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Situational similarity and behavioral consistency: Subjective, objective, variable-centered, and person-centered approaches[☆]

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Abstract

Personality psychology has long recognized the importance of situations for determining behavior, but little research has directly examined the degree to which the cross-situational consistency of behavior is associated with the similarity of situations. In two studies, participants ($n = 138$ & 116) engaged in several dyadic interactions, and their behavior was coded from a videotaped record. Behavioral consistency was examined in terms of single behaviors and person-centered behavioral profiles. Addressing *subjective* situational similarity, Study 1 showed that participants who rated the two situations as relatively similar were relatively consistent in their behavior across the situations. Addressing *objective* situational similarity, defined as the degree to which situations shared common elements, Study 2 showed that participants were more behaviorally consistent across similar pairs of situations than across dissimilar pairs. In addition, Study 2 found that behaviors that are relatively automatic and impulsive were more consistent than behaviors that are more controlled and cognitively mediated. Regardless of how situational similarity or behavioral consistency were operationalized, greater similarity was related to greater consistency.

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1. Introduction

The relative influence of situations and persons on behavior, like the relative influence of nature and nurture on personality, is an enduring issue. Although personality psychologists have traditionally been more interested in the person side, the psychological literature includes a vast, if disorganized, amount of evidence that situations are important determinants of what people do. Most published (i.e., successful) social psychological experiments demonstrate how a manipulated situational variable can cause behavior to vary across conditions, and thousands of such studies show the behavioral effects of variables such as incentive, degree of hurry, proximity of authority, number of bystanders, and nearly anything else one could imagine. The typical sizes of the effects of these variables on behavior are in a range corresponding to a correlation coefficient of about .30 to .40 (Funder & Ozer, 1983), which is substantial (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). However, these studies are not really about situations per se; typically the situational variables are manipulated only in order to test one or another social psychological theory (e.g., cognitive dissonance, self-perception). The behavioral dependent variables in these studies are selected in a similarly ad hoc manner; their inclusion is designed to test theoretical predictions rather than be broadly informative about behavior (Funder, 2001). The result of this neglect of systematic examination of situational and behavioral variables is that only a few studies have attempted to address directly the “links between situational similarity and consistent individual differences across situations” and the expected effect has been “rarely attained” (Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1993, p. 1023).

This issue deserves more attention than it has received, because a *minimalist* implication of the idea that behavior is to any degree a function of the situation, is that behavior should be more consistent across two situations to the degree they are similar. Several reasons can be suggested for why this simple, seeming-truism has been so empirically elusive. First, as mentioned above, the focus of experimental social psychology on isolated aspects of situations and single behaviors has entailed a neglect of broad conceptualizations of situations and comprehensive measurements of behavior. A byproduct of the focused pursuit of answers to specific theoretical questions has been an unfortunate lack of basic descriptive data in both social and personality psychology (Greenwald, 2001). An assessment of the basic question of whether behavior is generally consistent across situations to the extent they are generally similar, requires a broad rather than narrow focus on both situations and behavior.

A second reason for a lack of research on this issue is that, in order to address issues of behavioral consistency, it is necessary to observe each research participant directly and in more than one situation. Both practices are rare, probably because of their expense and difficulty. Only a handful of studies have directly observed a broad range of behaviors of participants in any situation, fewer still in more than one. Far more common are studies in which single behaviors are assessed or in which participants describe on self-report questionnaires how they have behaved or would behave.

The third and perhaps most important reason for a lack of research on the relationship between situational similarity and behavioral consistency is that the

methodological and conceptual issues involved are more complex than they might at first appear. It is no simple matter to decide which behaviors to observe and code and the typical solution has been to restrict observation to just a few behaviors, or even one, rather than attempt any kind of comprehensive assessment. For example, Lord (1982) assessed six kinds of behavior (e.g., desk neatness, lecture note completeness) all deemed potentially relevant to conscientiousness, and Shoda et al. (1993) assessed two behaviors (aggressive and prosocial verbal behavior) deemed relevant to “demand.” The dimensions of situations considered have been similarly specific. Situations have been characterized in terms of the demands they make (Shoda et al., 1993), the emotions they elicit (Pervin, 1977; Tomkins, 1962), the behaviors deemed appropriate in them (Price & Bouffard, 1974), their relevance to conscientiousness (Lord, 1982), and the degree to which they satisfy personal needs or goals (Lord, 1982; Pace & Stern, 1958). Each of these dimensions is reasonable and useful, but also provides only a limited assessment of the degree to which two or more situations might be considered “similar.” An even more basic issue is whether situational similarity should be assessed subjectively or objectively. Is situational similarity an irreducible aspect of an individual’s phenomenology, or can situations be meaningfully compared along concrete, identifiable dimensions?

The purpose of the present study is to re-examine the occasionally addressed question of whether behavior is consistent across situations to the extent that the situations are similar. In pursuit of this situational similarity effect, the present study takes a general approach to both behavioral and situational assessment. Rather than observing and measuring a few specially chosen behaviors relevant to a single theoretical issue, it assesses social behavior as comprehensively as the present state of the art will allow (Funder, Furr, & Colvin, 2000). It addresses the issues of situational similarity and behavioral consistency in a correspondingly broad manner, as multiple conceptualizations of each are examined. In addition, it directly examines real behavior in real situations, as opposed to hypothetical behavior in imagined situations, as represented by much of this literature.

1.1. Approaches to situational similarity

The concept of situational similarity can be approached in two basic ways, subjective and objective, reflecting the classic distinction between the situation as it is perceived by a particular person as opposed to the situation as it is in reality (Barker & Wright, 1951; Magnusson, 1981a; Murray, 1938).

1.1.1. Subjective approach

The subjective approach can be traced back at least as far as Gordon Allport (1937), who observed, “similarity is *personal*” (p. 283, emphasis in the original). More recently, Bem and Allen (1974) claimed that “the classification of situations must be an integral part of any assessment procedure; moreover...such classifications will have to be in terms of the individual’s phenomenology, not the investigator’s” (p. 518). Mischel (1977) agreed, stating that “clearly different persons may group and encode the same events and behaviors in different ways...a stimulus

perceived as ‘dangerous’ or ‘threatening’ by one person may be seen as ‘challenging’ or ‘thrilling’ by the one next to him” (p. 342).

From the subjective perspective, situational similarity is the degree to which a person sees or experiences two situations as similar. Various theories in personality and social psychology emphasize the link between peoples’ interpretations of their environment and their behavior. Allport recognized that personality traits make different patterns of situational stimuli “functionally equivalent” (Allport, 1937, p. 237), and recent social-cognitive perspectives on the interactionist approach to personality echo Allport’s suggestion that that attributes of people, whether labeled “dispositions,” “schemata,” or even “traits” influence how people perceive and interpret social situations (e.g., Krahé, 1990). Extraverts are likely to see many situations as social opportunities. Neurotics are likely to see many situations as potentially threatening or anxiety arousing. Like Allport, social cognitive perspectives also recognize that one’s behavior is influenced by one’s perceptions about the rules, expectations, and norms that characterize the situation.

Though the subjective similarity hypothesis seems theoretically and intuitively compelling, it has not been extensively empirically evaluated through direct behavioral observation. For example, Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) asked participants to rate the similarity of several pairs of hypothetical anxiety-arousing situations and to describe the pattern of reactions that they would likely show in each situation. Confirming expectations, when participants rated a pair of situations as relatively similar, their patterns of self-reported reactions were relatively similar. Using a comparable methodology of self-reported reactions to hypothetical situations, other research has supported the subjective situational similarity hypothesis (Klirs & Revelle, 1986; Krahé, 1990). Lord (1982) found that participants who perceived pairs of situations to have similar implications for conscientiousness were observed to exhibit a more stable level of this behavior across the situations than were participants who perceived the situations to be relatively dissimilar in this respect. This study provided an important advance by moving beyond the self-reported behavior typical of other studies, but is obviously limited in its specific focus on one class of behavior. The present research will range more broadly, surveying a wide array of behaviors relevant to everyday social interactions (Funder et al., 2000), and employing three different ways of assessing behavioral consistency (Furr, Funder, & Ozer, 2003). In Study 1, we adopt a subjective treatment of similarity by defining it in terms of the degree to which each person uniquely judges two situations to be similar.

1.1.2. Objective approach

The subjective approach to situational similarity has some obvious merits and has been widely endorsed, but it is important to note that the approach assumes rather than demonstrates that similarity is primarily a matter of idiosyncratic perception. Even Allport, who vehemently attacked the “doctrine of identical elements” (that equated similarity with the number of concrete elements two exemplars have in common) and was a vigorous proponent of idiographic analysis, acknowledged the existence of “some basic modes of adjustment that from individual to individual are *approximately* the same” (1937, p. 298). On a theoretical level, even though the range

of potential idiosyncratic perceptions is unlimited in principle, in practice it seems likely most people would deem some situations as more similar than others. For example, two situations that both contain one's best friend may generally be seen as more similar than settings one of which contains the friend, and the other a perfect stranger. This idea of consensual similarity is implicitly acknowledged by approaches that employ ratings of general attributes of situations, such as the emotions they elicit or the perceived appropriateness of behaviors, as summarized above. But even consensual ratings beg the question of just what *concrete* aspects of situations lead them to be generally responded to as similar or different.

Moreover, the subjective situation may not be the whole story—people may not be fully aware of the situation or its effects on their behavior. Some real yet subtle aspects of a situation may escape a person's notice but have real effects on the person's behavior. For example, a cornerstone of behavioral psychotherapy is the identification of environmental influences on clients' maladaptive behavioral patterns. Behavioral therapists may not be surprised to find that a client fails to recognize important environmental forces that shape his or her behavior (Masters, Burish, Hollon, & Rimm, 1987). Or consider a more prototypically psychoanalytic situation in which a man repeatedly and unconsciously seeks out women similar to his mother, thus creating relational situations that are similar in ways that escape his awareness but that may have powerful effects (Westen, 1998). Moreover, at a very literal level, some behaviors are simply not possible in some situations. No matter how strongly the teenager wants to believe it, the tennis racquet is not a guitar and the family dog is not a big-time record producer. Unfortunately for the teenager, his bedroom simply does not afford "jamming for a record producer."

Finally, the objective approach allows experimental manipulation or definition of situational similarity, at least at an aggregate level. As researchers, we can create a pair of situations in which a participant is with a stranger in both situations or a pair in which the participant is with a stranger in one situation but not the other. We may not know each participant's subjective interpretation of each situation, but we can—or may wish to—assert that the pair of situations in which the stranger is present is more similar than the pair of situations in which the stranger is present in only one (similar at least on the variable of "presence vs. absence of a stranger"). Whether this degree or kind of similarity has implications for the consistency of participants' behavior is an empirical question. If the comments by Allport, Bem, and Mischel quoted in the previous section were taken literally, one might expect that objective similarity will have little relation to behavioral consistency because the perception of similarity is so idiosyncratic; if instead situational similarity is to some degree a matter of objective reality, then it might be possible to show that behavior tends to be more consistent across situations that are similar on one or more objective dimensions regardless of whatever idiosyncratic perceptions might be present.

Like the subjective similarity hypothesis, the objective situational similarity hypothesis has not been extensively empirically evaluated with directly observed and coded behavior. Klirs and Revelle (1986) and Lord (1982) defined "nomothetic" similarity as situational similarity derived from aggregated, group-level interpretations. Klirs and Revelle found self-reported behaviors to be more similar across similar pairs of

hypothetical situations than across dissimilar pairs, but Lord found no evidence for a relationship between behavioral consistency and nomothetic situational similarity. More recently, Shoda et al. (1993) found evidence for a relationship between behavioral consistency and situational similarity, with similarity defined by the degree to which situations were rated as making similar demands on children's psychological competencies. These results were essentially replicated by Shoda, Mischel, and Wright (1994) using a slightly different operationalization of situational similarity. Although these studies provide important advances in our theoretical understanding of cross-situational behavioral consistency, they are limited in that they include only two or five behaviors (Shoda et al., 1993, 1994, respectively) and they examine situational similarity effects in regards to only one kind of behavioral consistency. In Study 2, we adopt an objective treatment of similarity by defining it in terms of whether or not two situations share one of two basic elements—the same task or the same partner (similar) versus different task and different partner (dissimilar). In addition, we observe over 60 behaviors and we examine several importantly different kinds of behavioral consistency.

1.2. Approaches to behavioral consistency

Like situational similarity, the concept of behavioral consistency can also be approached in at least two basic ways. The variable-centered approach defines consistency as a property of each behavior, and the person-centered approach defines consistency as a property of each individual. These two conceptualizations of consistency are independent of each other—in one data set, behavior might be consistent from one conceptualization but be apparently inconsistent from the other. A more complete understanding of the association between situational similarity and behavioral consistency requires examination of various conceptualizations of both similarity and consistency.

1.2.1. Variable-centered approach

For the most part, research on behavioral consistency has been dominated by a *variable-centered* or nomothetic conceptualization. Focusing on one behavior measured across persons and situations, the variable-centered approach addresses questions such as “if Margie is more talkative than Ann when being introduced to a stranger, will she also be more talkative than Ann at a study session with a friend?” This conceptualization of consistency can be described as the “consistency of individual differences across situations” (Ozer, 1986, p. 34) or the degree to which the rank order of participants on a behavior remains the same across two situations. The variable-centered form of consistency is closely associated with traditional trait approaches to personality and was examined by Shoda et al. (1993, 1994) in relation to situational similarity.¹

¹ Mischel and Shoda (e.g., Shoda et al., 1994) have articulated another conceptualization of consistency in which a given behavior is measured for one participant in a number of situations at two points in time, and the correlation between the participants' scores from one time and their scores from the other is interpreted as an indicator of consistency. This approach bypasses differences among situations.

1.2.2. *Person-centered approach*

An alternative approach can be termed idiographic, ipsative, or *person-centered*. While the variable-centered approach focuses on the consistency of individual differences on a single behavior, the person-centered approach instead focuses on the consistency of a person's overall behavioral pattern across two situations. This conceptualization addresses questions such as “if Margie is more talkative than anxious and more friendly than humorous when she was introduced to the stranger, will she exhibit the same pattern of behavior when she meets with her friend?” This form of consistency can be described as “the consistency of response profiles across situations,” and has been characterized as perhaps “the single most important type of consistency for evaluating the consistency of personality” (Ozer, 1986, p. 40). A similar conceptualization has been adopted in a few examinations of the stability of profiles of personality traits across different points of psychological development (Asendorpf & Van Aken, 1991; Block, 1971; Caspi & Herbener, 1990; Ozer & Gjerde, 1989). The person-centered form of self-reported behavioral consistency was examined by Magnusson and Ekehammar (1978) and Krahe (1990).

At the base of this person-centered approach to consistency lies the analysis of behavioral profiles, which raises a set of intriguing theoretical and methodological challenges. In the field of personality judgment, Cronbach (1955) uncovered some challenging issues arising from the analysis of profiles of traits, and similar issues arise in the analysis of profiles of behaviors. Imagine that Margie expresses more talkativeness than hostility while being introduced to a stranger and again later while studying with a friend. The degree of similarity between her two behavioral patterns, without regard for anyone else's behavior, is a measure of her *Overall consistency*. But have we learned anything distinctive about Margie from this analysis? Most people may be more talkative than hostile in most social situations, so perhaps Margie's Overall consistency is in part due to some basic behavioral pattern that most people exhibit and reveals little that is unique or distinctive about Margie. It may be possible then, that a high Overall consistency score may arise from a tendency to be consistently normative—consistently acting like people in general tend to act. Does this high Overall consistency reveal much about the individual? Such consistency may reflect general human nature or conformity to norms rather than that which makes individuals uniquely different from each other.

On the other hand, a person could be consistently counter-normative, or distinctive in particular ways. Imagine that, when introduced to a stranger, Margie is more talkative than the average person being introduced to a stranger and less hostile than the average person being introduced to a stranger. That is, she is *distinctively* talkative and non-hostile with strangers, as compared to the behavioral profile expressed by most people when they are introduced to strangers. The question is, does she show a similar profile of distinctiveness when studying with a friend? In other words, is she also more talkative and non-hostile when studying with her friend, as compared to the behavioral profile expressed by most people when they are studying with friends? The degree to which Margie exhibits similar distinctive behavioral profiles across situations may thus be an important counterpoint to her Overall person-centered consistency as discussed above. Furr et al. (2003) have found that such

Distinctive consistency is indeed meaningfully separable from Overall person-centered consistency. While Overall consistency reflects the degree to which a participant is consistent in both normative and counter-normative behavioral levels, Distinctive consistency reflects the degree to which a participant is consistent in primarily counter-normative behavioral levels.

1.3. *The current studies*

In two studies, we examine the link between situational similarity and behavioral consistency. Study 1 addresses these issues by defining similarity from a subjective perspective—participants rate the degree to which they believe that two situations in which they interact are similar. Study 2 addresses the similarity issues from a more objective perspective, defining similarity based on specific shared objective attributes of pairs of situations. In both studies, we examine actual behavior in actual situations—behavior as observed and coded from videotaped in-lab interactions—as opposed to self-reported behavior in hypothetical situations. In addition, we examine a broader range of behaviors than have been examined in previous studies of situational similarity. Both studies examine consistency from both the variable-centered and person-centered perspectives.

2. Study 1—subjective situational similarity

Are people who see a pair of situations as relatively similar more behaviorally consistent across them than people who see the pair as less similar? In a study of the subjective similarity hypothesis, participants engaged in two dyadic interactions with strangers. After the second interaction each participant rated the degree to which he or she perceived the two situations to be similar to each other. Thus this pair of situations, although objectively quite similar in that each participant interacted with an opposite-sex stranger, may vary considerably *between* participants in terms of subjective similarity.

2.1. *Method*

2.1.1. *Participants*

A total of 164 Harvard University undergraduates (82 Females, 82 Males) engaged in a series of data collection procedures, including two videotaped social interactions. All targets were paid for their participation. Complete data was obtained for 138 participants (70 females, 68 males).²

² This study is based on data collected from 1984 to 1986 as part of the Harvard Accuracy Project. The primary focus of this project was on the factors that affect the accuracy of personality judgments. Funder and Colvin (1991) used the data set to investigate several issues related to behavioral consistency, but the questions addressed in the current have not been previously addressed, and all of the analyses are new.

2.1.2. Situations

Each target participant engaged in two dyadic interactions. Each interaction was approximately five minutes long and was videotaped with the participants' full knowledge and consent. The first interaction was a getting-acquainted situation in which two of the participants—randomly assigned, opposite-sex strangers—were seated at a couch and given five minutes alone with each other. The second interaction took place approximately one month after the first interaction and was identical to the first, except that each participant was paired with a different randomly assigned opposite-sex partner, who was also a stranger.

2.1.3. Perceived situational similarity

Immediately after the second interaction, participants rated the extent to which they found the first and second situations to be similar or different (1–7 scale, 1 = very different, 7 = very similar). This provides a simple subjective measure of situational similarity that varies among participants.

2.1.4. Behavioral data

Participants' behavior in the videotaped interactions was coded by trained research assistants using an early 62-item version of the Riverside Behavioral Q-sort (RBQ; Funder et al., 2000). The RBQ consists of items representing “mid-level” social behaviors—behaviors that are at a level of generality between narrowly defined motor activities or habits on one end and more abstract styles of behavior on the other (e.g., “Expresses sympathy towards partner,” “Expresses hostility,” “Behaves in a cheerful manner,” and “Is talkative”). To code behaviors, research assistants watched an interaction, focusing on one participant, and used the RBQ to describe the total pattern of behavior exhibited by that participant in that interaction. The format of the RBQ is a forced-choice Q-sort, in which research assistants place a specific number of cards into each of nine piles. Cards placed in category 1 indicate those behaviors that were extremely uncharacteristic of the participant in the interaction, those placed in category 9 indicate those behaviors that were extremely characteristic of the participant in the interaction, and those placed in category 5 indicate those behaviors that were neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic of the participant (see Funder & Colvin, 1991 for more detail about the behavioral interactions and the 62-item version of the RBQ).

Sets of research assistants coded each participant in an interaction. On average, six research assistants coded each interaction and their ratings were averaged for each behavior. No research assistant coded, nor even saw, a given participant in more than one interaction. Thus, at most, a research assistant could only code one half of the participants in one of the situations (since two target participants engaged in each interaction). This procedure was complicated and time consuming and demanded a large number of research assistants, but the complexity was crucial. By keeping the codings of a participants' behavioral data from one situation independent from codings of his or her behavior in every other situation, we can ensure that consistency observed in the behavioral data does not arise from idiosyncratic biases in *rater* consistency. If consistency is found for

a participant, it *cannot* be due to a rater simply basing his or her behavioral ratings in a situation on impressions formed from viewing the participant in a previous situation.

The strict coding procedure reflects a compromise. Although it ensures that any consistency observed in the data is not due to consistently idiosyncratic rater biases, it does incorporate variability among raters (many different research assistants rated many different participants) as well as variability among participants. This compromise produces some reliability estimates that are lower than typically preferred. Nevertheless, we believe that the need for “pure” consistency data outweighs the preference for extremely high reliabilities. In addition, we have retained all RBQ items in an effort to evaluate a range of behaviors that is as comprehensive as possible. Inter-rater reliability estimates varied across the RBQ items. For example, reliability estimates of behaviors coded from the first interaction ranged from .28 to .82 with a median of .65, and reliabilities in the second interaction ranged from .12 to .85 with a median of .64 (see Funder & Colvin, 1991, for more information). It can also be noted that, to the extent ratings of any variable are unreliable, it becomes more difficult to detect correlations between that variable and others—a conservative bias. For the following analyses, we eliminated the lone RBQ behavior with an average reliability below .40 across the two situations (item 47 “Seems to view interaction as sexual encounter”), leaving 61 behaviors for analyses.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Variable-centered consistency

Analysis of the link between subjective situational similarity and variable-centered behavioral consistency presents an interesting challenge. Subjective situational similarity is defined at the person level (each participant provides a similarity rating), but variable-centered consistency is defined at the sample level (the consistency correlation for a given behavior is computed across participants). At least two analytical alternatives are available to deal with this apparent mismatch between consistency and similarity. One solution would be to use moderated multiple regression, but researchers using this procedure have had little success, apparently because of entailed issues of unreliability (see Chaplin, 1997). Accordingly, we adopted an alternative procedure that we have found useful in other contexts (see Furr et al., 2003).

Asendorpf (1990) presented an index that can be used to break down the sample-level consistency correlation for a behavior into individual-level units of consistency (“individual consistency” scores):

$$ic_{pb} = 1 - \frac{(Z_{pb1} - Z_{pb2})^2}{2},$$

where ic_{pb} is person p 's individual consistency score for behavior b , and Z_{pb1} and Z_{pb2} are person p 's standardized score on behavior b in situation 1 and situation 2

Table 1
Subjective situational similarity and behavioral consistency

	Variable-centered consistency	Person-centered consistency	
		Overall	Distinctive
Correlation	.28**	.23**	.22**
95% CI	.12 ≤ ρ ≤ .43	.07 ≤ ρ ≤ .38	.06 ≤ ρ ≤ .38

Note. $n = 138$. ** $p < .01$. 95% CI = 95% Confidence interval around the correlation.

respectively. The mean of the individual consistency scores for a given behavior is equal to the cross-situational consistency correlation for that behavior.³

For each participant, we computed 61 individual consistency scores (*ic*'s)—one for each of the 61 most reliable RBQ behaviors. We then computed the mean of his or her 61 *ic*'s, representing the degree to which the participant showed consistency across all behaviors. The internal consistency reliability of this mean individual consistency score is $\alpha = .66$, with a mean (across the 138 participants) of .35 and a standard deviation of .25.

The correlation between participants' mean individual consistency scores and their similarity ratings represents the degree to which variable-centered consistency is related to subjective situational similarity. Table 1 presents these correlations and shows that participants who rated the situations as similar were indeed more behaviorally consistent across the two situations.

2.2.2. Person-centered consistency

For each participant, an Overall person-centered consistency score was computed between the two situations by correlating his or her raw, unadjusted RBQ profiles from both situations. The correlation between a participant's 61-item RBQ pattern from one situation and his or her 61-item RBQ pattern from the other situation represents the extent to which that person exhibited the same profile of behaviors across the two situations.⁴ This would tell us, for example, that Margie was more talkative than hostile in both situations. Across all participants, the mean Overall person-centered consistency correlation is .55, with a standard deviation of .21.

In addition, for each participant, a Distinctive person-centered consistency score was computed between the two situations. This was obtained through several steps. In step 1, for each of the two situations, average behavioral profiles patterns were computed across participants. These two profiles reflect the behavioral profile of

³ In addition to the individual consistency scores, we also examined normalized individual consistency scores and the absolute differences between z scores, which correct for potential skew in the distribution of original individual consistency scores (Asendorpf, 1990). Although the correlations were slightly smaller, the results were still statistically significant and not substantially altered.

⁴ There are a variety of ways to measure the similarity between two profiles (see, for example, Cattell, 1949; McCrae, 1993). Many of the differences among these different methods are minimized or negated altogether with the use of Q-sort data.

the average person in each of the two situations. We might find, for example, that the average person is more talkative than hostile in both situations. In step 2, for each participant, we obtain the participant's "distinctive" behavioral profiles in the two situations. To do this, we subtract the average behavioral profile for a situation (computed in step 1) from the participant's own behavioral profile in that situation. This step produces, for each participant in each situation, a profile of 61 deviation values representing the distinctiveness of the participant's behavioral pattern in the situation. A positive deviation value for a behavior in a participant's distinctive behavioral profile indicates that the participant exhibited the behavior to a greater degree than did the average person in that situation, a negative deviation value indicates that the participant exhibited the behavior to a lesser degree than did the average person in that situation. We might find, for example, that Margie was somewhat more talkative and less hostile than the average person in situation 1, and we might also find that she was somewhat more talkative and less hostile than the average person in situation 2. In step 3, we calculate a Distinctive consistency correlation for each participant. For each participant, we compute a correlation between the participant's distinctive behavioral profile from one situation and his or her distinctive profile from the other situation. This reflects the degree to which that participant exhibited the same pattern of distinctive behaviors across the two situations. For example, Margie's Distinctive consistency correlation of .20 indicates that the way in which she behaved distinctively in situation 1 was somewhat similar to the way in which she behaved distinctively in situation 2. Furr et al. (2003) provide more information regarding the mathematical definition of Overall and Distinctive person-centered consistency and their differences. Across all participants, the mean Distinctive person-centered consistency correlation is .38, with a standard deviation of .28. Note that Distinctive consistency tends to be lower than Overall consistency, which reflects the fact that Distinctive consistency represents the consistency of one's counter-normative behavioral tendencies and that Overall consistency represents the consistency of one's counter-normative and normative behavioral tendencies.

To assess the degree to which subjective situational similarity is associated with person-centered behavioral consistency, we computed a correlation between participants' situational similarity ratings and their two person-centered consistency scores (Overall and Distinctive). As Table 1 shows, participants did indeed show greater Overall and Distinctive person-centered consistency to the degree that they rated the situations as relatively similar.

2.3. Discussion

This study shows that both variable-centered and person-centered consistency are associated with subjective situational similarity. Of course, the non-experimental design prevents us from concluding that greater perceived similarity causes higher levels of consistency. For example, it is possible that higher levels of consistency lead one to judge two situations as relatively similar. Nevertheless, results are consistent with the perceived situational similarity hypothesis. In Study 2, we explore objective situational similarity.

3. Study 2—Objective situational similarity

Study 2 further examines the link between similarity and consistency by adopting an objective conceptualization of situational similarity and by studying a broader range of situations than in Study 1. In this study, participants interacted in six situations varying on two facets—task and partner. Many psychologically meaningful dimensions could be examined in an examination of general situational effects on behavioral consistency. But clearly, what one is supposed to be doing and who one is supposed to be doing it with can have a powerful influence on the nature of one's behavior in a given situation, and by extension the consistency of one's behavior across situations. Indeed, Magnusson (1981b) included task and partner among the set of situational characteristics that he described as “of special interest” for the description and classification of situations (p. 19). In addition, previous research has demonstrated some effects of task and partner on behavior and behavioral consistency. For example, in their exploration of situational similarity, Shoda et al. (1993) observed children in 14 camp activities (e.g., art and fishing). In addition, many studies have demonstrated the effect of partner characteristics on behavior. For example, Thorne (1987) demonstrated that one's behavior in a dyadic social interaction is likely to be different if one's partner is extraverted than if one's partner is relatively introverted, and she concluded that “the expression of a disposition creates a situation for the person who encounters it” (p. 724).

Study 2 also examines a hypothesis regarding *which behaviors* should show the situational similarity effect. Shoda et al. (1993) found that aggressive verbal behavior showed a situational similarity effect but that prosocial verbal behavior did not. Their interpretation of this finding is that automatic, impulsive, and reactive behaviors, such as aggressive talk, are strongly tied to situational stimuli and thus likely to demonstrate a situational similarity effect. Conversely, more controlled or cognitively mediated behaviors, such as prosocial talk, are not as strongly tied to situational stimuli and thus unlikely to demonstrate a situational similarity effect. The distinction between automatic and controlled behaviors reflects a broader distinction in dual-processing theories of cognitive science (e.g., Bargh & Ferguson, 2000; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Epstein, 2003). To our knowledge, this interesting finding reported by Shoda et al. has not been replicated. The lack of replication is particularly problematic, since there was only one exemplar of each type of behavior, and type of behavior (automatic versus controlled) was confounded with social desirability. In the current study, we examine a large set of behaviors, and we disentangle the two behavioral dimensions—automatic versus controlled, and desirable versus undesirable.

In the current study, we observed participants engaging in each of three fundamental social tasks with each of two different partners. Rather than defining similarity from the perspective of each participant as in Study 1, we here define situational similarity as the degree to which a pair of situations share elements of one of these two facets.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

A total of 184 University of California, Riverside undergraduates (92 females, 92 males) participated in several stages of data collection. In addition, they each recruited a same-sex close acquaintance to join them in videotaped interactions. All participants were paid for their involvement. The current study involves data from six in-lab videotaped dyadic interactions, and complete data was obtained for 116 target participants (64 females, 52 males).⁵

3.1.2. Situations

Each target participant engaged in six dyadic interactions, each of which was approximately five minutes long and was videotaped with the participants' full knowledge and consent. The situations differed from each other on two facets—partner and task. The first interaction was an unstructured task in which two participants were seated at a couch and given five minutes alone with each other, similar to Study 1. This interaction typically evolved into a “getting acquainted” conversation. The second interaction was a cooperative task in which the participants worked together to build a model, and the third interaction was a competitive task in which the winner of a series of memory games received one dollar. Participants encountered these three situations (situations 1–3) first with an opposite-sex stranger (another target participant) and then, several days later, with the same-sex close acquaintance they had recruited (situations 4–6).

3.1.3. Situational similarity

Situational similarity is treated as a dichotomous variable, with two situations designated as *similar* if they share a common element, either partner or task, and designated as *dissimilar* if they share none of these elements. For example, situation 1 (unstructured task with the stranger) and situation 2 (cooperative task with the stranger) are considered similar because they are both interactions with the stranger partner, thus have a common element. Similarly, situation 1 and situation 4 (unstructured task with the acquaintance) are considered similar because they are both unstructured task interactions. These two situations thus share the common element of task. Conversely, situation 2 and situation 4 are considered dissimilar because they share neither the partner nor the task. With six situations, there are 15 possible pairs of situations. The “common element” approach to objective consistency leads to nine “similar” pairs (six pairs in which the partner is the same and three in which

⁵ Study 2 is based on data from the Riverside Accuracy Project-I (Funder, 1995). The primary focus of this project was on the factors that affect the accuracy of personality judgments. A variety of personality characteristics have also been examined in this data set, but no analysis of behavioral consistency has been published from it. Additional analyses were conducted to examine the possibility that participants with complete behavioral data differed from those without complete data. A series of *t* tests compared the two groups in terms of self-reported personality characteristics, but failed to reveal a meaningful pattern of differences.

the task is the same) and six “dissimilar” pairs (pairs that share neither of these elements).

3.1.4. Behavioral data

Participants' behavior in the six videotaped interactions was coded by trained research assistants using the latest, 64-item version of the Riverside Behavioral Q-sort (RBQ; Funder et al., 2000). As in Study 1, research assistants watched an interaction, focusing on one participant, and used the RBQ to describe the general pattern of behavior that the participant exhibited in that interaction. Sets of four research assistants coded each participant in an interaction, but no research assistant coded, nor even saw, a given participant in more than one interaction. Aggregated scores were again computed (across raters) for each participant in each situation for each behavior. For the first interaction, the mean profile-level reliability of the four-rater aggregates ranged from .66 to .91, with a mean of .81, which is representative of the other five interactions.

Although this procedure ensures that any consistency found in the behavioral data is not due to consistent idiosyncratic rater biases, it again reflects a compromise between the fundamental need for consistency data that is as “pure” as possible and the preference for extremely high reliabilities. In the current study, reliabilities of behaviors coded from the first interaction ranged from .08 to .80, with a mean of .53, which is representative the other five interactions (see Funder et al., 2000, for more details). For the following analyses, we eliminated the RBQ behaviors with an average reliability below .40 across the six interactions, leaving 49 behaviors for analysis.

3.1.5. Behavioral dimensions: Automatic/controlled and desirable/undesirable

To investigate the associations between consistency, situational similarity, and the two behavioral dimensions of automaticity and desirability, we recruited a set of judges to rate each of the 64 RBQ behaviors. For each behavior, seven judges used 5-point Likert-type scales to rate the degree to which it is automatic (5) versus controlled (1) and the degree to which it is desirable (5) versus undesirable (1). The judges were six faculty members in Psychology and one graduate student.⁶

For ratings of automaticity, judges received the following instructions: “Please rate each of the following behaviors for the degree to which it is primarily a *cognitively mediated* behavior versus an *impulsive* behavior. A cognitively mediated behavior is one that is relatively deliberate, requiring some degree of interpretation of the situation and consideration of the consequences of enacting the behavior. An impulsive behavior is one that is relatively automatic, one that is more of an automatic reaction elicited by the situation.” These instructions were worded to reflect as closely as possible the meaning of automatic (or impulsive) versus controlled (or cognitively mediated) as described by Shoda et al. (1993).

⁶ We thank Verne Bacharach, Skip Beck, Bob Hill, Tim Huelsman, Kurt Michael, Shilpa Pai, and Heather Reimer, for providing these ratings.

For ratings of social desirability, judges received the following instructions: “Please rate each of the following behaviors for the degree to which it is socially desirable. That is, rate each behavior for the degree to which people generally see it as favorable and good to exhibit the behavior versus unfavorable and negative.”

Judges agreed quite well regarding their automaticity ratings. To examine the reliability of these composites, we computed the correlations between the raters’ profiles of automaticity scores. One judge’s ratings were removed due to low interjudge agreement correlations (computed across RBQ behaviors). The average of the interjudge agreement profile correlations among the six remaining judges was $r = .45$. For each behavior, the judges’ ratings were averaged to form an automaticity composite score. This produced a profile of 64 behavioral automaticity scores with a reliability $\alpha = .82$ (based on the average agreement profile correlation of $.45$). This reliability estimate indicates that judges agreed on the relative automaticity of the 64 RBQ behaviors. Three of the behaviors with the highest automaticity scores were “Is expressive in face, voice, or gestures,” “Is physically animated, moves around a great deal,” and “Laughs frequently.” Three of the more controlled behaviors were “Offers advice,” “Expresses criticism,” and “Exhibits a high degree of intelligence.”

Judges had even higher agreement regarding the social desirability ratings. The average interjudge agreement profile correlation among the seven judges was $r = .79$. For each behavior, the judges’ desirability ratings were averaged to form an desirability composite score, which produced a profile of 64 behavioral automaticity scores with a reliability $\alpha = .96$ (based on the average agreement profile correlation of $.79$). This reliability estimate indicates that judges agreed strongly on the relative desirability of the 64 RBQ behaviors. Three of the behaviors with the highest desirability scores were “Behaves in a cheerful manner,” “Seems interested in what partner has to say,” and “Appears to be relaxed and comfortable.” Three of the least desirable behaviors were “Exhibits condescending behavior,” “Exhibits an awkward interpersonal style,” and “Talks at rather than with partner (e.g., conducts a monologue, ignores what partner says).” The automaticity and desirability dimensions were nearly independent—the correlation (computed across behaviors) between the two profiles of composite scores was $r = .09$.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Variable-centered consistency

Cross-situational consistency has traditionally been defined at the level of the behavior by computing the correlation between behavioral scores in one situation with behavioral scores in the second. Such a correlation represents the degree to which the sample of participants maintained a consistent order of individual differences on the behavior across the two situations. For each of the 49 most reliable RBQ behaviors, we computed 15 consistency correlations. For each behavior, we computed the average of the nine correlations between “similar” pairs of situations, and we computed the average of the six correlations between “dissimilar” pairs of situations. In addition, for each behavior, we computed the average of the six similar situations that

shared a common partner and the average of the three situations that shared a common task.⁷

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations (across all 49 behaviors) of these average consistencies and shows, in general, that consistency was generally higher between similar pairs of situations (mean $r = .20$) than between dissimilar pairs (mean $r = .12$). The effect size (Cohen's d) is very large and is computed as the mean consistency difference between similar and dissimilar pairs of situations divided by the standard deviation of differences. In the variable-centered approach adopted for these analyses, the sampling units underlying the means in Table 2 are behaviors—consistency is computed for each behavior and the average consistencies are computed across behaviors. Although psychological data analysis typically assumes that persons are independent sampling units, we would not argue that the behaviors in the RBQ are independent, and so traditional inferential tests would be difficult to interpret in connection to the “variable-centered” means in Table 2. Nevertheless, we believe that the large effect size tells a clear story—although the absolute difference in variable-centered consistency between similar pairs of situations and consistency in dissimilar pairs of situations is only .08, almost every behavior shows this difference. Fig. 1 presents the distribution of differences between consistency in similar situations and consistency in dissimilar situations, and shows that nearly 95% of the behaviors had positive differences—consistency was higher between similar pairs of situations than between dissimilar pairs. That is, the large effect of situational similarity is reflected more by its *ubiquity* than by its *absolute magnitude*.

The current data provide no support for the hypothesis that relatively automatic behaviors would show the situational similarity effect to a greater degree than relatively controlled behaviors. Two means were computed for each behavior—one *mean consistency across similar pairs of situations* (averaging the nine correlations from similar situations) and one *mean consistency across dissimilar pairs* (averaging the nine correlations from dissimilar situations). For each behavior, we subtracted the “dissimilar” mean from the “similar” mean to create a difference score reflecting the degree to which the behavior showed higher consistency between similar pairs than dissimilar pairs. Thus, a relatively large positive difference score indicates that the behavior shows the situational similarity effect to a relatively great degree (these difference scores are the basis of the Cohen's d in Table 1). The correlation (across behaviors) between the difference scores and the automaticity composite was negligible ($r = -.05$).⁸

⁷ All analyses that involved statistical tests of means of consistency scores were performed using Fisher's z -transformation of raw consistency correlations. Each participant's total consistency correlations were z -transformed and then averaged across participants. Inferential statistics were computed on the z -transformed scores, which were then transformed back to an r metric and are reported in Table 2. Similarly, the mean distinctive consistency scores in Table 2 were computed by z -transforming raw correlations, computing the mean, and then transforming back to the r metric.

⁸ Because difference scores have a variety of statistical and psychometric issues, we also examined these hypotheses using partial correlations. We computed the correlation between automaticity and consistency in similar situations, partialling out consistency in dissimilar situations. Affirming the results from the difference score approach, the partial correlation was negligible ($-.01$).

Table 2
Objective situational similarity and behavioral consistency: Mean consistency correlations

Type of consistency	All situations	Similar			Dissimilar No common element	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>
		All similar	Common task	Common partner			
Variable-centered	.17 (.09)	.20 (.10)	.17 (.10)	.22 (.11)	.12 (.08)	1.64	
Overall person-centered	.54 (.17)	.57 (.15)	.62 (.19)	.54 (.15)	.48 (.20)	1.44	15.49***
Distinctive person-centered	.18 (.13)	.21 (.13)	.19 (.19)	.22 (.15)	.14 (.16)	.67	7.19***

Note. *** $p < .001$. For variable-centered consistency, means (and standard deviations) were computed across 49 behaviors. For person-centered consistencies, means (and standard deviations) were computed across 116 participants. d = Cohen's d , computed as the mean consistency difference between similar and dissimilar pairs of situations divided by the standard deviation of differences. $t = t$ value for one-sample t test for the null hypothesis that the mean consistency difference between similar and dissimilar pairs of situations is zero.

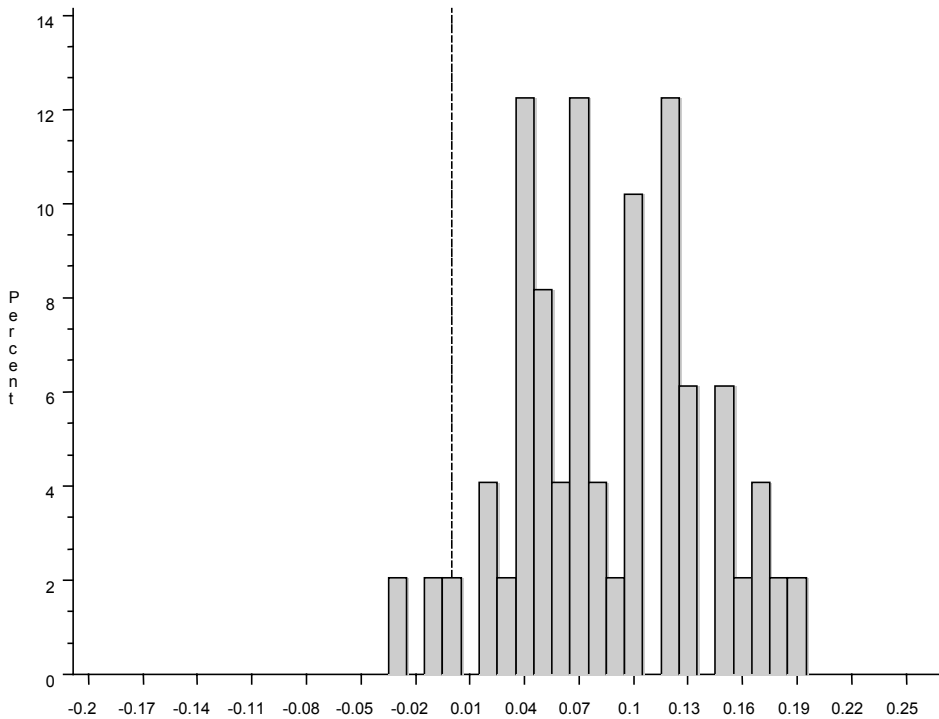


Fig. 1. Distribution of differences between consistency in objectively "Similar" situations and consistency in "Dissimilar" situations: differences computed for each of 49 behaviors.

Although there is no clear evidence for the hypothesized association between automaticity and the situational similarity effect, other analyses reveal strong evidence for an association between automaticity and *consistency in general*. Behaviors that are relatively automatic are very likely to have high mean consistency across similar pairs of situations ($r = .45$) and mean consistency across dissimilar pairs ($r = .54$).

A parallel set of analyses for the social desirability composite showed a weak association with the difference score representing the situational similarity effect ($r = .16$) and negligible associations with mean consistency across similar pairs of situations ($r = .03$) and with mean consistency across dissimilar pairs ($r = -.06$).

To further illustrate these results, the 49 behaviors were grouped into high and low automaticity and social desirability sets, based on mean splits. We then computed the average consistency correlations for each combination, as presented in Table 3. For the automatic/controlled dimension, the mean consistency correlations are higher for the more automatic behaviors than for the controlled behaviors, reflecting the association between automaticity and *consistency in general*. The difference between consistency in similar situations and consistency in dissimilar situations is constant across automatic and controlled behaviors, reflecting the independence of automaticity and situational similarity effects. For the social desirability dimension, the mean consistency correlations are essentially the same for relatively desirable and undesir-

Table 3

Objective situational similarity and behavioral consistency by automaticity and social desirability

Automaticity	Social desirability		Average
	Low (undesirable)	High (desirable)	
Low (automatic)	$\bar{r}_s = .16(.08)$ $\bar{r}_d = .08(.08)$	$\bar{r}_s = .17(.07)$ $\bar{r}_d = .07(.06)$	$\bar{r}_s = .16(.08)$ $\bar{r}_d = .08(.06)$
High (controlled)	$\bar{r}_s = .24(.12)$ $\bar{r}_d = .17(.11)$	$\bar{r}_s = .24(.09)$ $\bar{r}_d = .15(.07)$	$\bar{r}_s = .24(.10)$ $\bar{r}_d = .16(.08)$
Average	$\bar{r}_s = .19(.10)$ $\bar{r}_d = .12(.09)$	$\bar{r}_s = .21(.08)$ $\bar{r}_d = .12(.07)$	$\bar{r}_s = .20(.10)$ $\bar{r}_d = .12(.08)$

Note. \bar{r}_s = mean consistency correlation for “similar” pairs of situations. \bar{r}_d = mean consistency correlation for “dissimilar” pairs of situations. $N = 49$ behaviors.

able behaviors, and the difference between consistency in similar situations and consistency in dissimilar situations is constant across desirable and undesirable behaviors.

3.2.2. Person-centered consistency

As in Study 1, two indices of person-centered consistency were evaluated. For each participant, 15 Overall consistency scores were computed (one for each of the 15 pairs of situations), by correlating his or her unadjusted RBQ profile from one situation with his or her unadjusted RBQ profile from another situation. Among the 15 Overall consistency correlations for each participant, nine derive from similar pairs of situations (six common partner, three common task) and were combined into a mean “similar” Overall consistency score ($\alpha = .83$). The six remaining consistency correlations for each participant were combined into a mean “dissimilar” Overall consistency score ($\alpha = .85$).

In addition to Overall consistency scores, for each participant, 15 Distinctive person-centered consistency correlations were computed (one for each of the 15 pairs of situations), as described for Study 1. Then for each participant, the nine Distinctive consistency correlations from “similar” pairs of situations were combined into a mean “similar” Distinctive consistency score ($\alpha = .62$), and the six remaining Distinctive correlations were combined into a mean “dissimilar” Distinctive consistency score ($\alpha = .70$).

Table 2 shows the mean (across the 116 participants) Overall and Distinctive consistency correlations. We conducted a one sample t test of the null hypothesis that the mean difference between consistency in similar situations and consistency in dissimilar situations is zero. Table 2 presents the results, which strongly supported the objective similarity hypothesis for both kinds of person-centered consistency. The effect sizes associated with these differences are generally above what Cohen (1977) labeled as large, with some above what Rosenthal et al. (2000) referred to as “jumbo” effects (with tongue in cheek, no doubt).

We find the means, effect sizes, and significance tests to be compelling evidence supporting the objective situational similarity hypothesis, but what we find even more powerful is the fact that fully 98% of the participants had a higher mean

consistency score among similar situations than among dissimilar situations. Again, results indicate that, while the absolute magnitude of the difference between person-centered consistency in similar situations and in dissimilar situations is not huge (Overall = .09, Distinctive = .07), it is nearly ubiquitous. Fig. 2 presents the a histogram of participants' differences between Overall person-centered consistencies for similar and dissimilar situations and shows that 114 out of 116 participants showed the expected effect of greater consistency between similar situations than between dissimilar situations. Thus the objective situational similarity effect is observed for almost every individual in the current study. It is also worth noting that of the 9 pairwise comparisons between a similar mean and the relevant dissimilar mean shown in Table 2, all 9 show that similar situations have greater consistency than dissimilar situations.

3.3. Discussion

Study 2 extends Study 1's findings concerning the relationship between situational similarity and behavioral consistency. Situational similarity was conceptualized inobjective terms in Study 2, and participants were, almost without fail, more

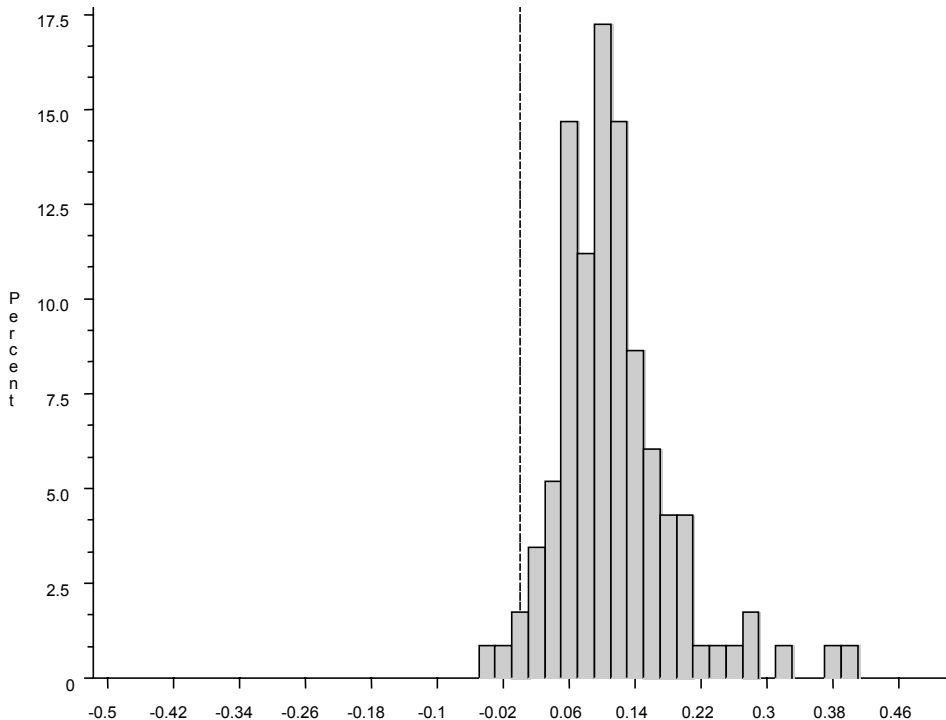


Fig. 2. Distribution of differences between consistency in objectively "Similar" situations and consistency in "Dissimilar" situations: differences computed for each of 116 persons.

consistent across situations that shared a common element than between situations with no common element. By focusing on a more objective conceptualization of similarity, Study 2 is a useful complement to Study 1. In Study 1, similarity was defined subjectively, as each participant rated his or her own perception of the degree of similarity between two situations, and findings showed that perceived similarity was related to both person-centered and variable-centered behavioral consistency. In Study 2, similarity was defined objectively, apart from any subjective experience or perceptions of participants, and findings showed that this definition of similarity was also related to both person-centered and variable-centered behavioral consistency. This study did not provide support for the hypothesis that automatic or impulsive behaviors would show the situational similarity effect more than controlled or cognitively mediated behaviors. Instead, automatic behaviors were generally more consistent than were controlled behaviors.

4. General discussion

Situational forces affect behavior and, consequently, behavioral consistency. As we move from situation to situation, our behavior changes. We laugh at parties and cry at funerals. We are playful and relaxed with our friends, but we may be more formal and guarded with those we have just met. How can situations be characterized and how do they affect behavioral consistency?

The psychological construct assumptively used to explain situational effects on behavioral consistency has been situational similarity—the more similar two situations are to each other, the more behavioral consistency we should observe between the situations. The current findings showed that behavior was indeed more consistent between situations that were similar than between situations that were dissimilar. This held true regardless of how situational similarity was defined and regardless of how consistency was defined. When situational similarity was defined from a subjective perspective, by asking people to describe how similar they perceived two situations to be, people who perceived the situations to be relatively similar were more behaviorally consistent across the two situations than people who perceived the situations to be relatively dissimilar. When situational similarity was defined from an objective perspective, by counting the elements that two situations have in common, people were more consistent across pairs of situations that share a common element than across a pair of situations that shared no common element.

Perhaps the most powerful finding emerging from the current analysis is the near universality of the situational similarity effect, particularly the objective effect. From the variable-centered perspective, nearly 95% of the behaviors under investigation in Study 2 showed higher consistency correlations between pairs of similar situations than between pairs of dissimilar situations. From the person-centered perspective, results were even more powerful—98% of the participants showed higher consistency correlations between pairs of similar situations than between pairs of dissimilar situations. At an absolute level, some of these differences do not appear extremely large, and thus the effect sizes reported in Table 2 might appear disproportionate.

The large effect sizes arise because, although the differences between consistency in similar situations and consistency in dissimilar situations might be “only” .07 or .09 (on a correlational metric), almost every single behavior showed the effect and almost every single person showed the effect. On our less modest days, we might argue that such a pervasive and virtually universal effect nearly qualifies as a law of human behavior.

The effect sizes of the similarity-consistency relationships were in the expected directions in every analysis. However, there are hints in the data that the exact nature of the link between similarity and consistency, while clearly positive, may depend in part on which conceptualizations of similarity and consistency are being considered. The results seemed to be somewhat stronger for objective definitions of situational similarity than for subjective similarity. This finding, while intriguing, must be interpreted with caution. The two studies differ not only in terms of the type of situational similarity that they investigated, but also in the nature of the situations that they examined. In Study 1, both situations were unstructured interactions with an opposite-sex stranger. In Study 2, the situations all differed either in terms of either task or familiarity with partner. From the “common elements” framework then, the two situations included in Study 1 might have been more objectively similar to each other than any of the pairs of situations in Study 2. The higher objective similarity in Study 1 might have produced the higher mean levels of consistency in Study 1 as compared to Study 2, in terms of Variable-centered consistency (Study 1 mean $r = .37$, Study 2 mean $r = .17$) and Distinctive Person-centered consistency (Study 1 mean $r = .38$, Study 2 mean $r = .18$). It also might have restricted the degree to which situational similarity effects could occur. Perhaps the high level of objective similarity in Study 1 restricted the range of potential subjective similarity ratings (the standard deviations of consistency scores are higher in Study 2 than in Study 1), which reduces the degree to which subjective similarity could correlate with consistency in Study 1. It is also possible that the apparently weaker effects for subjective situational similarity might result partly from the measurement of subjective situational similarity. In Study 1, subjective situational similarity was measured with only one question. One might argue that *any* findings based on correlations with a one-item measure of similarity are actually quite encouraging and that the results obtained in Study 1 would strengthen with a more robust measure of subjective similarity. Still, it is noteworthy that notwithstanding strong statements in the literature that subjective similarity is of primary importance, objective similarity could be shown to have a powerful effect on behavioral consistency.

Different ways of operationalizing subjective and objective similarity may have different implications for behavior. For example, Champagne and Pervin (1987) examined three forms of subjective situational similarity—direct ratings (comparable to the ratings used in the current Study 1), the similarity of reinforcement contingencies, and the similarity of reinforcement contingencies weighted by the subjectively rated values of outcomes. The three forms of situational similarity were all related to the consistency of self-reported behavior in the expected directions, but were not redundant with each other. Similarly, Lord (1982) compared four forms of subjective situational similarity and found that three of the four were related to

consistency of cross-situational ratings of conscientiousness. Oddly, the one form of subjective similarity that was not related to consistency was direct ratings of similarity, contrary to the findings of the current study. Thus, one direction for future research may be to examine the relationships among different ways of operationalizing subjective similarity. Researchers could adopt a strategy of having participants directly rate the similarity of different facets of situations (e.g., “how similar were your feelings in the two situations?” or “how similar were your interaction partners?”). Conversely, participants could rate each situation separately, and then researchers could compute similarity scores based on the ratings. Further work on the perception of situations could both inform and benefit from such research.

Perhaps even more interesting might be the examination of the associations between subjective and objective situational similarity as related to behavioral consistency. Unless an individual has a severe dissociative disorder, his or her perceptions of a situation must be based upon objective features of the situation, at least to some degree. An analysis of the connections between subjective and objective features of the situation, and of the personal variables that moderate such connections could dramatically deepen our understanding of situational effects on behavior. The current studies included both subjective and objective similarity, but the nature of the data sets dictated that each be examined separately. A single study that included both forms of similarity would be valuable and informative. The only study to date that comes close is Lord’s (1982), in which each participant provided four kinds of subjective similarity data, from which four “nomothetic” similarity indexes were derived by aggregating across people. Although this “aggregated subjective” approach to similarity does approximate an objective approach, Lord found that none of the four indexes were associated with behavioral consistency.

In Study 2, we addressed the question of *which behaviors show the situational similarity effect*. Separating automaticity from social desirability, we found no evidence for the hypothesis that behaviors that are relatively automatic or impulsive show the situational similarity effect to a greater degree than behaviors that are more controlled or cognitively mediated (Shoda et al., 1993). Although we found no evidence for a link between automaticity and the situational similarity effect, we found strong evidence for a link between automaticity and consistency in general—behaviors that are relatively automatic have higher levels of consistency than behaviors that are more cognitively mediated. This pattern of findings, particularly the lack of association between automaticity and the situational similarity effect, is to some degree explained by strong overlap between similar and dissimilar consistency. The correlation (across behaviors) between mean consistency in similar situations and mean consistency in dissimilar situations was extremely high ($r = .85$), indicating that behaviors that were relatively consistent between similar pairs of situations were also relatively consistent between dissimilar pairs of situations, almost without exception. So, when “controlling for” mean consistency in dissimilar pairs of situations, little variance was left in mean consistency in similar pairs of situations. Another way of conceptualizing these findings is that all behaviors showed the situational similarity effect to almost exactly the same degree—behaviors do not differ in the degree to which they show or elicit a situational similarity effect.

The question of *who shows the effect* is a further issue that has been relatively neglected in theory and investigation of situational similarity. Perhaps some people are relatively attentive to situational cues and thus might be expected to exhibit the situational similarity effect to a greater degree than others. If so, what personality variables underlie this difference? One candidate might be self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974). According to self-monitoring theory, high self-monitors attend to situational cues as guides for behavior, while low self-monitors attend to internal cues. This difference would seem to suggest that high self-monitors would be more susceptible to the situational similarity effect than would low self-monitors, because similarity is presumably based to some degree on overlapping cues or features of situations. More simply, high self-monitors might show the effect to a greater degree, because they are more “tuned in” to situations than are low self-monitors. Analyses examining individual differences in the effect of situational forces represent an important step in interactionist approaches to personality theory.

The understanding of situational similarity, to the degree it is ever attained, is only a step toward the ultimate and more important goals of determining how to describe situations in their own right. What are the key dimensions of situations? Is there a hierarchy of situational attributes? Can such situational attributes be assessed with reliability and validity? Psychologists have commented for decades that the assessment of persons is far more developed than the assessment of situations (e.g., Bem & Funder, 1978), and the same comment remains true today. The assessment of situational similarity represents a small but significant step toward alleviating that imbalance.

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