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An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations

*An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* provides a systematic theoretical account for understanding the impact of situations on patterns of social interaction. Through descriptions of 21 of the most common situations that people encounter in everyday life, the authors aim to give readers the tools needed to understand how those situations influence interpersonal behavior. These descriptions are intended to be freestanding, each one offering analysis, research examples, and descriptions of the prototypical situation. The authors build upon the tools of interdependence theory, which stresses the manner in which people’s outcomes are determined by the structure of their interaction with each other. This analysis makes clear exactly what is “social” about “social psychology.”

Harold H. Kelley has won numerous scientific awards, including the American Psychological Association’s Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, the American Sociological Association’s Cooley-Mead Award, the Society for Experimental Social Psychology’s Distinguished Career Contribution Award, and the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships’ Distinguished Career Contribution Award. He is the coauthor of *The Social Psychology of Groups* and of *Interpersonal Relations: A Theory of Interdependence*. John G. Holmes is a three-time winner of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships’ Distinguished New Contribution Award, former Executive Committee Chair of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology, and former Associate Editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Norbert L. Kerr is the coauthor of *Group Process, Group Decision, and Group Action*, former Associate Editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and of the *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, and a former Executive Committee Chair of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology. Harry T. Reis is the President of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships, executive officer of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, former Editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and coeditor of the *Handbook of Research Methods in Personality and Social Psychology*. Caryl E. Rusbult is winner of the National Conference on Family Relations’ Reuben Hill Award and the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships’ Distinguished New Contribution Award, and former Associate Editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*; she holds the William Friday Professorship, an endowed professorship, at the University of North Carolina. Paul A. M. Van Lange is scientific director of the Kurt Lewin Institute, an Interuniversity Graduate School of Social Psychology and Its Applications in The Netherlands, Associate Editor of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and former Associate Editor of the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 
This book is dedicated to John W. Thibaut . . . friend, colleague, mentor, and admired exemplar of the best in social psychology. Whatever the merits of interdependence theory may be, it is doubtful whether its perspective on interpersonal relations would have existed without his contributions.
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Preface

This preface is a sketch of the “history” of this Atlas, an acknowledgment of the support we had in its preparation, and a characterization of the social process involved in working together. Perhaps we may be forgiven if, in this preface, we pat ourselves on the back for the effort and goodwill we have managed to put into the enterprise. The reader will be left to judge whether those were “worth our whiles.”

It all began one fall evening on the corner of 24th and M Streets in Washington, D.C. Earlier that day, in an address to the joint meeting of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology (SESP) and the European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP), Kelley had described the notion of distinguishing all possible “2 × 2” situations and their implications for personal motivation and social interaction and cognition. The meeting participants had enjoyed a dinner reception at the French Embassy, with dancing and champagne. Holmes, Kelley, and Rusbult had returned to the hotel and were standing on the corner when Reis leapt off a later bus and ran up to them saying, “Why don’t we get a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to go to the Bellagio Center on Lake Como and think and write about all those situations?” We quickly planned to discuss the suggestion at breakfast the next morning, at which time we and another colleague, Van Lange, agreed to pursue it.

Subsequently, Kelley prepared a grant application for the Rockefeller Foundation which, unfortunately, did not draw a favorable response. Meantime, however, Van Lange solicited support from the Kurt Lewin Institute at the Free University of Amsterdam, which enabled Kelley, Rusbult, and Van Lange to meet there for two weeks in the spring of 1996. The concept of “atlas” was already in their thinking, so they took it as
their mission to map out the “terrain” of possible situations and how they variously could be distinguished. They had intense discussions about the properties of interdependence and developed an extensive and detailed outline of headings under which each different situation and its implications would be described. In e-mail consultation with Holmes and Reis, the three also decided to invite Kerr and Eddy Van Avermaet to join the enterprise, and they met with Eddy in Amsterdam.

In the summer of 1996, the original five, all of whom are active members of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships, met for an afternoon and evening discussion immediately after its Biennial Conference, held that year at the Banff Conference Center in Alberta. Dismay was expressed at the technical detail and complexity of the entry format developed from the Amsterdam discussions. Reis, in particular, argued for an approach that would produce shorter descriptions of each situation, would be more accessible to readers unfamiliar with the technical ideas, and would resonate more strongly with their existing knowledge of interpersonal phenomena. Thus, there developed a mild tension between the favorite technical pirouettes of some of the interdependence theory aficionados and the vision of an audience of readers unfamiliar with interdependence thinking advanced by the “newcomers” to the theory. The resolution of that tension is reflected in the format to be found in this Atlas.

Several members volunteered to prepare some sample “entries” according to suggestions growing out of the Banff meeting. Those were discussed at the next meeting of the group, which followed the 1997 meeting of SESP in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Kerr joined the group at that meeting and provided an additional “outsider” perspective. Further entries were planned.

Meantime, the absence of outside support for our meetings began to concern us. It became clear that we should ask ourselves about the feasibility of pursuing a project of this magnitude without such support. A crucial unscheduled meeting took place one evening in the front room of Kelley’s home in Malibu. He, Van Avermaet, and Van Lange were discussing the matter when the same thought occurred to Kelley and Van Lange: “Let’s just do it ourselves, without outside support,” or in Paul’s colorful phrase, “Let’s go for the banana!” That was the point at which we (or at least some of us) gave up the idea of an exotic working trip and replaced it with an implicit plan to continue our ad hoc sessions, piggybacked on conferences, and rely primarily on independent individual work interspersed with group feedback. It goes without saying that the feasibility of that
process depended heavily on the fact that we all tended to go to the same conferences and, during the interim periods, had access to e-mail and could rapidly exchange ideas, rough drafts, and comments.

All seven of us met next at the 1998 SESP meetings in Lexington, Kentucky. (Van Avermaet later found it necessary to withdraw because of the growing demands of his university duties in Louvain.) At that time we each volunteered to prepare specific entries according to the emerging format. At our next meeting, in July of 1999 in the charming courtyard of the Old Parsonage in Oxford (in connection with the EAESP meetings), both Holmes (by e-mail) and Reis felt able to announce, “We have the makings of a book here.”

Two later piggyback meetings were held in conjunction with the new independent meetings of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (Nashville, 2000; San Antonio, 2001). And we are greatly indebted to SSCI (Social Sciences Conferences Incorporated), and to Bibb Latané and Deborah Richardson, for their generous support of a very productive five-day working session in late May 2000, at their Nags Head Conference facility at Sea Frolic, Highland Beach, Florida.

In retrospect, an important component of the project’s initial appeal was to have a trip to Bellagio and the Italian Lake region, with good friends. Later, as we slowly got under way with the Atlas and began to produce entries, we realized how intrinsically interesting the enterprise itself was. We learned a good deal from each other about how to distinguish and represent situations and how to conceptualize their different implications. That learning was bidirectional, with the “newcomers” becoming familiar with the interdependence perspective and language, but also with the “card-carrying” interdependence people being encouraged to simplify and clarify that language (while still adding conceptual curlicues necessary for richer situational analysis). And it was not unusual for a simple idea innocently advanced by one person in preparing a particular entry to lead to an unanticipated and useful conceptual advance proposed by another member of the group. We also learned to work together, sweetening criticism with humor and making jokes out of each other’s foibles. So, increasingly, the meetings became welcome occasions of pleasurable intellectual exchange. Perhaps the reader will also realize that the joint product presented here was accomplished by a group of senior people in their various specialties and departments – people who have had and continue to have heavy responsibilities of instructing graduates, chairing departments or areas, officiating at conferences, gaining grant support, and supervising assistants in research programs.
So we present here, with considerable pride, the product of that rather extended and messy, but ultimately enjoyable, process. Perhaps we may be forgiven for some minor variations in style and voice among the various sections of the Atlas. The person(s) indicated as primarily responsible for each portion produced the first draft and made subsequent revisions, but every section was read closely by each of the six of us and was almost always subject to several cycles of revision. So we feel that the designation of the six of us as “authors” is entirely justified by that process. In the list of authors that appears on the cover and title page, Kelley drew the first position in recognition of the other authors’ gratitude for his contributions to the development of interdependence theory. The rest of the list is in alphabetical order.

The Authors, May 2002
PART ONE

INTRODUCTION AND THEORY
Interpersonal Situations

The Context of Social Behavior

Our goal in writing this Atlas was to provide behavioral scientists with a tool for analyzing and understanding the influence of interpersonal situations on social interaction. We believe that there are important insights about human social behavior to be gained from systematic investigation of the properties of situations. To be sure, “the situation” has long been the object of considerable attention in several of the behavioral sciences, notably social psychology (the discipline that we six authors all call home). Nonetheless, our impression is that this scrutiny has been more intuitive than theoretical, more haphazard than systematic. Furthermore, existing research has tended to emphasize the relatively impersonal aspects of situations even though interpersonal factors are often likely to dominate the individual’s attention and behavior. We maintain that a more comprehensive theoretical approach to the description and analysis of situations, and especially to their interpersonal properties, will do much to advance our understanding of social interaction.

Interdependence theory forms the conceptual skeleton for our analysis. First proposed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) and later extended by Kelley and Thibaut (1978), interdependence theory provides a systematic account of certain key interpersonal properties of situations, as well as the individual’s response to those properties, as the causal determinants of social interaction. The term “interdependence” refers to the manner in which two individuals influence each other’s outcomes in the course of their interaction. This Atlas, however, is only incidentally a primer on interdependence

Harry Reis had primary responsibility for preparation of this chapter.
theory; our foremost goal is to apply this theory to the description and analysis of certain common social situations. Each of these situations receives detailed examination in a series of “entries,” as we refer to them throughout this Atlas, which will illustrate to the reader the benefits of considering social situations in terms of the abstract and characteristic properties of interdependence that exist between the interacting partners. Readers will encounter in these entries many important questions that have engaged the curiosity of behavioral scientists for decades. By identifying each situation’s basic properties of interdependence, as well as the elements shared with, and differentiated from, other situations, our analysis sheds new (or as we see it, conceptually clearer) light on these questions. In so doing, we hope to provide readers with a set of conceptual tools for analyzing these and other situations.

1.1 The Concept of Situation in Social Psychology

*The American Heritage Dictionary* defines situation as “a position or status with regard to conditions and attendant circumstances” and as “a combination of circumstances at a given moment; state of affairs.” As nearly all textbooks show, social psychology takes pride in ascribing to itself the study of “situationism” and “the power of the situation” – that is, to demonstrate that the situational context is a potent force in shaping behavior. In this regard, social psychologists trace their roots to the E in Kurt Lewin’s (1936/1966) paradigmatic equation, \( B = f(P, E) \) – Behavior depends on the Person and the Environment. Solomon Asch, for example, stipulated that “most social acts have to be understood in their setting, and lose meaning if isolated… No error in thinking about social facts is more serious than the failure to see their place and function” (1952, p. 61). Similarly, in their classic review of some of the field’s most influential studies, Nisbett and Ross (1991) provide compelling testimony to the explanatory power of situational explanations of behavior.

Current practice in social psychology treats situationism as an exceedingly broad concept, encompassing, for example, the impact of information about a new acquaintance or hypothetical other on thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward that person; the interplay of stylistic and substantive factors on the appeal of persuasive messages; and the degree of deliberateness with which bits of social information are processed. Despite this diversity, or perhaps because of it, the field has been criticized for its failure to develop a comprehensive theoretical model of situations and their
structure or impact. For example, Kenny, Mohr, and Levesque (2001) echoed a widespread opinion in stating that

Although social psychologists have emphasized the importance of the situation, they have been less successful in its conceptualization. . . . [T]here is no universally accepted scheme for understanding what is meant by situation. It does not even appear that there are major competing schemes, and all too often the situation is undefined. (p. 129)

The absence of such a conceptual framework, as Rozin (2001) has observed, may not be problematic in the short term, but it seems certain to inhibit the long-term conceptual development of a discipline that takes “the situation” as a central conceptual focus (see also Zajonc, 1999).

This Atlas provides such a conceptualization of situations, beginning in chapter 2. However, the theoretical framework that we favor differs from the field’s more colloquial use of the term in two key respects. First, whereas existing studies of situational influences on behavior often focus on impersonal features of the situation, we emphasize its interpersonal core – the degree and kind of interdependence between people, the information they have about each other and the situation, and the behavioral options open to them as they interact. We do so for a variety of conceptual and practical reasons, all of which amount to an appreciation for the fundamental importance of social relations in understanding human behavior. These reasons may be evident in a cardinal observation: That from the actor’s perspective, interpersonal factors – who one is with, one’s history with that person and similar others in related situations, what one is trying to accomplish with that person, and how one’s personal outcomes link to the other’s outcomes – are fundamental to differentiating one situation from another and, therefore, to understanding the impact of situations on behavior (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). For example, a critical comment from a dinner companion has very different implications for cognition, emotion, and behavior coming from one’s adolescent daughter, well-meaning best friend, boss, maternal grandfather, dissertation advisor, insurance agent, therapist, or a stranger.

A second distinction intrinsic to our meaning of the term situation involves a focus on its objective properties. Social psychologists in large part subscribe to Nisbett and Ross’s (1991) principle of construal: that causal analysis should concentrate on the personal and subjective meaning of the situation to the actor. Although we do not deny the significance of personal construals – indeed, throughout this Atlas, readers will see that “what the
individual makes of the situation” is a central ingredient of our analysis—
we suggest that the analysis of social interaction must begin at an earlier
causal step, namely, with description of the situation’s objective elements
(see chapter 2). In this regard, we concur with Gottman and Notarius (2000)
who, in a slightly different context, observed that to understand a spouse’s
interpretation of an interaction, one must first know what actually took
place in that interaction. (For example, to understand an adolescent’s com-
plaint that her parents are unsupportive, it would be useful to observe a
support-seeking interaction between them.) To be somewhat more specific,
our analysis focuses on a small set of key properties that define situations
with interdependence between individuals and that serve as the basis for
the interactions that emerge between those individuals. We maintain that
the interaction patterns that we commonly observe in everyday life, in fact,
may be better understood by clearly differentiating the situation from the
interpersonal motives and attitudes that operate on or transform that sit-
uation and together shape those interaction patterns. We further maintain
that to diagnose the reality of a situation and to understand the behav-
iors that partners exhibit, it is necessary to determine the interdependent
structure of their goals. In other words, as discussed below, the study of
interaction can help researchers uncover the person factors that shape the
individual’s response to situations.

Although this analysis begins with an objective assessment of situa-
tions, it is not inconsistent with theories that emphasize the individual’s
personal construal of those situations. As an illustration, one may consi-
der the well-known Milgram obedience experiments, in which an insis-
tent authority figure (the experimenter) repeatedly demanded that subjects
administer increasingly painful, and eventually seemingly lethal, electric
shocks to a peer who, unbeknownst to the subjects, was an experimental
confederate and who in actuality received no shocks. The fact that a large
percentage of the subjects complied with those instructions is often cited
as evidence of “the power of the situation”—in other words, that the ex-
perimenter’s demands somehow “caused” the subjects’ obedient behavior.
We propose instead that the situation created in this experiment, defined
in terms of the subjects’ relationship with the authoritative domineering
experimenter and the putative dependent peer, afforded subjects with an
opportunity to select one of two interaction patterns: to obediently shock
the peer or to resist the experimenter’s entreaties and thereby act in ac-
cord with more humane principles. The choice reflects “what the subject
makes of the situation”; that is, the subject’s considered response to the
objective conditions inherent in this situation, as it has been devised by the