Situations and Goals as Fundamental Constructs in Interpersonal Communication Research

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IN THE LATE 1970s and early 1980s, there was a flurry of research and theory focused on the perception and categorization of situations. Much of this interest was in response to a growing dissatisfaction with oversimplistic and mechanistic models that tried to link personality traits and attitudes to behavior. In personality-social psychology, Mischel (1979, p. 740) argued against models of behavior in which prediction is based on a “few behavioral signs” and called attention to the necessity of studying the reciprocal interaction between person and context in fine-grained detail. Similarly, “interactionists” (Endler, 1982; Endler & Edwards, 1978) advocated that research focus on “modern interactionism,” which holds that overt behavior is a function of the continuous feedback between the person and the situation, that the person is an intentional and active agent in the interaction process, that cognitive factors are the essential determinants of behavior, and that the psychological meaning assigned to the situation is a major determinant of behavior. In addition, the rise in attribution theories and cognitive heuristics, and evidence that individuals view the world through cognitive filters, led scholars increasingly to borrow constructs and processes from cognitive psychology in the hope that the integration of cognition, memory, social learning, and person-variables would provide direction in the understanding of naturally occurring behavior (see Taylor, 1981). These trends necessitated the rejection of the view of individuals as organisms that simply (or that only) react to external environmental cues and have raised the status of individuals to that of cognitive information processors, who, in order to act effectively, “must define situations, perceive other people, plan
strategically, construct performance patterns, satisfy role demands and enforce them on others, and so on" (Athay & Darley, 1981, p. 282). Over the past decade, there has been an increased focus on goals and strategies, and how a variety of knowledge structures may influence social interaction and communication processes. It has been suggested that such goal-based units may provide a "common language" for thinking about persons, situations, and relationships (Miller & Read, 1987, 1991; Read & Miller, 1989). In the current work, we suggest that such units provide a useful framework for a more dynamic conceptualization of situations.

As communication scholars, our purpose is to advance an ecologically sound understanding and prediction of naturally occurring communicative behavior. To pursue such lofty goals requires an integration of the various ways in which individuals interact with the external environment, how they construe and update the meanings of their own and others’ behaviors, and how these may be linked to their attempts to achieve their current and changing goals. Below, after discussing a variety of definitions and taxonomies regarding the concept “situation,” we consider a variety of knowledge structures useful for understanding how situations are represented and the links among situation perception factors, goals, and strategies. Then, using connectionist models, we explore the dynamics of situational representation and enactment, considering the role of individual and cultural factors.

Situations: Definitions and Taxonomies of Situations

Definition of “Situation”

Argyle, Furnham, and Graham (1981) describe a situation as “the sum of features of the behavior system, for the duration of a social encounter” (p. 30). Goffman (1961) uses the term social situation to “refer to the full spatial environment anywhere within which an entering person becomes a member of the gathering that is (or does then become) present. Situations begin when mutual monitoring occurs and lapse when the next to last person has left” (p. 144). Such definitions place important limitations on how researchers typically have construed and treated “situations” in research. Below, we explicitly reevaluate these assumptions and argue for a more dynamic definition and conceptualization of a “situation.”

First, previous definitions of situations assume that a “situation” exists only when two or more individuals are physically present in a particular setting. But couldn’t a situation “exist” with only one person present; wouldn’t a woman facing a storm in her leaking boat be in a “crisis situation”? Or wouldn’t businesswomen be in a conflict situation if each of the parties believed that the other was sabotaging her sales efforts—even if these women were not physically in each other’s presence.

Second, such definitions mark situational start and end points in terms of the physical arrival and departure of participants. But it seems likely that for some communicators situations may begin before the interaction begins and may not be “over” until long after the physical interaction ceases. For example, a communicator may anticipate a relational breakup and attempt to “set the stage” to let the partner down as easily as possible. For the communicator, the situation may start long before an actual “disengagement event” occurs with a series of events set in place by the individual’s goals, including plan making, attending to cues as the event unfolds, experiencing emotions, and so forth (Canary & Cody, 1994). The
“situation” may continue for hours, days, months, or even years after the two individuals talk and agree to “disengage,” as disengagers reflect on the relationship, reexperience emotions, and assess causes for relational decay. During this time, the construction of the “situation” may be altered as the individual reflects back on previous events in order to decide which interpretation or narrative most coherently explains the evidence or fits with one’s goals (e.g., to garner social support or to be viewed as “the good guy”; see Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990; Harvey, Orbuch, Weber, Merbach, & Alt, 1992). In the process, the grieving partner will no doubt think back to many events preceding the disengagement event to rethink and reevaluate the meaning of various situations.

Third, older definitions assumed that “mutual monitoring” is necessary for a “situation” to be perceived. But if we hear on the news that our country is at war and our troops are “under fire,” this is highly apt to be an anxiety provoking situation for many, but with whom are we engaging in “mutual monitoring”? And even when “mutual monitoring” occurs, it cannot guarantee similar situational constructions by the participants.

Furthermore, such definitions seem not to fully grapple with several additional issues. First, there is a problem with meaning and perspective. Clearly, the meaning of the situation depends upon each individual’s perspective, activated cognitions, and knowledge structures. For instance, an employer may perceive that she is being friendly and sociable, and that this is a “social-friendly situation,” while various workers perceive the same behaviors as reflecting (a) a good-natured sense of humor, (b) a childish, immature, or insensitive person, or (c) demeaning sexual harassment (see Pryor, 1987; Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993, for an overview of this area). Furthermore, it may take hours, days, or months to reflect back on previous events in order to decide which interpretation is “best” (or which alternative explanation most coherently explains the evidence).

Second, it is unclear what the most useful level of analysis regarding situations may be. Situations may be the same or similar at a superficial level and quite different at a psychological level: This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in exploring the meaning of varying “situations” across cultures. For example, “bars” may have very different meanings in different cultures; on the other hand, romantic situations (i.e., situations in which one might be more likely to pursue amorous goals) may provide a more useful universal level of abstraction. Although the particulars leading members to conclude that a situation is a “romantic situation” may differ, activating the same abstract concept may be crucial to developing a shared understanding of a psychologically meaningful analogous “situation.”

Third, older definitions do not grapple with the issue of change. Psychological “situations” are apt to shift and change during the very course of the interaction—even for the same individual. Situations appear more dynamic than these more static and concrete definitions seem to allow. How can we construe situations that allow us to capture such dynamics? For example, we could be in a “frustrating situation” because the podium, which is needed for a presentation, is unavailable. If one of those present improvises to provide a suitable podium, the situation ceases to be a frustrating one. It may, depending upon the particulars involved, turn into a cooperative and rewarding one, involving mixtures of relief, pride, and liking for various participants. Not only may the psychological “situation” change during the course of the interaction from the vantage point of a particular interactant, but at any point in time different interactants and observers may construe the situation to be quite different. Furthermore, “situations” for communicators may overlap:
Communicators may frequently need to grapple with multiple “situations” and their interfaces concurrently. Only a few interpersonal theories focus on anything remotely related to processes of change in behavior and inferences regarding communicative behaviors over time (e.g., speech accommodation theory—Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987).

Thus we would argue that past definitions of situations were too static and concrete in nature. A situation does not require two individuals; one person would seem to suffice. Temporal start and end points need to be reconsidered; a more flexible time frame for understanding the situation should be considered. Perhaps we should also rethink the necessity of “mutual monitoring” and take into account in any definition of the situation the problem of meaning and perspective as well as the issue of change. Finally, we need to consider whether construing situations at a more abstract psychological level might prove more useful in understanding analogous situations across individuals and across cultures.

What then are the underlying structures that make a situation a situation? How can we study situations more dynamically? We concede that these questions are challenging ones and that we certainly will not be providing easy answers in this chapter. We also concede that the challenge of studying dynamic systems of persons and situations may require substantially more thought, effort, and analyses than the vast majority of studies so far published. Our goal, however, throughout this chapter is to summarize research on the various components that will facilitate a more dynamic assessment of situations, culminating with a modest proposal for how “situations” can be studied as dynamic constructions. First, however, we will review studies that examined how people perceive and categorize situations. Later, we will attempt to suggest how this work may be integrated into a more dynamic framework.

**Taxonomies and Dimensional Analyses of Settings and Goals**

*Situation Perception and Categorization*

Pervin (1978, pp. 79-80) has proposed that the “situation,” as a source of influence on behavior, can be decomposed into three components: who is involved, where the action takes place, and what activities are involved. Pervin’s three-component account of a “situation” provides a convenient point of departure for our review of taxonomic studies: (a) research on the classification of role relationships, that is, the “who” component; (b) studies of the settings of interaction, that is, the “where” component; (c) research on the nature of the situated activity, that is, the “what” component. Finally, we will discuss research on the global dimensions of situation perception, especially on the affective factors of situation perception.

*Role relationships.* Marwell and Hage (1970) took as their initial goal the elaboration of the underlying dimensions that lead to distinctions among categories of role relationships. They created a stimulus set of role relationships by consulting a dictionary and compiling a list of nouns referring to positions or roles—for example, priest, son, social worker. Then they generated a focal counterrole: altar boy, mother, unwed mother, and so on. Marwell and Hage then generated a set of 16 variables by crossing four relational elements (occupants, activities, locations, and occurrences) with four relational quantities (scope, intensity, integration, and
independence). The results yielded a three-dimensional factor structure. The factors were labeled intimacy, visibility, and regulation.

Wish, Deutsch, and Kaplan (1976; Wish & Kaplan, 1977) conducted an INDSCAL analysis of similarity ratings of pairs of role relationships (husband-wife, lawyer-client, and so forth) and obtained a four-factor solution whose dimensions were interpreted as (a) competitive and hostile versus cooperative and friendly, (b) equal versus unequal power, (c) intense versus superficial, and (d) social-emotional and informal versus task oriented and formal. Wish et al. reported substantial differences in the person's emphasis with respect to the four dimensions. Subjects who were married, older, and more conservative tended to place greater importance on the first dimension (competitive and hostile versus cooperative and friendly), whereas the younger, unmarried, less conservative individual was apt to place greater weight on the last factor (social-emotional and informal versus task oriented and formal). Wish and Kaplan (1977) were able to replicate these four dimensions, at least in part, in a follow-up study; however, they found that the Wish et al. fourth dimension split into two distinct dimensions: (a) formal and cautious versus informal and open and (b) task oriented versus non-task oriented.

Synthesizing the work on the “who” component leaves us with eight candidate dimensions of role relationships: relational intimacy, visibility, regulation, cooperative competitive orientation, formal orientation, equality, intensity, and task orientation.

Settings. Several projects have focused on fairly global assessments of settings (Craik, 1970, 1973; Russell & Ward, 1982; Stokols, 1978), but it is uncertain how macro-level assessments of physical settings affect interpersonal communication. For example, Ward's (1977) proposed dimensions of “man-made versus enclosed” and “land versus water” may be of interest to some on the basis of the activities occurring at such sites or in terms of eliciting emotions. However, scholars investigating situational prototypes generate information that may be more useful to interpersonal communication scholars (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982a, 1982b; Tversky & Hemenway, 1983).

Cantor et al. (1982b) assume that an actor’s knowledge of a social setting is organized around and stored in long-term memory as a prototype that takes the form of a set of distinctive features usually associated with membership in the setting category. Cantor et al. proposed a four-category taxonomy of settings or situations, each of which is hierarchically structured so that settings of less generality (for example, “being at a bar mitzvah”) are nested under a setting or situation of greater generality (such as “being at a religious ceremony”), which is in turn nested under a setting of still greater generality (for example, “being in an ideological situation”). The Cantor et al. taxonomy, which was constructed to be consonant with taxonomies of personality traits, such as Norman’s (1963) conscientiousness, extroversion, emotional stability, and culture factors, contained four broad categories: (a) being in an ideological situation, (b) being in a social situation, (c) being in a stressful situation, and (d) being in a cultural situation. Cantor et al. had their subjects list properties characteristic of each of the setting categories, at each of the three levels of generality. One of their findings was that the subject prototypes did not exhibit the perfect nesting of attributes implied by their model. For example, a given trait might be ascribed to both the highest (being in a social situation) and the lowest (being at a cocktail party) levels of a category, but not to the middle level (being at a party).
Tversky and Hemenway (1983) were interested in generating a taxonomy of environmental scenes, which they describe as the "setting or context for objects, the background where objects are figural" (p. 125). Like Cantor et al. (1982b), Tversky and Hemenway adopt a hierarchical approach to the categorization of scenes. Beginning with the superordinate, a priori categories "indoors" and "outdoors," Tversky and Hemenway had individuals generate categories and subcategories of either indoor or outdoor scenes. Selecting the most frequently mentioned scenes, the authors constructed a three-tiered, double-pronged taxonomy as follows: Under category (1), indoor scenes, were nested (a) home ([1] single-family, [2] apartment); (b) school ([1] elementary, [2] high school); (c) store ([1] grocery, [2] department); and (d) restaurant ([1] fast-food, [2] fancy). Under category (2), outdoor scenes, were nested (a) park ([1] city, [2] neighborhood); (b) city ([1] midwestern, [2] industrial); (c) beach ([1] lake, [2] ocean), and (d) mountains ([1] Sierra, [2] Rocky). A second set of 210 individuals supplied setting attributes or features at different levels of generality. Results indicated that 95% of the attributes listed were "parts": For example, parks have parts such as trees, equipment, and so forth. Tversky and Hemenway also found that most of the parts supplied were neither at the superordinate (for example, indoor) or the subordinate (for example, single home) levels but at the intermediate, or what they term the basic level (home, school, store, and so forth). Further, the authors found that the basic level of categorization was preferred in communication tasks such as describing scenes. Tversky and Hemenway concluded that the intermediate or basic level of taxonomic classification corresponds to the level in which scene schemas are likely to be organized and stored in memory.

What is useful about this work is that the knowledge of settings that communicators bring to their everyday interactions appears to be hierarchically structured at different levels of generality but retrieved and put to use primarily at intermediate levels of abstraction. This suggests that, if we are interested in predicting interpersonal behavior from features of settings, the success of our efforts may vary considerably depending upon the level of abstraction of our questioning. Thus, for example, if we want to know how a person will behave at a staff Christmas party, we might have the most success by trying to unearth the rules for appropriate behavior at an office party in general. The second useful idea that we can derive from these cognitive approaches to settings is the notion that setting knowledge is not just knowledge of the "where" component of an action sequence. According to which set of scholars you believe, setting knowledge consists of knowledge of persons and their proper activities in settings or knowledge of settings and their parts. In any event, the two studies make it clear that invoking a setting implies a good deal more than simply supplying a backdrop.

Activities. In an early study on the "activity" component, Krause (1970) distinguished among seven categories of behavior settings or situations: (a) joint working, (b) trading, (c) fighting, (d) sponsored teaching, (e) serving, (f) self-disclosing, and (g) playing. Magnusson (1971) also uncovered some dimensions of situation categorization, labeled as rewarding, negative, passiveness, social interaction, and active (working). These studies indicate that the nature of "activities" is an important determinant of how a situation is perceived (also see Ekehammar, Schalling, & Magnusson, 1975; Magnusson & Ekehammar, 1973; see below for typologies of goals).

Global perceptions of situations. A number of research efforts have been directed to recovering the global structure underlying perceptions of situations. Pervin
(1976) had subjects recall and evaluate everyday situations that they had experienced and regarded as important, and he concluded that people were remarkably consistent in using only the following four dimensions to perceive situations: friendly-unfriendly, tense-calm, dull-interesting, and constrained-free.

Forgas (1976, 1978, 1979, 1982) focused study on what he called “social episodes.” Forgas used essentially the same research strategy on a number of different subject populations. In Forgas’s (1976) study, housewives sorted events such as “playing with your children” and “having dinner with your family,” while undergraduates assessed events relevant to their social environments (i.e., “going to the pictures with some friends” and “having an intimate conversation with your boy/girlfriend”). Two dimensions were recovered from the housewife data set: intimacy and subjective self-confidence (or “knowing/not knowing how to behave”). From the student data, three dimensions were recovered: involvement (“having an intimate conversation with your boy/girlfriend”), pleasantness (“going out for a walk with an acquaintance”), and subjective self-confidence. Forgas found that students had least confidence when in events requiring prolonged interaction with comparative strangers.

In a study of the perception of social episodes by members of two rugby teams, Forgas found that perceptual dimensions were consistent with known characteristics of the teams. For the highly cohesive Team 1, the obtained dimensions were friendliness, intimacy, and activity (Forgas, 1979, p. 189), whereas for the less cohesive Team 2, the primary dimension along which social episodes were perceived was evaluativeness, corroborating the fact that members of the team judged and ranked members on the basis of playing skill (or lack of skill). Forgas (1978) found that faculty/staff members perceive their social environments on the basis of four dimensions: involvement, evaluation (pleasant-unpleasant), anxiety, and social-emotional versus task.

Cody and McLaughlin (1980) had subjects rate scenarios against a set of scales measuring six proposed factors of situation perception: intimacy, dominance, resistance, personal benefits, relational consequences, and rights, the first five of the factors having emerged as significant in multidimensional scaling analyses. Factor analysis of the ratings of situations yielded a six-factor solution: personal benefits, dominance, rights, intimacy, consequences, and resistance. All of the factors but rights had been obtained in the MDS study; but if “rights” are construed to mean legitimacy of request, then perceived “right” to influence others is an important situational feature one must include in a typology of situational features (see below). Cody, Woclel, and Jordan (1983) used confirmatory factor analysis to test the fit of a seven-factor model of situation perception that included the six factors obtained in Cody and McLaughlin plus a seventh factor, apprehension. The seven-factor (nonorthogonal) model was a good-fitting account of the structure underlying subjects’ perceptions of selected hypothetical situations and was superior to alternative models.

Biggers and Masterson (1983) were interested in recovering the broad categories of “emotional responses” that different situations might evoke. A pool of 48 interpersonal situations was created, and subjects rated each of the situations against a set of scales measuring the proposed factors of emotional response: pleasure, arousal, and dominance. Biggers and Masterson found that approach of and avoidance of situations could be accounted for by the three factors, primarily involving perceived pleasure.

A synthesis suggests that there are at least six distinct factors involved in the global perception of situations. These factors have the property that they have been
"discovered" by at least two different researchers or research teams. They include (a) intimacy, (b) friendliness, (c) pleasantness, (d) apprehension (obtained in Pervin, 1976, as "tense-calm"; in Forgas, 1976, as "subjective self-confidence"; in Cody et al., 1983, as "situation apprehension"), (e) involvement, and (f) dominance. These six factors taken together should provide a minimally adequate account of the structure of situation perception generally, although for specific situations like persuasive encounters, or relational disengagement, there are probably additional pertinent factors. A recurrent theme in the above analysis of situations, highlighted by Biggers and Masterson (1983), is the importance of emotion in situational analysis. Let us take a more detailed look at the links among situations, emotions, and goals.

Emotions and situations. As suggested above, many—if not most—of the situations we encounter in day-to-day experience may differ in terms of their affective features (e.g., pleasure, apprehension), and certain affective components may be related to approaching or avoiding situations (Biggers & Masterson, 1983). However, research scholars studying emotions have developed a fuller, more exhaustive view of how situations and goals are linked to emotions (see de Rivera, 1977; Frijda, 1987; Lazarus & Smith, 1988; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Roseman, 1984; Roseman, Spindel, & Jose, 1990; Scherer, 1984, 1988). Roseman et al. (1990), for example, argue that six basic situational features elicit emotions. First, situational state deals with the extent to which outcomes or experiences were consistent with one’s goals and reflected what the communicator wanted (versus unexpected, inconsistent, and undesirable outcomes and experiences). Second, motivational state deals with the extent to which outcomes or experiences were pleasurable, positive, and beneficial (versus painful, negative, and costly). Third, probability deals with the extent to which outcomes or experiences were predictable, certain, and void of doubt (versus unpredictable, uncertain, and doubtful). Fourth, power deals with the extent to which the individual felt powerful, strong, and able to cope with the situation (versus feeling powerless, weak, and unable to cope). Fifth, legitimacy deals with the levels of rights a person perceives—that what happened was just, that he or she deserved something good (versus an injustice and she or he deserved something bad to happen). Finally, agency deals with the extent to which events were caused by circumstances, by other people, or by the communicator. It should be obvious that Roseman's theory uses a number of situational features already described: pleasantness, probability (uncertainty, apprehension), power (or dominant role relationships), rights or legitimacy, and focus of activities/benefits.

Roseman et al. (1990) found that these situational features predictably had an impact on eliciting 16 discrete emotions. For example, positive emotions (joy, relief, hope, affection, and pride) were elicited when situational state was motive consistent, while inconsistent-motive situations resulted in negative emotions (disgust, distress, sadness, fear, frustration, anger, shame, guilt, regret, and unfriendliness). Surprise was the only emotion to be elicited when situational state was either motive consistent or inconsistent. Motivation to attain rewards elicited feelings of joy, while motivation to avoid punishments elicited feelings of relief. Certainty (the probability situational feature) was associated with feelings of joy (and in some situations with feelings of distress and sadness), while uncertainty was associated with relief, hope, and surprise. Subjects who believed they deserved a positive outcome (i.e., their rights were not fulfilled)—this is the legitimacy distinction)
naturally experienced frustration, anger, and regret (communication scholars also found similar emotions and conflict to follow when partners failed to uphold legitimate rights and obligations; see Canary & Cody, 1994). The agency distinction was related to a plethora of emotions; other people were seen as causes of affection, anger, and unfriendliness, while the self was seen as the causal agent in events eliciting pride, shame, guilt, and regret.

Finally, Roseman (1984) predicted that appraising oneself as strong in the presence of a negative outcome would result in particular emotions (i.e., frustration instead of sadness, distress, or fear; anger, instead of dislike; regret instead of guilt). While this hypothesis was not supported, possessing low power was generally associated with negative feelings. Roseman et al. (1990) argue, however, that assessments of power—as they measured them—may have resulted in assessments based on the outcome itself (e.g., I’m powerless if I couldn’t prevent a negative event) rather than assessments of how effectively one might deal with the negative outcome in the future. Thus the role of power in appraisals of emotions in this latter sense is unclear. Nonetheless, there is fairly convincing evidence that a finite number of salient situational features (similar or isomorphic to the ones obtained in situation perception research) are strongly related to emotional states, most of which (e.g., friendliness, anger, affection, guilt) no doubt have pronounced effects on communicative behaviors.

Roseman’s task was to ascertain the deep structures and dimensions that lead up to particular emotions. Our task, analogously, may be to ascertain what “deep structures” tend to elicit the inferences that this is an “x” and not a “y” situation. Let us suggest what we might need to know to approach situations in a similar way.

First, for emotions, there is a good vocabulary; we know what emotions (e.g., frustration versus anger) we are trying to understand and differentiate. Are there analogous “psychological situational” terms? Perhaps. In everyday language use, people do refer to particular situations. For example, they might say, “That was a challenging situation,” “a frustrating situation,” “a stressful situation,” “a no-win situation,” “a romantic situation,” “a cooperative situation,” or “a helpful situation.” Many emotion terms (e.g., sadness, disgusting, guilt, anger, fear) suggest corresponding psychological situations (e.g., sad situation, disgusting situation, guilt provoking situation, conflict situation, threatening situation). In fact, mapping situations onto Roseman’s emotions might be a useful step. For example, threatening situations may map unto fear (uncertain, circumstance caused appraisal involving not achieving what one wants to achieve or not avoiding what one wants to avoid, and feeling that one may be relatively powerless to bring about the goals desired). Challenging situations, on the other hand, may map unto “hope” or “frustration.” Challenging situations may result when the individual perceives that he or she may be able to bring to bear resources (e.g., is powerful) to respond effectively to the current circumstances.

Still, many situations may map onto a single “emotion.” For example, in Roseman’s theory, “liking” or “affection” is a positive emotion, elicited when one achieves that which one wishes to achieve or avoids that which one wishes to avoid and attributes this outcome to another. Situations that may fall within this liking emotion category may include a variety of situations (e.g., helpful situations, friendly situations, romantic situations, endearing situations, cooperative situations, intimate situations, supportive situations, and so forth). This suggests that emotions alone do not provide a complete basis for differentiating situations. To understand situations and differentiate among them seems to require a more
complete understanding of persons, relationships, sequences of actions, and settings. This is a tall order indeed! Our task, however, might be easier if there were a common set of units for understanding the interfaces among persons, emotions, settings, relationships, actions, and so forth. Below, we consider how knowledge structures may provide for such a common set of units.

Knowledge Structures and Situations

Miller and Read (1987, 1991; Read & Miller, 1989) have argued for a common set of units—goals, plans, resources, and beliefs—that are useful for understanding persons, situations, relationships, and social interactions and the links among these. In addition, these concepts are useful for understanding other concepts that are important for understanding situations: emotions (Roseman, 1984; Roseman et al., 1990) and differences within and between cultures (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Forgas, 1988).

Goals and Other Knowledge Structures

There is a long tradition in a variety of disciplines and domains suggesting that some knowledge structures—such as goals, plans, resources, and beliefs—might be particularly useful units for understanding persons (Adler, 1964; Allport, 1937; Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987; Miller & Read, 1987, 1991; Mischel, 1973, 1979; Murray, 1938; Pervin, 1989; Read & Miller, 1989, 1993a, 1993b; Wilensky, 1983), situations and cultures (Argyle et al., 1981; Cody, Canary, & Smith, 1994; Cody & McLaughlin, 1985; D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992; Mischel, 1973, 1979; Pervin, 1989; Read & Miller, 1989), interactions (Dillard, 1990a, 1990b; Miller & Read, 1987, 1991; Read & Miller, 1989; Schank & Abelson, 1977), emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1984; Roseman et al., 1990), and relationships (Miller & Read, 1987; Planalp, 1985). Miller and Read (1987, 1991; Read & Miller, 1989) have argued, as we will see below, that goals (along with plans, resources, and beliefs) are such useful units of analysis because they may underlie so many different but interwoven and related concepts. Below, we provide a bit more detail regarding each of these units and then detail some of the links between situations and goals.

Goals. For our purposes, a goal is, simply, something that an individual wants or desires to attain because it is rewarding in its own right. Goals may be activated and made salient by the situation or the behaviors or appearance of others, or they may be chronically salient for individuals. Some researchers have focused on particular social goals common in relationships involving influence, compliance, or persuasion (Bisanz & Rule, 1990; Cody et al., 1994; Dillard, 1990a, 1990b). Others have focused on the goals specific to particular types of close relationships, such as sexual relationships (De Bro, 1993). Still others have sought to identify those goals that are prominent in interpersonal communication such as to seek pleasure, to show affection, to seek inclusion or attention, to escape, to relax, and to control others or the situation (Rubin, Perse, & Barbato, 1988). A recent hierarchical taxonomy of human goals (Chulef, 1993) suggests that goals tend to cluster into three higher-order clusters: personal, social, and family goals. The personal goal cluster includes goals related to intellectual and spiritual growth, ethics and happiness, enjoyment, and desires to experience life in new and exciting
ways. The social cluster includes goals relevant to social interactions (e.g., to be friendly, competitive, cooperative, supportive, or approval seeking). The family goals cluster relates to family, marriage, romance, and sex.

Obviously, multiple goals may be activated at the same time. Exactly how one decides among these goals, or integrates them, is an important area of continuing theoretical and research activity (Berger & Jordon, 1992; Dillard, 1990a, 1990b; Greene & Lindsey, 1989; Miller & Read, 1987, 1991; Miller, Bettencourt, De Bro, & Hoffmann, 1993; Wilson, 1990).

**Plans and strategies.** These are organized sequences of behaviors, often composed of sequences or subplans linked together, that are aimed at achieving one or more goals. Plans may contain considerable detail and can be relatively “automatic” or relatively “unconscious” (Barth, 1990; Burscheid, 1983; Kellermann, 1992; Mand- der, 1975; Miller & Read, 1987). Individuals are apt to have hierarchies of plans and strategies; which one is employed is apt to depend upon a host of factors such as one’s perception of the context, the rapidity with which the choice must be made, prior experiences and expectations, and probable success of the strategy for achieving this goal and not adversely affecting other important goals. Although too voluminous a literature to review here (for recent reviews, see Canary & Cody, 1994; Daly & Wiemann, 1994), a number of communication scholars have examined strategies and plans for how to initiate a date (Berger & Bell, 1988), how to acquire resources from intimates (Rolloff, Janiszewski, McGrath, Burns, & Manrai, 1988), how to maintain a marriage (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Canary & Stafford, 1992), how to overcome obstacles to interpersonal compliance (Rolloff & Janiszewski, 1989), or how to acquire information about the state of a relationship (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984). Some communication scholars have even argued that “communication, by its very nature, can not nor be strategic” (Kellermann, 1992, p. 288).

Related to the idea of a plan or strategy is the concept of a script (Schank & Abelson, 1977). A script is a much more specific and stereotyped sequence of actions than a plan or strategy, which is more general and abstract. A variety of social interaction scripts (Pryor & Merluzzi, 1985), relational scripts (Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Greene, 1989), and sexual scripts (Burns, Mohntan, & Miller, 1993; L. C. Miller et al., 1993) have been examined. Activating one portion of a sexual script, such as leaving with a man from a bar to go “his place,” may activate particular sexual scripts such as “one night stand” or “pickup” scripts (Read & Miller, 1993a). In early work on scripts, Bower, Black, and Turner (1979) discovered that confusion between different portions of medical scripts (e.g., going to see a dentist or doctor) occurred, which suggested that at least portions of scripts (e.g., waiting room scene) were general to all medical—and perhaps professional—scripts, and not specific to a particular medical interaction, while other portions of the scripts were specific to the particular medical interaction (e.g., seeing the drill in the dentist’s office and climbing into the dentist’s chair; opening one’s mouth and saying “ah” when seeing a tongue depressor). A structure that was more general and flexible than scripts, but not so general and abstract as plans, was needed. To fill this void, Schank (1982) coined the phrase MOPs, or memory organizational packets that serve to organize scenes. MOPs have proven to be useful devices for understanding communication partners in social interactions (see Kellermann, 1991).

**Beliefs.** Which goals and strategies are chosen may also be influenced by one’s beliefs about the world. One’s beliefs may affect which goals and plans are
implemented and what inferences are made about behavior (one’s own as well as that of others). End beliefs relate to goals, per se, such as “having people like me is rewarding”; means beliefs, such as “disclosing about myself is a good way to get others to like and pay attention to me,” are beliefs about the plans or strategies an individual would adopt to reach his or her goals. Beliefs may involve evaluations about morality and effectiveness of plans, and inferences about the characteristics and likely behavior of others generally (e.g., “People are basically out to get what they can”). Beliefs may also be specific to particular relationships (e.g., “If I tell her this, she’ll continue talking to me”). These beliefs in particular relationships may guide future interpretations (Planalp, 1985). Individuals may have beliefs that are fairly idiosyncratic and other beliefs regarding appropriate behavior and how and what one should and shouldn’t do that are shared with most members of a given culture or subculture (e.g., rules, norms).

Resources. Most of the time, to enact and carry out plans successfully, resources are needed. Surprisingly little is known about the role and nature of perceived and actual resources in influencing the successful completion and coordination of plans (Miller & Berg, 1984; Wilensky, 1983). Miller and Read (1987; Read & Miller, 1989) argue that resources could be broken down into personal resources that the individual had access to chronically such as cognitive resources, knowledge, specialized talents and abilities, social, expressive, and communicative skills, physical attributes, coping skills, status, possessions, and time; resources afforded by the nature of the situation, including access to others, objects, and experiences; and relational resources such as transactional memories (Wegner, Giuliano, & Heckel, 1985), material resources, affective, physical and psychological resources, and support.

Complex Structures Useful for Understanding Situations

As we argued earlier, goals, plans, resources, and beliefs may be important components of various higher-order structures important for understanding situations. Earlier, in describing work on emotions (Roseman, 1984; Roseman et al., 1990), it was apparent that perceptions regarding whether one’s goals were achieved or not played a major role in appraisals of various emotional states in situations. Similarly, others have argued that goals, as well as plans, resources, and beliefs, are useful structures for thinking about traits and relationships. In fact, Miller and Read (1987, 1991; Read & Miller, 1989) have argued that some of these higher-order concepts, such as traits, are summaries of underlying configurations of knowledge structures.

Person structures. Miller and Read (1987; Read & Miller, 1989) have argued that a typical unit in personality—traits—could be usefully construed in terms of chronic configurations of goals, plans, resources, and beliefs. For example, Miller and Read (1987; Read & Miller, 1989) argued that traits such as loneliness and sociability and traits involving “self-presentation” could be thought of as having one or more components in common. For example, sociable and lonely individuals may want to make friends and please others, those interested in self-presentation, in contrast, may want to make a good impression. Sociable and lonely people, however, may differ in their chronic plans, resources, and beliefs—differences that may affect goal achievement over time. Sociable individuals and those chronically
concerned with self-presentation—while having very different goals—might have considerable overlap in plans, resources, and beliefs. Support for this conceptualization of traits—especially the centrality of goals in making trait inferences—suggests its viability (Borkenau, 1990; Read, Jones, & Miller, 1990).

In addition, Miller and Read have been attempting to understand the deep structures—such as goals and other knowledge structures—that result in particular inferences about others involving traits and roles, such as whether someone is a “rapist” or a “regular guy” or whether the woman in a “rape trial” is a “slut” or a “diligent mother” and “innocent victim” (Miller & Read, 1991; Read & Miller, 1993a). Such units—goals, plans, resources, and beliefs—we would argue are useful not only for thinking about and making inferences about persons and situations but also useful for understanding and predicting how configurations of these units predict ongoing behavior.

**Relationships.** Goals, and their relationship to plans, resources, and beliefs, are apt to play a major role in differentiating various relationships from one another. As mentioned earlier, plans, resources, and beliefs may affect the successful completion of one’s own goals; they may also affect the successful completion of a relationship partner’s goals. And both intrapersonal goals and interpersonal goals may be complementary or they may conflict (for additional detail regarding the nature of these associations, see Miller & Read, 1987; Read & Miller, 1989; Wilensky, 1983). Early work by Abelson (1973) defined a number of interpersonal themes in terms of the interrelated plans of two individuals. In that framework, each actor’s plan involved subgoals that could be facilitated or inhibited by the other. The interpersonal relations among these goals could be thought of in terms of the role of the agent, relative to the other (e.g., as an agent of the other’s plan), the approval or disapproval of the other’s plan (e.g., an attitude), and the resources of the other to facilitate or hinder that goal (e.g., facilitative ability). Defining a conceptual space, various interpersonal themes could be defined in terms of these dimensions. For example, betrayal can be viewed in the following way: One actor, having previously agreed to serve as an agent, instead hinders the other’s goal, preventing that other from attaining it. Similarly, Miller and Read (1991) have argued that some terms, like revenge, have a storylike structure, regarding the relationships among the characters and the goals that were activated and achieved. Thus to say that someone sought revenge means that an actor had reason to think that another did her a wrong (blocked her goal), that she is in a position (e.g., has the resources) to keep the other from reaching his or her goals, and that she has attempted to achieve this outcome on one or more occasions.

There are several points of note here. First, goals, plans, resources, and beliefs of the parties of a relationship may interact to facilitate or hinder each partner’s goal achievement. Such interpersonal themes and resultant affective reactions are apt to greatly affect the salience of various features of the situation and the nature of the “situation” that is construed by the interactants and by observers. Second, some personality and relationship terms in our language seem to be summaries that capture the richness of individuals’ goals, resources, plans, and beliefs in their relationships with one another.

**Understanding Situations**

**Situations and goals.** Our meaning of “situations” is intimately interwoven with various types of “goals.” For example, Cody et al. (1994) found that 42 situations
commonly studied in "compliance gaining" work can be more parsimoniously classified into 12 basic types of goals, with each goal defined or characterized in terms of a few salient situational features. For instance, a goal to initiate a relationship possesses salient characteristics involving potential long-term relational consequences, high levels of apprehension, high levels of personal benefits, and high levels of intimacy and homophily (similarity). The goal of giving advice can be characterized as involving low levels of situation apprehension, low levels of personal benefits (the relational partner is usually the one who benefits), and typically involves a close friend or relative (see Cody et al., 1994; Dillard, 1990a, for a discussion of goals and situational features that can be used to characterize goals).

The particular configuration of goals activated, whether we have achieved them or believe we can achieve them, and the role of others in facilitating or inhibiting goal achievement are apt to play an important role in our constructions that this is an "x" and not a "y" situation. Furthermore, the particular goal structures that are activated for a given individual are apt to play a role in the enactment of his or her behaviors that will in turn define the "situation" in the ongoing social interaction. Goals are a more dynamic unit than the larger and more abstract concept "situation." While situational features largely describe communicators' perceptions and summarize the anticipated or actual emotions that are elicited (see Cody et al., 1994, and Dillard, 1990a, 1990b, for more specific details on this matter), goals are apt to play a central role not only in defining the "situation" but in directing subsequent communicative behaviors, such as devising plans, implementing plans, and employing multiple tactics over time.

One of the advantages of studying goals deals with the basic fact that there are probably a finite, parsimonious set of goals (perhaps 12 to 30 goals), while there may exist hundreds of situations available for study. In addition, goals, as suggested above, can be construed as a common unit across a number of different domains that are relevant to situational constructions such as emotions, inferences about others' traits and characteristics, inferences about relationships, and so forth. This is crucial because these components are interwoven. A number of projects assessing the nature of goals (Bisanz & Rule, 1990; Cody et al., 1994; Dillard, 1990a, 1990b) indicate that the "who" component strongly affects the "what" or activities component; the goals communicators pursue are strongly interwoven with the relationships of the people involved in the situations. For example, most goals involving obtaining permission from others deal with parents and with others in positions of authority, while most gain assistance goals involve brothers/sisters or peers (i.e., friends, roommates, dates) (see Cody et al., 1994; Rule & Bisanz, 1987; Rule, Bisanz, & Kohn, 1985). Thus goals also provide a more dynamic approach to the study of communicative behaviors.

Situations as configurations. Others have argued that situations could be thought of not only in terms of goals but also in terms of structures analogous to plans, resources, and beliefs. For example, Argyle et al.'s (1981) analysis of situations argues for the importance of goals whose satisfaction a particular situation affords. In addition, associated with these situations are rules governing appropriate behaviors in these situations and roles people can fill: These make certain plans more salient and restrict others. Situations often afford resources important for successful goal enactment. More recently, others (e.g., Woods, 1993) have argued that the "effective stimuli in a multifaceted situation can be characterized, and the means
is a semantic and pragmatic analysis of environment-cognitive agent relationships with respect to the goals/resources of the agent and the demands/constraints in the environment” (p. 231). Similarly, goals, and the plans and strategies necessary to achieve those goals, have been central concepts in understanding social interaction (e.g., Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Wilensky, 1983) and as reviewed earlier—what are apt to be important components of situations—emotions (Roseman, 1984; Roseman et al., 1990), traits (Miller & Read, 1987; Read & Miller, 1989), and relationships (Abelson, 1973; Miller & Read, 1987; Read & Miller, 1989).

What, then, makes a situation a situation? Perhaps it would be useful to rethink dimensions associated with situations in terms of configurations of goals, plans, resources, and beliefs. Whether a situation is positive or negative (pleasurable or not) would seem to greatly depend upon whether we are likely to achieve our goals or not (and whether we in fact succeed or not). Whether others are facilitating or inhibiting our goal achievement should play a major role in construing the situation as friendly or not, or cooperative or competitive. The greater the uncertainty—or the more our actions seem unable to bring about the desired goals or avoid undesired goals—the more anxious we may become. Resources of the individual and whether others can influence the outcome or not (as well as whether individuals have the right to influence and choose to influence others as well as whether the influence is desired or not, one way or two way, able to be resisted or not) are apt to play a major role in defining other important features of the situation (e.g., dominance). We would argue, then, that at any point in time the “situation,” from the vantage point of the construer, is defined by the configuration of and relationships among activated evaluations of individuals’ goals, whether these goals can (or should) be achieved or not and why or why not (e.g., an assessment of whether that which is needed to achieve these goals is available due to resources in the setting, through others or oneself, and whether others will move to block or facilitate goals—and why), and the current status and likelihood of the achievement of these goals.

Goals, plans, resources, and beliefs are useful concepts not only in thinking about making sense out of others’ behaviors—but also in construing situations. They are also useful units for considering—once our goals have been activated by such a construction process—how our goals activate communicative behaviors.

“Situations” as Dynamic Constructions

When we enter into any situation, we are often confronted with a vast array of information about the persons in the context, their roles, the setting itself, and so forth. The work reviewed earlier suggests that different situations may be differentiated in terms of a variety of dimensions. For example, when considering the “who” of the situation, we use dimensions involving relational intimacy, visibility, regulation, the cooperative-competitive dimension, a future orientation, equality, and so forth. In considering global perceptions of situations, concepts such as intimacy, pleasantness, apprehension, involvement, and dominance may be important for differentiating one situation from the next, at least from the vantage point of each of the participants or audience members. And we have argued that many if not all of these dimensions might be rethought in terms of underlying goal structures. By doing so, we would argue, it becomes easier to think about the richness of the process of understanding situations and the dynamics by which our construc-
tions of situations may change. To explore this process and make it more concrete, we rely on the following example of the William Smith Kennedy rape trial taken from Read and Miller (1993a).

William Kennedy Smith met Patricia Bowman at AuBar, a West Palm Beach night spot. They talked, danced, and then left for the Kennedy family’s oceanside compound. What followed, Patricia claimed, was a brutal rape; William claimed it was consensual sex. Was William—as argued by the defense attorney at his rape trial—a gregarious, “regular guy” besieged by a “woman scorned.” Or, was he—as the prosecution argued—a “Dr. Jekyll” who turned into a “Mr. Hyde” and attacked an unsuspecting, diligent mother. Throughout the nationally televised trial, viewers’ perceptions often shifted as new witnesses and testimony were introduced. (p. 526)

Relying on a model of social explanation (Miller & Read, 1991) that integrates work on a knowledge structure approach to understanding (e.g., Galambos, Abelson, & Black, 1986; Schank & Abelson, 1977; Wilensky, 1983), with Kintsch’s (1988) construction-integration model of discourse comprehension and Thagard’s (1989, 1992, 1993) model of explanatory coherence, Read and Miller (1993a) argue that individuals “understand” a situation at any point in time in the following way. Throughout the interaction, input (e.g., behavior, speech acts, appearance, events) activates related concepts (e.g., goals, plans, scripts, themes, traits, roles, resource availability) via a spreading activation process (e.g., Collins & Loftus, 1975). Initially, concepts are activated somewhat “promiscuously” (Kintsch, 1988) with little regard to their internal consistency. Thus alternative or contradictory explanations of the same event may be activated at the same time. These concepts are linked into a heterogeneous network. In contrast to Kintsch (1988), others have argued that there is a strong bias for linking concepts that have causal and goal-based relations to each other (Miller & Read, 1991, 1993a; see also Thagard, 1992, 1993). Possible plans may generate expectations and aid in interpreting subsequent input. Throughout, when we identify an action as part of a plan, we search for the goal that it is a part of and assess whether the goal is an end goal or part of a larger plan. If the latter, we try to identify the source of the plan, such as interpersonal roles, personal relationships, or other sources. And we assess whether this developing “model” jibes with other information available regarding the person, relationship, setting, and so forth. At this point the network consists of concepts that are relevant, irrelevant, or even inconsistent with the eventual representation and explanation of the event.

Because a more complete discussion of this process is available elsewhere (Miller & Read, 1991), it is sufficient to note here that concepts may be positively linked (e.g., where the activation of one concept increases the activation of another, such as a goal or causally related concepts), negatively linked (e.g., when two concepts contradict or are inconsistent with one another), or not linked at all. In Figure 5.1, we illustrate part of the Kennedy Smith rape trial. The concept or “node” represented in the upper-left-hand corner is as follows: “She was a caring and concerned single mother.” The arrow to the node, “She wanted to get medical advice regarding her daughter,” indicates a positive link such that the former explains why she engaged in the later behavior. The concept “she didn’t want sex” is negatively associated with “she wanted sex” because these concepts contradict one another; the activation of one concept decreases the activation of another.

In a second step, the explanatory coherence of alternative representations of the network are evaluated. To do this, a parallel constraint satisfaction process
(Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986), that implements Thagard's (1989) model of explanatory coherence, is applied to the network. These principles include, for example, *breadth*—that is, an explanation that explains more of the facts will be coherent. "William went with his uncle and cousin to the AuBar" and "William danced and talked to strangers" are both behaviors to be explained. The former could be explained by William's being "shy" (e.g., needing other males around to go to a bar); the second behavior could be explained by "being flirtatious."
However, because both behaviors could be explained by being gregarious, this trait receives activation from both behaviors and therefore receives the highest activation of the explanatory hypotheses. This is an example of how the principle of breadth is implemented by summing the activation of all the things that are explained. Other principles are also implemented in the simulation, including parsimony or simplicity (i.e., the explanation requiring the fewest assumptions will be more coherent); being explained (explanations are more acceptable if they are explained by further explanations); unexplained data (the goodness of a concept as an explanation for an individual’s behavior should be reduced to the extent that some of the behavior is unexplained); unification (a set of explanatory hypotheses are more coherent if they jointly explain all the evidence rather than requiring unique explanatory hypotheses to explain pieces of evidence); and analogy (explanations are more coherent if they are supported by an analogy to another system with the same causal structure). In addition, Thagard (1992) argues that the evaluation of explanations is comparative; the coherence of an explanation is a function of the coherence of alternatives. The goodness of a mediocre explanation will decrease when a more coherent alternative explanation is available. This follows because conflicting explanations have inhibitory links to each other. Read and his colleagues (Read & Cesa, 1991; Read & Marcus-Newhall, 1993) have provided experimental evidence for most of these principles in the construction of social explanations.

In Figure 5.1, one set of nodes, marked with solid borders, are those that involve “facts” that are not in contention and that need to be explained in a simplified model of the sexual interaction between William Kennedy Smith and Patricia Bowman. Nodes supporting William Smith raping Patricia Bowman are marked with a diagonal-line border while nodes supporting Smith’s not raping her are marked with a dense-dot border. If these were the only nodes activated, the conclusion that they had had consensual sex would be more activated than the conclusion that William had raped Patricia, and much more likely to provide the salient interpretation of the situation. While our conclusion regarding rape may hinge on whether we believe the woman wanted sex or did not, these crucial nodes in the network may receive additional activation from other nodes not directly related to this issue (for example, whether the woman was seeking revenge or not).

This process iteratively converges on a pattern of node activations that is the best “compromise” among the constraints imposed by the positive and negative links among the nodes. The activation of each node is updated in parallel, based on its current activation, the activation of other nodes to which it is linked, and the strength of those links. This updating process continues until the activation of the nodes’ asymptotes. Activation of a concept increases with more and stronger excitatory links and decreases with more and stronger inhibitory links. By this process, concepts that are not supported by other concepts “die out” and concepts that are supported are strengthened. Highly activated concepts are the representation of the interaction up to that point. As in most symbolic connectionist systems, the activation of a proposition indicates its degree of acceptability—the degree to which the individual believes that the proposition describes the world.

Miller and Read (1991) argue that the meanings of behaviors in social interactions are dynamic; that is, they are the continuing changing product of mutually influencing elements in the system (Miller et al., 1993). How does this analysis help us to understand “situations”? For any individual, at any point in time, the activated goals, plans, resources, and beliefs will be more or less likely to activate
higher-order "situational" structures. (For example, "This is a challenging situation versus a threatening one." "This is a demeaning situation versus this is a 'stand up' no matter what the consequences situation." "This is a rape versus this is consensual sex." "This is a situation involving revenge or a 'wake-up' call to other women regarding sexual predators." And so on.)

Read and Miller (1993a) have argued that many of Patricia's behaviors such as dancing and talking to William in a bar in the early morning and driving home with him may have activated for many jurors the components of a one night stand sexual script (Miller et al., 1993); this would tend to enhance the activation of the consensual sex interpretation. The goals of wanting revenge versus wanting to warn other women are probably crucial ones, influencing rape versus consensual sex activation. Revenge here may be construed as an event script, or general "frame," possessing a number of slots that need to be filled. According to Read and Miller (1993),

the slots are (1) a behavior, which consisted of bringing charges against William, (2) consequences of the behavior which consist of hurting William's reputation, possibly sending him to jail or hurting him professionally, (3) the roles (Patricia was a "woman scorned"; William was a "regular guy" who acted out a typical sexual script for a "one night stand") and the characteristics of the participants in the act (Patricia was emotionally unstable; because of that it only took being angry with William for using Patricia's wrong name after sex to provoke Patricia to try to hurt William; she was manipulative; William was gregarious, although sleazy), (4) resources involved (she gathered evidence such as goods from the compound to make a case that she was there that night; she provided enough evidence to the prosecution that they pursued the case in court; access to the media could also service to make a case against William), and (5) the goals and intentions of the participants (Patricia's goal was to hurt William to make him pay for having hurt her). To the extent these components are all activated by the set of behaviors and other inferences in the representation (and more so than an alternative representation), that trait, "vengeful" should be most activated as the most coherent explanation. Thus, the defense needed to deactivate such "slots" in building this case: the prosecution needed to deactivate them and activate an alternative trait frame (e.g., Patricia as a caring woman). (p. 532)

Note here that the trait frame being built may have many of the same slots as a "situation" frame for revenge. In any event, those structures or "nodes" that are most activated will be likely to define "the current situation."

Some situations may have many "slots" in common with one another. Consider threatening and challenging situations. In both, actors want to avoid something or achieve something but there are obstacles (e.g., intrapersonal, interpersonal, circumstantial) in the path of achieving the goal or goals. One is apt to construe a situation as "challenging" when one believes one has a good chance (i.e., because of resources and plans available) of overcoming those obstacles. If we view a situation as "threatening," the expectation for goal achievement is apt to be much lower and the consequences for failing to achieve the goal may be much greater. If differentiating components are more activated than the alternatives, one situational inference will be more activated than another. As the particulars underlying these constructions change, so too will the likely activation of the most activated construction. Situations that differ from one another in terms of one or two underlying components are more likely to be "transformed into" or "confused with" one another than situations differing in terms of many underlying components.
Given a current model of the situation—including a model of the goals of the other—higher-order structures, including our own currently activated goals, and perceptions of possible plans and resources to bring to bear to achieve these goals, may be activated and guide subsequent action. In the section below, we discuss the connection between situation perception and strategy enactment that will influence, in turn, how the next behavioral sequence will be incorporated into our representation of the next "situation."

On the Dynamics of Situations and Behavioral Enactment

Links Among Situation Perception Factors, Goals, and Message Strategies

The knowledge base concerning situations enables the individual to plan behavior that may effectively produce a desired outcome. A number of models of persuasion behaviors have been proposed over the years (Dillard, 1990a, 1990b; Hunter & Boster, 1978, 1979, 1984; Smith, 1984). Clark (1979; Clark & Delia, 1979), for instance, argued that strategies are selected on the basis of the importance of three goals: instrumental, relational, and identity management. A number of studies have shown that people select strategies on the basis of the costs or risks associated with the implementation of the strategies (for example, Cody, McLaughlin, & Schneider, 1981; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; McLaughlin, Cody, & Robey, 1980; Sillars, 1980b). Nearly all of these models assume that there are strategies that are appropriate or normative for certain situations and that situation perception influences both the amount of pressure the agent will employ and the amount of cost associated with strategy selection.

Much of what we currently know about situational influences supports two general, yet parsimonious, propositions. First, a person employs a message strategy based on his or her perceptions of how effective the message will be in influencing the target's attitudes and/or behavior. Underlying this proposition is the assumption that, as individuals experience a sufficient number of situations to learn how to differentiate one situation from another, they also learn what tactics do not work in various situations and which tactics may lead to success. As Schlenker (1980) has noted, people will attempt to be successful by selecting messages that they believe are fitted to the situation as it appears to the audience. Hence, to be forgiven, increased penitence is required as the severity of the offense increases (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Schlenker & Darby, 1981); to be persuasive, increased supporting evidence is required to overcome resistance; and so forth (for recent reviews of work on accounts and the consequences of accounts, see McLaughlin, Cody, & Read, 1993).

Second, when selecting an effective strategy, a person's choice of strategy is further refined by the desire to maximize his or her expected gains while minimizing costs—the "general hedonic proposition" (Schlenker, 1980, p. 17), or what is referred to as the "minimax principle" in bargaining. Many of the recently proposed models argue that cost or risk is fundamental to understanding why people select the strategies they select and implement. Costs, paralleling Clark and Delia's (1979) goals, can stem from an instrumental nature, a relational loss, or a discrediting of one's image. If a person used coercive power, for example, he or she may not only fail to change behavior but can prompt retaliation by the target, a coalition
formed by the target, the target’s union, and so forth; aggressive, or hostile, acts are often reciprocated (Cody & Braaten, 1992; Schonbach, 1990; Schonbach & Klebaumhuter, 1990).

Unfortunately, we know remarkably little about links between situation perception and communicative behaviors for five reasons:

1. Relatively few studies have explored situational influences beyond the paper-pencil surveys that produced so many inconsistent findings in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, a number of studies have relied on paper-pencil surveys of “compliance-gaining messages” and have summed all of the “likelihood-of-use” evaluations into a single index of “message strategy selection” and failed to study basic theoretical bases of power (Raven & Kruglanski, 1970) or subtle forms of influence (i.e., Cialdini, 1993). Subsequently, we know that a number of situational features may not be related to increased pressure (Dillard & Burgoon, 1985), but results are far too limiting to warrant any other conclusion.

2. Relatively few studies have precalibrated perceptions of situations from the point of view of the respondents. We cannot assume that respondents share the same perceptions of situations as do experimenters, or that respondents’ perceptions are homogeneous, or that the respondents’ share identical motivations (see comments above concerning individual differences).

3. Relatively few studies have selected more than one situation to represent a general type of event in a factorial design (see, for instance, the chapter on interpersonal influence in O’Keefe, 1990).

4. Relatively few unflawed studies have explored the impact of more than two or three factors at a time.

5. Little research has truly reflected the interactional nature of communication.

For these reasons, we will very briefly overview some of the results that are available.

**Intimacy.** An increase in emotional attachment or in knowledge about one’s partner affects whether certain strategies are functional or not and generally increases the importance of relational and image goals (see Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979). Further, it is obvious that referent influence (appeals to love, empathic understanding, and so forth) can rarely be used effectively in less intimate relationships (Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975; Raven & Kruglanski, 1970). Generally, intimacy is associated with more integrative or “prosocial” tactics than with tactics destructive to the relationship, although research supporting both effects has been reported. “Liking” the target (Michener & Schwertfeger, 1972) and “desired liking from the target” (Clark, 1979) parallel the intimacy variable. Liking results in withdrawal from persuasion, the use of demand creation (requiring “that the influencer increase the target’s desire for whatever outcomes the influencer mediates”), and avoidance of both outcome blockage and extension of the power network (Michener & Schwertfeger, 1972, p. 192). Generally, desire for liking results in strategies more conciliatory in nature than destructive (Baxter, 1984; Clark, 1979). More recently, De Bro (1993) has examined how various types of sexual relationships may be differentiated from one another in terms of their underlying goal configurations. For example, individuals in long-term relationships versus those in one night stands are more concerned with having positive feelings and less concerned with having control in the relationship; perhaps, not surprising, they are less likely to use deception as a strategy for negotiating safer sex.
On the other hand, some writers have argued that, when intimacy is significantly associated with prosocial strategies, the size of the effect is small when employing the Marwell and Schmitt (1967) strategies (see Boster & Stiff, 1984; Dillard & Burgoon, 1985). Further, Fitzpatrick and Winke (1979) found that, when engaging in a conflict, married persons employed more emotionally charged tactics than individuals who were exclusively dating.

How do we reconcile these results? As Dillard and Burgoon (1985) suggest, it is very likely that high intimacy not only reflects a particular set of qualities of the relationship (emotional attachment and so on) but also reflects a greater number of shared situations; nonintimates communicate in a limited range of events while intimates experience more situations together as well as a wider range of them. As a consequence, then, because most situations are positive (or else the relationship won’t stay intimate for long), there is a significant but weak correlation between intimacy and prosocial strategies. When married couples recall “conflict” events, they recall qualitatively different types of conflicts than do couples who are only dating. Thus intimacy is linked to the functional utility of both empathic understanding/referent power and manipulation tactics but only moderately influences the use of conciliatory tactics. In the latter, the actual use of the tactics depends on whether an intimate other is contrasted with a disliked other (Clark, 1979; Michener & Schwertfeger, 1972) or depends on the operation of other characteristics of the situation (goals and so on), not merely the nature of the relationship. Additionally, Cody et al. (1994) found that goals college students pursued differed substantially from one type of relationship (parent, friend, roommate, and so on) to another (stranger, bureaucrat, and so on).

**Dominance.** Dominant, higher status communicators have a wider range of potential strategies available for use than do others (Kipnis & Cohen, 1980; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1980, 1983)—including assertiveness, negative administrative sanctions, making demands—as well as political strategies for further increasing power (see Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994, chap. 12; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Wilkinson & Kipnis, 1978).

**Rights to persuade.** Dillard and Burgoon (1985) found that rights were significantly related to increased pressure, while Kipnis and Cohen (1980) found that, when assigning work to another (a context in which the agent has high rights), workers used more “assertiveness.” McLaughlin et al. (1980), in a study of compliance resisting, found that high rights to resist were associated with justification and nonnegotiation tactics and with less negotiation (especially in nonintimate contexts) than when rights were limited. Legitimacy of request, or rights, plays an important role in organizational settings (see Hirokawa, McIvy, & Miura, 1991; also see Bettinghaus & Cody, 1994, chap. 12).

**Personal benefits.** The use of pressure in a message has been associated with the level of personal benefit to be derived for the communicator (Clark, 1979). Kipnis and Cohen (1980) found that, when the communicator desired a benefit from a superior, the agent used exchange and ingratiation. When the communicator desired a benefit from a coworker, the agent employed exchange, ingratiation, and also relied on outside agencies to block the actions of the target. When the agent desired to obtain a benefit from a subordinate, the agent used assertiveness and coalitions. Thus, when one seeks personal benefits, there is an increase in distributive tactics
and a decrease in ingratiatiion) as the status of the communicator (relative to the target) decreases. Dillard and Burgoon (1985) found that self-benefit was associated with pressure (when subjects responded to a hypothetical situation) and both self-benefit and other-benefit were associated (weakly) with increased pressure (when respondents recalled an event they had experienced personally).

**Perceived resistance.** Sillars (1980a) found that perceived cooperativeness (paralleling the resistance/unfriendly factor) was associated with the use of integrative strategies and the avoidance of both passive-indirect and distributive strategies. Similarly, Kipnis and Cohen (1980) found that, when targets demonstrated resistance by refusing to comply with an agent’s first request, communicators were persistent and increased the use of personal negative sanctions (negative relational tactics similar to Sillars’s distributive strategies; see also Kipnis & Schmidt, 1980; Wilkinson & Kipnis, 1978).

**Relational consequences.** Perception of the relational consequences of persuasive attempts has been the topic of a limited amount of research, with few consistent results (Cody et al., 1981; Lustig & King, 1980; McLaughlin et al., 1980; Miller, Boster, Roloff, & Seibold, 1977). Clark (1979; also Dillard & Burgoon, 1985) questioned both the validity of the construct and its function. However, there is no doubt that communication behaviors change and that different tactics are employed when involved with relational growth, relational maintenance, and relational disengagement and termination. Canary and Cody (1994), in fact, devote an entire chapter to each of these types of relational consequences.

**Situation apprehension.** “Situation apprehension” refers to the extent to which the agent feels he or she will experience tension or nervousness in the situation and no doubt reflects the extent to which the agent feels confident in managing the situation so that a desirable outcome is achieved (Greene & Sparks, 1983). Generally speaking, high situation apprehension (a) should reflect a desire to monitor one’s image and (b) should emerge in the individual’s social environment as an additional cost of attempting to persuade others. In the former case, then, it is not surprising to find that persons use more face-maintenance tactics and are more likely to attempt exchange arrangements when apprehension is high, and employ greater effort and pressure when situation apprehension is low (Cody et al., 1985).

**Goal Activation and Behavioral Enactment**

While situations, we would argue, are constructions, as suggested above, at any given time these constructions may play a tremendous role in activating goals. That, in turn, activates plans and strategies for behavioral enactment (Miller & Read, 1991; Miller et al., 1993). Is there a way, analogous to understanding how individuals may represent sequences of actions and situations, to model the process by which goals lead to strategic choices?

As Thagard (1993) argues,

Decision making is inference to the best plan. When people make decisions, they do not simply choose an action to perform, but rather adopt complex plans on the basis of a holistic assessment of various competing actions and goals. Choosing a plan is in part a matter of evaluating goals as well as actions. Choice is made by arriving at a
plan or plans that involve actions and goals that are coherent with other actions and
goals to which one is committed. (p. 2)

Thagard (1993) argues for a set of principles of “deliberative coherence” governing
these relations among goals and actions and that specifies how decisions arise from
them; he also implements these principles in a connectionist model. These include the
following principles: symmetry (if one factor, action or goal x coheres with another y,
then y coheres with x); facilitation (if some number of actions together facilitate goal
x’s achievement, those actions will each cohere with G and with one another, but, the
more actions required, the lower the coherence among actions); incompatibility (when
two or more factors cannot both be performed [strongly incoherent] or when they are
difficult to achieve together [weakly incoherent]); goal priority (some goals are more
intrinsically desirable above and beyond reasons of coherence); judgment (judgments
regarding the acceptability of factual beliefs affect facilitation and competition rela-
tions); and decision (decisions depend upon the overall coherence of actions and goals).
Thagard’s model provides a bridge between representation, goal activation, and how
enactment of a particular strategy may occur following the perception of a given
“situation.” The implementation of Thagard’s principles (in a program called DECO)
also allows for the fact that some goals may be chronically activated and goals can
receive more or less activation given the particulars of the “situation.” Thus both
situational and person structures may make particular knowledge structures more or
less salient and together they may affect which structures are more likely to play a
guiding role in action—and subsequent representations of the new “situation.”

Individual and Cultural Differences That Affect
Which Goals Are Activated, Which Situations Are Entered,
and How Situations Are Construed

We expect that across individuals and across cultures, communicators—by their
very nature—are apt to process information in a similar way, with goal concepts being
central to causal analysis and playing a crucial role in behavioral enactment. We, along
with some anthropologists (D’Andrade, 1992), further suspect that communicators,
across cultures, may grapple with many of the same goals. The differences may be
shaped by the relative salience of those goals and how they play out and interact with
differing experiences and expectations within cultures (see Spence, 1985). As Spence
a similar point when he argued that all human beings are guided by two opposing
senses: a sense of self (or agency), involving the desire to assert and protect one’s self,
and a sense of selflessness (or communion), involving the desire to join with others.
Bakan argued that individual and cultural differences emerge from our differential
response to the challenges we all face in confronting and balancing these opposing
forces. For example, there may be general gender and individual differences in
responding to this challenge: Women (and “expressive” individuals; Spence & Helm-
reich, 1978) may emphasize the latter; men (and “instrumental” individuals; Spence &
Helmreich, 1978), the former (Gilligan, 1982; Spence, 1985; Spence & Helmreich, 1978).

Gender

Consistent with such hypothesized gender differences, Cody et al. (1994) found
that females, relative to males, (a) pursued more activities with brothers/sisters,
roommates, and friends; (b) asked for more assistance from parents, brothers/sisters, and roommates; (c) gave more advice to parents and to brothers/sisters; (d) volunteered for more charity work; (e) performed more work on relationships; and (f) enforced more rules concerning rights and obligations with their roommates. This work suggests that relational maintenance with dating partners, roommates, and friends may be more important for women than it is for men.

Furthermore, to the extent that different goals are chronically more salient for women and men, they may guide how men and women construe the communicative behaviors of others. For example, Miller, Cooke, Tsang, and Morgan (1992) argued that, if concepts related to success-competition are more activated for men, then male perceivers in evaluating male targets engaging in a “masculine” behavior (such as bragging) would provide more polarized evaluations of those men regarding attributions of success. Women, on the other hand, would provide more polarized attributions of women on communal dimensions (e.g., expressive characteristics) in evaluating women who engage in more “feminine” communicative behaviors (e.g., disclosing positively rather than bragging). Their pattern of findings was consistent with such polarization effects. Thus differences in chronically activated goals may affect not only what situations we seek but also the meanings we construe regarding others’ behaviors.

**Traits**

While numerous personality dimensions involve individual differences in underlying goals, historically, traits—and not goals—have been the unit of analysis in personality. Unfortunately, trait measures predict behavior only within a limited range of events. Trait measures predict some behaviors better than others for some people (especially when one averages over a set of events) and predict behavior over time better across “similar situations”: although what constitutes a “similar situation” is unclear (Bem & Allen, 1974; Block, 1971, 1977; Endler, 1982; Endler & Edwards, 1978; Epstein, 1979, 1983; Jaccard & Daly, 1980; Mischel, 1968; Mischel & Peake, 1982a, 1982b). Miller and Read (1987; Read & Miller, 1989) have argued that traits are culturally defined economical labels that help individuals “summarize” and make sense of observed regularities in configurations of commonly occurring goals, plans, resources, and beliefs. In fact, recent work by J. G. Miller (in press) suggests that trait concepts may not be universally useful for understanding persons. Thus understanding the emergent interactions among persons and situations may require a basic unit of analysis that is less static and culture specific than traits.

Still, most personality work has been conducted on traits. Even so, many traditional trait measures seem to address the resolution of a variety of goals and goal system tensions (Thorne & Miller, 1993; also see Markus & Kitayama, 1991, for a discussion of traits that may map onto cross-cultural differences). For example, contemporary personality dimensions such as “self-monitoring” may involve differences in how individuals chronically resolve a tension between wanting to “fit in” and be sensitive to contextual changes compared with wanting to maintain one’s own sense of individuality and uniqueness. Such goal differences may affect behavioral choices or how situations are construed. Thus high self-monitoring individuals prefer entering into situations that provide them with clearly defined cues as to how to behave, whereas low self-monitoring individuals prefer entering into situations in which they can exhibit their own underlying predispositions (Snyder, 1979, 1987; Snyder & Cantor, 1980; see also Snyder & Gangestad, 1982; Snyder & Kendzierski, 1982).
Similarly, introversion-extraversion may be a dimension that captures two naturally occurring goal tendencies in individuals: a desire to be with others, on the one hand, and seek social stimulation involving assertiveness, competitiveness, and intimacy (Argyrey et al., 1981; Furnham, 1981), versus a desire to be alone and avoid it. In many respects, most of us are in the middle on this dimension and our goals may vacillate over time. Consider our behavior at professional conferences. Initially, we find ourselves happily stimulated by others, then, after a while, feeling overstimulated, we seek the comfort of some less socially stimulating distraction or even the quiet of our hotel room.

And, along similar lines, forms of social anxiety, such as communication apprehension and loneliness, may involve a tension between wanting social attention and acceptance on the one hand and wanting to avoid rejection on the other. Lonely individuals who attribute their loneliness to personal shortcomings are less active in meeting other people (Peplau, Russell, & Heim, 1979). Further, the negative view of self, lack of social skills, and low trust in others appear to place lonely individuals in positions that perpetuate loneliness (Jones, Freeman, & Goswick, 1981; Solano, Batten, & Parish, 1982). Communication apprehension, shyness, and unwillingness to communicate are similarly related to avoidance of selected situations (Burgess, 1976; McCaliskey, 1982; Pilkonis, Heape, & Klein, 1980).

Some individuals (those who have an internal “locus of control”) may have more proactive goals and believe that they can achieve those goals by enacting their plans, compared with those who believe that outcomes are dictated by chance (Rotter, 1966). Internal/external control is related to cognitive processes and to behaviors congruent with self-perceptions (Rotter, 1966; Rotter & Mulry, 1965). Internals value positive reinforcement more highly when they think that reinforcement is conditional on their own actions rather than on the basis of luck or chance and thus feel a greater sense of motivation to achieve when they perceive task accomplishment is due to their own efforts. On the other hand, a salient consideration for externals is the basic question of whether or not they are lucky: consequently, they derive little value from being attentive in a “skills-determined” task “since success or failure cannot necessarily be attributed to luck in such a situation” (Brownell, 1982, p. 759). A number of studies have found that internals perform better in a “skills” type of task than in a “chance” type of task, whereas externals perform better in a “chance” task (Baron, Cowan, Ganz, & McDonald, 1974; Baron & Ganz, 1972; Houston, 1972; Kahle, 1980; Lefcort, 1972; Lefcort & Wine, 1969; for additional information concerning locus of control, see Canary & Cody, 1994; Canary, Cody, & Marston, 1986; Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988).

Clearly, however, individuals do not enter into new “situations” with simply a set of activated goals. Rather, individuals also enter into situations with preexisting experiences, beliefs and knowledge, resources, emotional tendencies, and so forth, all of which may not only affect what situations we enter but how we color and construe the current situation and make subsequent behavioral choices. While the particular array and configuration of preexisting structures is apt to be unique to each individual, as suggested above, patterns of similarities are apt to result in identifiable personality and gender differences. Such differences are also apt to result in marked cultural differences.

Cultural Differences in Situational Analysis and Goal Enactment

Bakan also argued that cultures would differ in how they responded to communal and agentic challenges. Eastern cultures appear to respond to this challenge by
emphasizing communal goals; Western cultures appear to emphasize agentic goals (Bakan, 1966; Hui, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; J. G. Miller, in press; Triandis, 1989). Such shared understandings of cultural goals, "values, norms, expectations, and emphases" in a culture and language, Forgas (1988) argued, "cannot but shape the way we implicitly represent our social environment" (p. 191). Such structures are apt to play an important role in activating concepts and interpreting behavior during ongoing social interaction (also see Read, 1987, for a detailed discussion of these issues).

Research from a variety of domains (Wierzbicka, 1992) suggests that the way situations and persons are perceived may be dependent on particular language codes that may be tightly tied to the goals and beliefs salient in that code. For example, in Russian literature and speech, the use of the passive is common, with the suggestion that individuals have little control over what happens to them (Wierzbicka, 1992). In contrast, in the United States, the emphasis is on what the individual can do to control his or her own fate or destiny. This contrast between Russians and Americans seems to mirror the locus of control dimension mentioned earlier.

We have suspected for some time that in different cultures, on average, different goals may be more or less salient or activated. For example, Murphy and Murphy (1968), based on Hsu's (1963) comparative analysis of Chinese, Hindu, and American ways of life, argued that, in Chinese society historically, mutual dependence and having and maintaining strong kinship relationships were predominant goals; related to this, they argued that there was a prevailing strong "situation determinism" in which the "self is deeply rooted in close human relations" (p. 175). Such beliefs about self led, in this analysis, to such things as "fear of not living up to ancestral name" (wanting to avoid such an outcome), which results, according to their analysis, in conformity behaviors (e.g., strategies such as making proper funerals for parents, large clan temples and graveyards, and so forth). Increasing status for ambitious individuals was achieved by competitive action to gain resources to "dispense largesse in the kinship group" (p. 175). This contrasts with an American orientation in which the focus is on "self-reliance." In an ideal life, it was argued, the self is viewed as "distinct from all others...[with] a lack of permanent human relations...[leading to]...complete freedom of the individual" (p. 177). In "actual life in society," a focus on self-reliance leads to a focus on contractual relationships with more ambitious individuals trying "to get bigger rewards for lesser efforts, known as success" (p. 177). Fear of inferiority and desire to compete tend to make conformity salient; conformity in U.S. culture takes the form of prejudice against lower groups, keeping up with the Joneses, and so on. What is intriguing in this analysis is that, even when some of the salient structures may be similar (e.g., desire to conform and wanting to be successful, that is, ambitious), the strategies for their achievement and the beliefs relevant to these strategies and how they achieve goals are strikingly different. More recent work suggests that the goals and ways of construing meaning in Eastern cultures (Bond, 1986; J. G. Miller, in press) are more consistent with a communal orientation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The salient goals, plans for achieving those goals, and beliefs of individuals in different cultures may differ along with the meanings of particular behaviors. Still, there may be a core of goals that are universally frequent or common across most cultures and which most humans can relate to, even when their means of achieving those goals may be quite different (D'Andrade, 1992). Understanding cross-cultural
"translations" of situations may aid us in finding more universal situational "deep structures."

Analogous situations across cultures. Perhaps one potential way to gain insight into the "deep structure" of situations is to consider situations that—while different in their specific content—share a similar psychological meaning for members of different cultures. How can we explore that? Lee (in press) provides an exciting possibility in her exploration of humor and why jokes often do not "translate" across cultures. She starts with a "Far Side cartoon," labeled "Scientific Meat Market" in which male and female scientists are seen in a bar "sizing up" potential dating partners in terms of their scientific accomplishments, and bragging about their own. While this is funny for Americans, Lee points out that Taiwanese speakers may not "get it."

In the United States, a "bar" is a setting that is apt to activate a host of associations. Among these will be the possibility of a "dating scene" or "pickup place," or a place to meet friends after work and relax, or a place to take a date before dinner. It is clear that "a bar," however, may activate very different structures for Taiwanese. Lee (in press) points out that, in Taiwan, a "bar" is where businessmen (not businesswomen, wives, or potential dates) go to seek pleasure, "wild food," and seal business deals. At a psychological level, a "bar" scene in the United States is not analogous to a "bar" scene in Taiwan. What would be an analogous "situation" for the Taiwanese within their culture? To address this question, one approach is to move beyond the surface similarities of the settings and ask questions about the goals that are served in these different settings. If the goal of going to a bar in the United States is to find a date, what setting in Taiwan would serve that goal? Lee (in press) provides an intriguing analysis of an attempt to explore such analogous situations. She argues that humor is a syllogism (with major and minor premises and a conclusion) except that there are missing pieces. The joke tells only the minor premises (e.g., these are scientists, this is a bar) and relies on the audience’s concrete knowledge of the culture to fill in missing pieces (e.g., scientists are nerdy; bars are where you meet people to date; you try to impress a potential date with your wealth, status, and good looks) and reach the conclusion, which, with humor, is laughter.

Unfortunately, members of different cultures may not share the major premises and thus may not laugh. For Taiwanese, scientists are esteemed and not nerdy; bars are not where you meet appropriate people to date—thus this is not a joke. What, Lee asks, would make for an analogous situation, that would make this a joke for the Taiwanese? She suggests that the essence of the underlying "situation" is one in which a given culture’s "nerds" are trying to initiate a relationship with opposite sex "nerds" (in the typical setting where one finds a date in that culture), by trying to brag about which of the "nerds" would view as "accomplishments" to brag about. Substituting Taiwanese variants that fill these categories for the Taiwanese, she argues, will result in laughter, suggesting that the analogous "situation" has been successfully constructed. Lee’s analysis makes several things clear. First, humor and jokes may be an intriguing way to explore cultural differences in understandings of concrete episodes and suggest ways to create analogous situations (that differ in their particulars). Second, this analysis suggests that the same sequence of actions may activate very different higher-order structures. To activate the same higher-order structures may require very different sequences of actions. And, third, for "situations" to be more cross-culturally meaningful, perhaps we
should focus on this higher order of abstraction, where similarities in concepts needed to activate analogous situations may be found.

Summary and Directions for Future Research

What are the “fundamental units” for understanding situations? Although the answer to this question is still far from clear, we have argued that in many respects understanding “situations” requires a fundamental understanding of persons, emotions, settings, the meaning of sequences of actions, and relationships. It seems likely that understanding “situations” will require some “common units” for understanding not only situations but persons, relationships, emotions, and sequences of actions. We have argued that such units are apt to include goals, plans and strategies, “norms” (or beliefs), and resources. But how are these units and concepts combined and related to one another, once they are activated? Connectionist modeling approaches from cognitive science provide an intriguing way of thinking about situations in a more dynamic and “gestalt-like” framework. This more dynamic framework allows us to examine not only how communicators make sense and interpret events in ongoing interaction but how, in response to their changing constructions over time, communicators’ enact and modify their own behavioral responses.

Connectionist models may also help to capture the interwoven nature of these concepts. The very same underlying structures that play a role in a trait attribution may play a fundamental role in a situational or emotional attribution as well. These underlying concepts and their links are apt to be part of a complex and richly textured web of understandings. If we are forced to make a person or a situation attribution, we may focus our attention on those—most highly activated—concepts that fall into that particular category within this web. Which attributions are made are apt to depend on which are more heavily activated, a function of a variety of factors including individual and cultural differences (J. G. Miller, in press). That is, Western cultures may have a richer vocabulary for trait terms and use these more frequently in making inferences about others (J. G. Miller, in press); Eastern cultures, which emphasize the contextualization of everyday behavior in their explanations of behavior, may have a richer natural language vocabulary for situations. Curiously, our very questions may force sharp boundaries between persons and situations that may not be apparent for the subjects in our research projects, and we may overlook the interconnectedness and fluidity of naturally occurring models of persons and situations in ongoing behavior in social interaction.

Needless to say, however, a great deal of work needs to be done in the years ahead. We shouldn’t perceive situations as simply a “laundry list” of important factors; we need to think about how these factors combine to create emergent “wholes.” Understanding “situations” will require not only understanding the component parts that make a particular situation “that particular situation” for a particular person in a given point in time, it will require that we understand how events and inferences about a variety of structures create particular situational “gestalts.” If the overall situational “gestalt” is a function of what is apt to be activated at any given point in time, then we need to have a better understanding and assessment of “prior knowledge structures” influencing the ongoing construction and how these may be weighted in the ongoing construction process. How do such prior knowledge structures and previous learning experiences play a role in
thinking about and making inferences about the current situation? Are some individuals and some members of particular cultures more likely to experience particular classes of situations (e.g., a competitive versus a cooperative situation; a controllable versus a hopeless situation) because different situational subcomponents are chronically salient or available? Do some cultures (e.g., Eastern) have a better natural vocabulary for construing “situations”? Can we come up with a vocabulary for “situations” analogous to our vocabulary for emotions? How do children come to make categorical distinctions between various situations? Do newcomers “learn” such distinctions following a similar developmental trajectory? Or do they learn a type of “reasoning by analogy” in which they transform—in some way—their native understanding of situations to map onto the new culture? Are there—perhaps at a more abstract level—situational “universals”? In addressing such questions, we will need to begin to look at the relative importance of subcomponents in the overall situational construction. For example, which subcomponents are more central to a particular overall situational categorization, and more apt—by their change—to affect a change in the overall situational classification? How do varying and shared perceptions of situations by different interactants affect the stability or volatility of the current situation? Do people move to a “common” interpretation of the situation under some conditions and not others? These are intriguing, dynamic questions that await the energy and imagination of future researchers.

Note

1. There are several versions of the Echo program. Here we employ the Echo2 version that assumes not only explicit contradictions (specified by the [C] bold lines on the diagram) but also implicit contradictions. For example, the nodes, “She wanted to be helpful,” and “She trusted him,” are treated as cohypotheses (indicated by the solid line between them) in explaining the node, “She drove him to his place in the early morning”; these cohypotheses are part of the prosecution’s argument. Another node, “Sought someone for ‘a one night stand’” (part of the defense’s argument) also explains, “She drove him to his place in the early morning.” These explanations (one consistent with the defense’s story, one consistent with the prosecution’s story) are treated in Echo2 as implicitly contradictory; thus, in Echo2, negative activation is sent between these contradictory links. Echo1 does not make these assumptions, and the difference, in this case, is crucial: Echo1 results in the more heavily activated explanation being the node, “He raped her,” rather than the node, “They had consensual sex.”

References


