



## Cultural similarities and differences in perceived affordances of situations for Big Five behaviors

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### ABSTRACT

The perceived affordance or conduciveness of various situations for Big Five behaviors was investigated in the United States ( $N = 188$ ) and the Philippines ( $N = 215$ ). The basic proposition that different situations afford different trait-relevant behaviors was supported, at least in the perceptions of cultural informants. Cultural similarities exceeded differences, and in both cultures individuals perceived Big Five behaviors as expressed in *if-then* patterns of variation across situations. Americans and Filipinos showed some similarity in the general dimensions along which situations are construed, but meaningful differences in the construal of certain interpersonal situations were also observed. The findings contribute to efforts to integrate person and situation approaches in personality and social psychology.

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### 1. Introduction

Personality cannot be expressed unless a situation affords its expression, and personality is revealed by people's characteristic ways of adapting to situations (Holmes & Wood, 2009, p. 250).

Situations differ in the opportunities they provide to express various motives, affects, or traits (Holmes, 2002; Reis, 2008). For example, school and work situations provide opportunities to express Conscientiousness traits and certain interpersonal situations are conducive to behaviors associated with Extraversion and Agreeableness traits. Accordingly, theorists have begun to focus on the *affordances* of situations, in recognition of the complementary and interactive nature of persons and situations (Denissen & Penke, 2008; Guinote, 2008; Holmes, 2002).

For example, a central tenet of interdependence theory (Holmes, 2002; Kelley et al., 2003) is that features of situations—for example, the degree of expected correspondence between participants' goals—selectively activate the expression of certain dispositions. Similarly, Denissen and Penke (2008) noted that one way to bridge the divide between structural (trait) and process approaches in personality and social psychology is to conceptualize the dimensions of the Big Five or Five Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1996) “as stable individual differences in people's reactions to circumscribed situational cues” (p. 1286). Fleenon and Nofle (2008) also proposed that situations could be defined by the degree to which they encourage or afford the expression of Big Five traits. Conversely, personality traits may be revealed in how people perceive situations. A focus on situational

affordances is also consistent with the situated perspective on social cognition, which highlights the dynamic role of situational cues in guiding cognition and behavior (e.g., Smith & Semin, 2004), as well as Mischel and Shoda's (1995) conceptualization of *if-then* patterns of behavior, which proposes that people exhibit distinctive and stable situation-behavior profiles (see also Kammrath, Mendoza-Denton, & Mischel, 2005; Mischel, Shoda, & Mendoza-Denton, 2002).

While personality and cultural psychologists agree on the importance of investigating the “affordances” of situations, they have used the term somewhat differently. Personality psychologists tend to view a situation as affording a trait if it elicits stable *individual differences* along the trait dimension of interest (e.g., Extraversion vs. Introversion) (Denissen & Penke, 2008; Fleenon & Nofle, 2008; Holmes, 2002; Leising & Müller-Plath, 2009). In contrast, cultural psychologists have used the term to convey the proposition that salient situations in a culture tend to evoke or “afford” particular emotions or behaviors, without reference to individual differences (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2006; Miyamoto, Nisbett, & Masuda, 2006; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). For example, Morling et al. (2002) reported that “influencing” situations in the United States had “an especially strong potential (or ‘affordance’) to produce the sense of efficacy, whereas “adjusting” situations in Japan had “especially potent affordances for the sense of relatedness” (p. 320). Similarly, Kitayama et al. (2006) concluded that situations that afford socially engaging emotions are more prevalent in Japan, whereas situations that afford socially disengaging emotions are more prevalent in the United States. Similarly, Miyamoto et al. (2006) concluded that the differences between Americans and Japanese in analytic versus holistic perceptual tendencies can be linked to physical environments that differentially afford these perceptual styles.

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Our usage in the present study is more consistent with the conception of affordances used by cultural psychologists. We provided respondents with descriptions of neurotic, extraverted, openness-to-experience, agreeable, and conscientious behaviors and asked them to rate the likelihood that these behaviors would be exhibited in various situational contexts. This approach enabled us to compare across cultures the perceived effects of various situational distinctions and the “if-then” patterns associated with neurotic behaviors, extraverted behaviors, and so forth. We did not ask respondents to judge the extent to which the situations would elicit *individual differences* in these traits (e.g., Extraversion vs. Introversion).

An overarching goal of the study, which was conducted in the United States and the Philippines, was to test whether there are cultural similarities in the perceived links between particular situational contexts and Big Five behaviors. On the one hand, an argument can be made for substantial cross-cultural universality in the affordance of particular situations for particular Big Five behaviors. For example, Reis (2008) suggested that certain objective situational features emphasized in interdependence theory—for example, the extent to which participants’ outcomes in a situation correspond or conflict—are cultural universals with evolutionary roots and have predictable impacts on trait-relevant behavior in all cultures. On the other hand, cultural differences in situational affordances could result from cultural differences in (a) the prevalence or potency of various situations across cultures, (b) how situations are construed, and (c) the trait-relevant behaviors viewed as appropriate in the situations, even if the situations are construed similarly across cultures (Morling et al., 2002; Reis, 2008).

Our cross-cultural hypotheses and analyses were of three types. In the first type of analysis, which we labeled “perceived situational effects and if-then patterns,” we first examined the impact of various situational distinctions (e.g., relationship categories) on the perceived affordance of Big Five behaviors and whether similar if-then patterns are observed across cultures. These analyses provided a cross-cultural test of the basic tenet that different situations afford, or are conducive to, different trait-relevant behaviors, at least in the perceptions of cultural informants. If so, it would provide cross-cultural support for the interactive nature of traits and situations and the need to consider personality in context (Denissen & Penke, 2008; Fleeson & Nofhle, 2008; Guinote, 2008; Holmes, 2002). Thus, in *Hypothesis 1* we predicted that *situations will vary in their perceived affordance or conduciveness for behaviors associated with each of the Big Five traits and the shape of these situation-behavior (i.e., if-then) patterns will be similar across cultures*. For example, if certain relationship situations are perceived by cultural informants to be more conducive to extraverted behaviors than others, and the pattern of these situation-behavior (i.e., if-then) patterns are similar across cultures, it would provide evidence in support of *Hypothesis 1*.

Although in *Hypothesis 1* we predicted similar if-then patterns of situational affordances across cultures, in *Hypothesis 2* we predicted that *the size or strength of the situational effects will be greater in the Philippines than in the United States*. Larger situational differences or effects would indicate greater cross-situational variability in the perceived affordances of situations for Big Five behaviors. For example, informants in the two cultures might exhibit similar expectations regarding the conduciveness of different relationship situations to extraverted behaviors (i.e., similar if-then patterns), but the size of the situational differences or effects could still vary across cultures. Three theoretical perspectives from cultural psychology predict such differences. First, some cultural psychologists have argued that behavior is more determined by the situation in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures, because in collectivistic cultures behavior is more determined by roles and relationships than by internal dispositions or traits (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver (2006) described an alternative distinction between cultures—tightness versus looseness—which refers to “the

strength of social norms and the degree of sanctioning within societies” (p. 1226). These two perspectives predict stronger situational effects and thus greater cross-situational variability in collectivistic or tight cultures. Finally, some cultural psychologists have attributed evidence of greater cross-situational variability in trait ratings in East Asian cultures, as compared to American samples, to Asian dialecticism (Church et al., 2008; English & Chen, 2007; Suh, 2002), a system of thought characterized by acceptance of inconsistency, variability, and change (Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Spencer-Rodgers, Boucher, Mori, Wang, & Peng, 2009). Greater cross-situational variability in trait ratings in dialectical cultures might imply greater variability in the perceived affordance of situations for behaviors associated with these traits. Also indirectly relevant are two studies of lay beliefs about the extent to which behavior is “traited” versus contextual (Church et al., 2006; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002). Both studies found that respondents in selected Asian cultures endorsed situationist or interactionist beliefs more than Americans.

In our second type of analysis, which we refer to as “situation affordance profiles for Big Five behaviors,” we examined for *each* specific situational context (e.g., cooperative situations) whether the affordance profiles encompassing *all* of the Big Five traits are similar or different across cultures. Non-flat affordance profiles would indicate that specific situations are more conducive to some Big Five behaviors (e.g., extraverted behaviors) than others (e.g., conscientious behaviors), again revealing the interplay of situations and trait-relevant behavior. Furthermore, if these non-flat affordance profiles are similar across cultures, it would indicate that specific situations are construed by respondents in different cultures in a similar manner, at least regarding their perceived implications for Big Five behaviors. In *Hypothesis 3* we predicted that *each situational context will exhibit a differentiated or non-flat Big Five affordance profile and these profiles will be similar across cultures*.

In our final type of analysis, which we refer to as “general dimensions of situational construal,” we used multidimensional scaling (MDS) to compare the general dimensions along which specific situational contexts are perceived in the two cultures. As input to the MDS analyses, we used the Euclidean distances computed between the Big Five affordance profiles for each situation to quantify situation similarity. The MDS analysis then provided a geometric representation of the similarity relationships among the situations, which we used to identify the general dimensions along which the situations were perceived or construed in the two cultures. Presently, there is sparse evidence regarding cultural differences in the construal of situations. McAuley, Bond, and Kashima (2002) had respondents in Hong Kong and Australia rate 56 role dyads (e.g., acquaintances, husband-wife) on 20 objective features and found that four dimensions—complexity, equality, adversarialness, and containment—differentiated the role dyads in both cultures. However, these researchers also found some cultural differences in the locations of particular role dyads within the space defined by these dimensions. In *Hypothesis 4*, we predicted that *respondents in the United States and Philippines will perceive or construe situational contexts along similar general dimensions, although some situations will be construed differently (i.e., have substantially different MDS scale values) along these dimensions in the two cultures*.

### 1.1. Overview of the present study

In the present study, we had cultural informants in the United States and Philippines judge the affordance or conduciveness of various situations for characteristics and behaviors associated with the Big Five traits (i.e., neurotic behaviors, extraverted behaviors, etc.). The relevance of the Big Five traits in the Philippines has been demonstrated previously (Church & Katigbak, 2002; Katigbak, Church, Guanzone-Lapeña, Carlota, & del Pilar, 2002). The United States is an individualistic, loose, and non-dialectical culture (e.g.,

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