Situational Strength as a Means of Conceptualizing Context

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Kanfer (2009) argues that "context" is an important consideration in the study of motivated behavior, but our knowledge of contextual constructs is immature and in need of considerable development. We agree and build on her position by proposing that situational strength (Hough & Oswald, 2008; Mischel, 1977) has the potential to help conceptualize what Johns (2006) calls "discrete context" (i.e., the particular task, social, and physical variables that influence motivation, attitudes, and behavior). The present article briefly describes situational strength, discusses its operationalization and measurement, explores its implications for practice, and describes two research questions that fall within *Pasteur's Quadrant* (Stokes, 1997).

Situational Strength

"Strong" situations restrict the expression and, therefore, criterion-related validity of nonability personality traits by providing information about the most appropriate

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course(s) of action (Weiss & Adler, 1984). Thus, in strong situations, motivated *behaviors* are more homogenous than would be predicted on the basis of motivational *traits* alone. For example, when provided with external incentives to do so, unconscientious employees are as likely as their conscientious peers to remain focused on tasks (Fleeson, 2007). It is, therefore, unsurprising that situational strength is viewed as an important consideration in person-centric formulations of motivation (Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008), a major reason for the disappointingly low relationship between personality and job performance (Murphy & Dzieweczynski, 2005), and the single most important situational force influencing the predictive power of dispositional variables (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). In other words, situational strength is a lens through which the interplay between the context and the content of motivation (i.e., two of Kanfer's "three Cs") can be viewed.

Although situational strength is a well-accepted idea and has been used in several recent studies, a lack of theoretical and empirical development has forced researchers to use a variety of *ad hoc* operationalizations of it. Examples include task structure, choice of responses to a problem situation, situational constraints, situational ambiguity/uncertainty, metafeatures of the Human Resource Management (HRM) system (e.g., consistently enforced rules), climate strength, and transformational leadership (cf. Meyer,

Dalal, & Bonaccio, under review). Thus, although many operationalizations have individually been shown to moderate disposition–behavior relationships (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1993; Beaty, Cleveland, & Murphy, 2001), there is little consensus regarding the optimal structure of situational strength's construct space.

An initial effort in this regard was made by Meyer et al. (under review), who argued that extant operationalizations of situational strength can be organized into at least two conceptually homogenous dimensions or facets: "constraints" (the extent to which an individual's freedom of decision or action is limited by outside forces) and "consequences" (the extent to which decisions or actions have significant implications for any person or entity). Further, this study meta-analytically demonstrated that both these broad facets moderate the relationship between conscientiousness and job performance. Although this preliminary structure has promise, additional facets of situational strength—reflecting, for example, the extent of "clarity" and "consistency" in situational cues—may exist.

Implications for Motivation Research

Personality traits, which represent a bulwark of Kanfer's content aspect of motivation, are frequently conceptualized as relatively distal motivational constructs. This is true regardless of whether personality is conceptualized as motivational traits related to approach and avoidance (e.g., Kanfer & Ackerman, 2000) or as the "Big 5." Because the personality–job performance relationship is widely believed to be mediated by motivational states such as self-efficacy, self-set goals (level/difficulty as well as content), and expectancies (cf. Locke & Latham, 2002), understanding the role of situational strength in these relationships is an important task for researchers attempting to understand and predict motivated behavior because situational strength may serve as a substitute for these behavioral tendencies among unconscientious employees. For example, adding structure (an instantiation of "constraints") to a given task may serve as

a proxy for the goal setting that is naturally carried out by conscientious employees (Barrick, Mount, & Strauss, 1993), leading *all* employees to engage in behavior that would otherwise have been exhibited primarily by conscientious employees.

Although situational strength is conceptualized as a moderator of personality–performance relationships, its precise role is not yet clear given the aforementioned mediating role of motivational states. For example, it is not yet clear whether situational strength (a) moderates the relationship between personality and motivational states, (b) moderates the relationship between motivational states and job performance, and/or (c) has a direct impact on motivational states. Nonetheless, certain implications for practice are already apparent.

Implications for Practice

Many of the organizational forces that affect situational strength operate through formal organizational policies. Policies that weaken situations include flexible schedules, which reduce temporal constraints on employees; telework, which reduces physical and supervisory constraints; and employee empowerment programs, which reduce both constraints and consistency. Policies that strengthen situations, on the other hand, include pay-for-performance programs, which increase clarity and consequences and performance-monitoring programs, which potentially influence multiple facets of situational strength. As Kanfer mentions, organizations have begun adopting many of these policies as a means of attracting and retaining high-performance employees. Because these policies share the goal of influencing the context surrounding motivated behavior, situational strength provides a simple, but useful, lens through which the impact of these policies can be assessed.

These HRM-policy implications suggest that research on situational strength can simultaneously enhance "understanding" and "use" (the traditional goals of basic and applied research, respectively)—in other words, that such research can exist in *Pasteur's Quadrant*

(Stokes, 1997). Two programs of research are offered below, by way of example.

Situational Strength and Pasteur's Quadrant: Two Examples

One critical program of research involves the development of a standardized instrument to measure situational strength. Such research would address basic research questions including (a) the dimensionality of situational strength, (b) the moderating effects of situational strength's various dimensions on relevant relationships, and (c) situational strength's specific influence(s) on motivated behavior's nomological network. Such research would, however, also be of great use to practitioners. In particular, the new situational strength instrument could be used to ascertain the overall level of situational strength engendered by an organization's HRM policies and examine whether they act in concert or in opposition with regard to situational strength. Moreover, inclusion of the situational strength instrument into popular job-analytic databases such as O*NET (the Occupational Information Network) could help practitioners account for the moderating effects of situational strength in an a priori manner, thereby allowing them to better predict personality–outcome relationships in specific occupations.

Our second example derives from the contention that individual differences are likely to exist in employees' *preferences* for situational strength. For example, highly constraining situations may be interpreted as reassuring by some but restricting by others. Thus, fundamental questions related to person–environment fit can be addressed by a program of research that characterizes situational strength not only as a property of environments (contexts) but also as a preference on the part of persons. Again, such research would also be of great use to practitioners because HR professionals could consider employees' preferences for situational strength when selecting and placing applicants, thereby decreasing subsequent stress, dissatisfaction, and voluntary turnover.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that context has not been given adequate attention in the organizational sciences. There is also little doubt that situational strength is an important, though not yet adequately conceptualized, lens through which researchers and practitioners can view discrete organizational context.

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