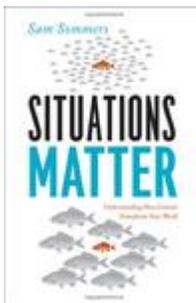


So Do Persons

A review of



Situations Matter: Understanding How Context Transforms Your World

by Sam Sommers

New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2011. 290 pp. ISBN 978-1-59448-818-4.

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Reviewed by

[John F. Kihlstrom](#)

It is axiomatic among some social psychologists that the situation is an overwhelmingly powerful determinant of the individual's experience, thought, and action. Moreover, it is commonly asserted that we tend to be unaware of these contextual influences—a condition known as *situation blindness*, which gives rise to such tendencies as correspondence bias and the fundamental attribution error (FAE). This doctrine of situationism is woven into Gordon Allport's definition of social psychology as the study of social influence, and it lay behind the person–situation debate that embroiled personality and social psychology beginning in the 1960s (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

In *Situations Matter: Understanding How Context Transforms Your World*, Sam Sommers, a social psychologist at Tufts University, argues that “to understand human nature, you must appreciate the power of situations” (p. 4). To this end, he takes the reader

on an engaging tour through classical and contemporary experimental social psychology, liberally spiced with personal anecdotes and illustrations from popular culture.

It's all here: the FAE and actor–observer differences in causal attribution; helping behavior; conformity and normative influence; obedience to authority and the Lucifer effect; groupthink; distinctiveness effects on self-description; salience effects on consumer choice; contextual determinants of emotion; social comparison effects, the Lake Wobegon effect, and basking in reflected glory; cultural effects on self-perception and aggression; social determinants of gender differences and stereotype threat; the mere exposure effect, propinquity/familiarity effects on interpersonal attraction, and excitation transfer; the outgroup homogeneity effect; racial bias in jury verdicts, criminal sentencing, and personnel selection (including a lovely low-tech, printed-page demonstration of the Implicit Association Test); and more.

Sommers's basic theme is WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get): People are easy to see because they're tangible and in our attentional focus; the context is harder to appreciate because it's in the background, abstract, nebulous, and blurred. We have to train ourselves to better appreciate the role of the situational context so that we can navigate the social world more intelligently and effectively. That's what social psychology is all about, and this book as well.

There's no doubt that situations matter or that contextual effects pervade mind and behavior. The cover of Sommers's book carries a version of the Ebbinghaus illusion (also known as Titchener circles), in which a medium-sized fish seems smaller when embedded in a group of big fish than it does when embedded in a group of little fish. And there's no doubt that human thought and action are exquisitely sensitive to context. It was this observation that got the whole person–situation debate going in the first place. But there is more to it than that.

Situations matter, but Sommers takes no account of the most important theoretical advance from the person–situation debate: a doctrine of interactionism (Bowers, 1973). People respond to the situation, to be sure, but people also create the situations to which they respond by means such as evocation, selection, behavioral manipulation, and cognitive transformation (Buss, 1987; Kihlstrom, in press).

For example, the gender differences that Sommers (in Chapter 5) attributes to social influence have their origins in the differences in body morphology between male and female neonates: The physical appearance of the child's genitalia evokes behavior from others that literally restructures the environment so as to foster the development of a masculine boy or feminine girl.

This process, in turn, is mediated by the beliefs of parents and others about what masculinity and femininity mean. And it takes another turn when the child recognizes his or her own gender and begins to actively model his or her attitudes and behavior on others of his or her own kind—or, perhaps, realizes that he or she is not like them, after all. It's complicated, and these complications arise from the fact that, as Kurt Lewin realized (but is

rarely given credit for), the person and the situation are interdependent determinants of behavior.

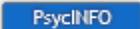
Situations matter, but the situation that matters most is the *perceived* situation. The objective stimulus environment may influence experience, thought, and action through reflex, taxis, and instinct, but people are sentient beings, striving to make sense of the world around them and to behave in accordance with that understanding. The information provided by the situation is typically vague, fragmentary, and ambiguous, forcing people (in Jerome Bruner's lovely phrase) to go beyond the information given in the stimulus, bringing their knowledge and beliefs to bear on the problem of what to do in the situation.

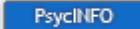
The bystander intervention effects discussed by Sommers (in Chapter 2) begin with an ambiguous situation: What's going on here? What can I do? What *should* I do? To answer these questions, we look to other people for clarifying information and then make a judgment. It's not "being in a crowd" (p. 62), much less "inertia" (p. 63), that inhibits helping behavior—it's diffusion of responsibility, pluralistic ignorance, self-efficacy, and modeling.

Situational effects make for good stories, and Sommers tells them well. But they are only part of the story of human experience, thought, and action—and perhaps the lesser part. To paraphrase F. C. Bartlett, social psychologists, of all people, must not stand in awe of the situation. From a cognitive point of view, the chief task of the social psychologist is to explain social behavior in terms of the individual's mental representation of the situation, including his or her own internal environment; and also to understand the mental structures and processes by which those mental representations are constructed and revised.

These internal cognitive structures and processes are part of the person, and they are the critical mediators of experience, thought, and action in social contexts. As such, attribution to the person is fundamental to a psychological explanation of behavior; the only error is the attribution to personality traits rather than to mental states.

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