations from each participant, subjects were asked to list specific situations from their personal experience for each of four general categories: social evaluation, physical danger, ambiguous, and interpersonal situations. These four categories were taken from Endler's (1980) multidimensional model of anxiety. The first two situations named for each category were selected for the subsequent behavioral and cognitive measures, resulting in a total set of eight situations for each participant. Among the situations listed were, for example, "Being in a car which skids on a wet road in fog" (physical danger), "Making a contribution to a seminar" (social evaluation), "Visiting the doctor" (interpersonal), and "Meeting relatives after several years" (ambiguous).

Behavioral measure. The "Present Affect Reactions Questionnaire" (PARQ, Endler, 1980, 1983), a well-established self-report measure consisting of 20 reaction scales, was used to obtain behavior patterns for each person with respect to the eight situations.¹ Ten of the PARQ items address autonomic arousal (e.g., "heart beats faster," "feel tense"). Ten items refer to cognitive-worry responses (e.g., "unable to focus on task," "feel

¹ Thanks are due to N. S. Endler who kindly provided a copy of the PARQ.

incompetent"). Subjects indicated on a 5-point scale the extent to which they showed a particular response in each situation.

Cognitive measures. Overall similarity ratings were obtained from each subject for all 28 possible pairs of situations included in the behavioral measure. Ratings were made on the 5-point scale used by Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978), ranging from (0) *not at all similar* to (4) *completely similar*.

To arrive at measures of the cognitive representation of anxiety-provoking situations derived from the "script," "prototype," and "social episode" models, subjects were divided into three groups.

Of the 25 subjects, 9 completed the "prototype" measure. They were instructed to describe each situation in terms of its characteristic features. The following example from the "physical danger" category illustrates the type of data generated by this measure: One subject who had named the situation *Coming near to an accident* described it in terms of the following characteristic features: "noise, panic, rush, crowded cars, hostility of other drivers, traffic signals, feeling nauseous." Subjects were free to include as many features as they considered relevant to characterize the situation comprehensively.

Eight subjects provided the "social episode" data by rating each situation on 7 bipolar adjective scales which had consistently emerged from Forgas' work as central descriptive features of social episodes (e.g., Forgas, 1983): "formal-informal," "simple-complex," "constrained-unconstrained," "predictable-unpredictable," "know how to behave-don't know how to behave," "involved-uninvolved," and "intimate-nonintimate." Each adjective pair was presented to the subjects on a 7-point scale.

Finally, eight subjects completed the "script" measure by writing detailed accounts of the course of events in each situation. For example, one subject who had named *Doing a psychology test* as a "social evaluation situation" generated the following script: "I went into the room. The test was explained. I did the test. They opened the door and let me out. I went away." Subjects were instructed to include as many single actions and events as they considered necessary for someone trying to reenact the situation.

RESULTS

In accordance with the idiographic methodology of the present study, the data were analyzed individually for each subject. The first part of the data analysis was concerned with establishing similarity patterns between the eight situations on the basis of the behavioral ratings and the cognitive measures.

To arrive at a measure of *behavioral similarity*, euclidean distances between the eight situations across the 20 PARQ reaction scales were computed for each subject. The euclidean distance index was the first and most comprehensive of four indices used by Magnusson and Ekehammar to compute the similarity between behavioral profiles across situations (cf. Magnusson & Ekehammar, 1978, p. 44). By using this index, the results of the present study are immediately comparable to the findings of their investigation. In the present analysis of individual reaction profiles, euclidean distances between each possible pair of situations were computed across the 20 reaction scales, resulting in a rank order of behavioral similarity for the 28 situation pairs.

The same procedure was adopted to arrive at an index of cognitive similarity based on the *social episode measure*. Euclidean distances between each of the 28 situation pairs were computed across the 7 bipolar adjective

scales on which each situation had been rated. Thus, a rank order of situational similarity was obtained for each subject.

Cognitive similarity based on the *prototype measure* was established by computing the amount of overlap in terms of shared features between the feature lists generated by each subject for the eight situations. Feature overlap between each pair of situations was defined by the number of shared features in relation to the total number of features for the two situations according to the following formula:²

$$r(i, j) = \frac{nc(i, j)}{\sqrt{n(i) \times n(j)}}$$

A stringent criterion of feature overlap was adopted, whereby only those characteristics which were worded in exactly the same way were counted as "shared features." This analysis provided individual rank orders of perceived similarity derived from the prototype model.

The pairwise similarity between the *scripts* generated by each subject in this group for his/her eight situations was defined, as in the prototype measure, by the amount of overlap between the scripts generated for each situation. Again, only those actions and events which were identically worded were regarded as "shared elements."

The global ratings of perceived similarity between each possible pair of situations provided an additional rank order of perceived similarity for each subject.

As a result of the above analyses, three similarity rank orders of the 28 situation pairs were obtained for each subject: one reflecting behavioral similarity based on the PARQ ratings, one reflecting global similarity perceptions based on the rating scale measure, and one based on the more complex measure of cognitive similarity (either scripts, prototypes, or social episodes).

To test the proposed covariation between situation cognition and behavior across situations, individual correlations were calculated between the behavioral and the cognitive similarity rank orders. Two correlation coefficients were computed for each subject: the correlation between behavior and global cognitive similarity ratings *and* the correlation between behavior and script, prototype, or social episode measures, respectively.

Table 1 presents a condensed table of the results pertaining to the correlations between global similarity ratings and reaction profiles. These data are directly comparable to the Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) findings.

The obtained average correlation of .37 represents an increase of .22

² $r(i, j)$ = similarity between situations i and j ; varies between 0 and 1. $nc(i, j)$ = number of shared features for situations i and j ; $n(i)$ = number of features for situation i ; $n(j)$ = number of features for situation j .

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SITUATION PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR: SUMMARIZED FINDINGS

Average correlation between similarity ratings and behavior	$r = .37$	(.15)
Average z-transformed correlations between similarity ratings and behavior	$r = .40$	(—)
Percentage of correlations in expected direction	91	(77)
Percentage of significant correlations in expected direction	65	(44)

Note. Figures in parentheses refer to data reported by Magnusson and Ekehammar, 1978, based on the euclidean distance index of profile similarity.

over Magnusson and Ekehammar's figure of .15, which was based on an identical set of situations for all subjects. Likewise, the percentage of positive correlations between situation perception and behavioral profiles increased from 77 to 91%, and the percentage of significant correlations increased from 44 to 65%. Thus it is evident that the correspondence between situation perception and behavioral profiles established in the present study on the basis of the individual sampling of situations is considerably higher than that obtained by Magnusson and Ekehammar with respect to a nomothetic set of situations.

Table 2 provides the individual correlations for each subject between global perceptual similarity and behavior and between the concept-based measure of perceptual similarity and behavior.

Both global ratings and more sophisticated measures of perceptual similarity correlate significantly with behavior for most of the subjects. A substantial proportion of the coefficients obtained exceeds the "magic" limit of .30 for "personality coefficients" identified by Mischel (1968). Differences between the average correlations for global and concept-based measures were nonsignificant for each of the three groups (prototypes, social episodes, and scripts).

DISCUSSION

The present data clearly support the hypothesis that cognition-behavior correlations are substantially higher when subjects rate idiographically sampled situations in contrast to situations presented by investigators such as in the Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) study. To the extent that situations represent valid samples from a person's individual experience, congruence between perceived situational meanings and behavioral patterns across situations is shown to increase. Congruence in this sense reflects precisely the systematic, though variable, relationship between situation perception and behavior postulated in the definition of behavioral coherence quoted above: Similarity of behavioral patterns

TABLE 2
INDIVIDUAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN SITUATION PERCEPTION AND BEHAVIOR

Subject	Prototypes	
	Prototype measure/ behavior	Similarity rating/ behavior
1	.33*	.41*
2	.63***	.67***
3	.64***	.49**
4	.13	-.01
5	.49**	.56***
6	.56***	.63***
7	.32*	.34*
8	.42*	.38*
9	.28	-.01
	$\bar{x}$ (z transf) 0.46	0.43
Social episodes		
	Episode measure/ behavior	Similarity rating/ behavior
10	.32*	.28
11	.53**	.52**
12	-.36*	.29
13	.54**	.36*
14	.52**	.12
15	.07	.64***
16	.24	.32*
	$\bar{x}$ (z transf) 0.29	0.39
Scripts		
	Script measure/ behavior	Similarity rating/ behavior
17	.35*	.27
18	.36*	.38*
19	.32*	.12
20	.23	.42*
21	.42*	.25
22	.56***	.63***
23	.61***	.49**
	$\bar{x}$ (z transf) 0.44	0.39

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

is expected to be low with respect to situations which are perceived as being different and is expected to rise as a function of the increase in perceived situational similarity. According to this view, low cross-situational correlations between behavioral profiles must not be interpreted in terms of a lack of behavioral consistency but rather as a person's flexible interaction with his or her environment which is mediated by the cognitive representation of situational cues.

An inspection of the individual correlations presented in Table 2 shows that the strength of the relationship between situation cognition and behavior varies considerably among subjects. In a conventional nomothetic study on behavioral consistency, this variation—which is retained in the present study due to its idiographic methodology—would be no longer discernible and would influence the overall pattern of results in such a way that meaningful conclusions about individual subjects were not feasible (cf. the demonstration of this point by Lamiell, 1982, pp. 7–11).

The present findings thus strengthen the argument in favor of an idiographic approach to investigate behavioral coherence in the interactional framework. Due to the identical *format* of the measures for all subjects, findings are immediately comparable across subjects in terms of the proposed structural qualities linking situation perception to behavior, while the idiographic sampling of situations for each participant is significant in ensuring the validity of the stimulus material. This conceptual distinction between processes and contents of personality functioning is also emphasized by Bem (1983). Rather than regarding nomothetic and idiographic approaches to the study of personality as both theoretical and methodological alternatives (e.g., Paunonen & Jackson, 1985, p. 487), he recommends that one should “formalize in nomothetic ways some of the *processes* of personality while treating the idiographic *content* of personality as extratheoretical.” (Bem, 1983, p. 216).

While the use of global ratings of situational similarity is adequate to demonstrate the link between situation perception and behavior postulated by the interactionist concept of coherence, it fails to address other important conceptual issues: how an individual's experience of situations is cognitively organized and how different forms of cognitive representation affect the link between situation cognition and behavior. This issue constituted the second objective of the present research. The question was examined whether more complex measures of situational similarity could be developed from recent theoretical models of situation cognition and applied to an idiographic analysis of cognition-behavior relationships across situations. Three such concept-based measures were utilized in the present study: a *prototype* measure conceptualizing perceived situational similarity in terms of shared characteristic features, a *script* measure defining situational similarity in terms of shared actions and event sequences, and finally a measure of *social episode* cognition in which situational similarity is

established through subjects' ratings of situations on a number of evaluative dimensions.

Script, prototype, and social episode measures of situation cognition are shown to be applicable to the issue of cross-situational coherence in that each measure is significantly correlated to behavior for the majority of subjects. Although it would not appear warranted to conclude, on the basis of the present data, that the more complex measures of situation cognition produce higher levels of cognition-behavior covariations than global ratings, they were at least shown to be equally well suited to reflect cross-situational coherence. Their main advantage over global rating measures is that they illuminate the structural principles by which situations are cognitively construed as similar or different. A clearer understanding of these principles is essential to the task of predicting individual behavior as a function of the dynamic interaction between person and situation.

However, due to their exploratory nature, the present findings constitute no more than tentative evidence, suggesting that each of the three models specifies a mode of interpreting situations which is meaningfully linked to behavioral profiles in these situations. Further investigation is needed into the nature of situation cognition in relation to behavioral coherence across situations. To address this task on the basis of the rationale outlined above, a more extensive study is presently being conducted which concentrates on two methodological improvements: (a) it includes intraindividual comparisons between the three cognitive measures of scripts, prototypes, and social episodes by presenting all three measures to each subject; on the basis of the intercorrelations between the three measures it will then be possible to assess the extent to which each measure addresses different aspects of situational similarity; (b) it employs behavioral measures which are able to cover more complex reactions to and behavior in stressful situations.

In their paper on the "consistency of behavioral inconsistencies," Kreitler and Kreitler (1983) take a highly critical view of personality psychologists' preoccupation with cross-situational consistency at the expense of the more general task of investigating lawfulness of behavior. In discovering such lawfulness, the present findings suggest that the subjective and possibly idiosyncratic meaning assigned to situations provides crucial information about the interpretative framework guiding an individual's behavior.

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