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# A Review and Synthesis of Situational Strength in the Organizational Sciences

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*Situational strength pertains to the idea that various characteristics of situations have the ability to restrict the expression and, therefore, the criterion-related validity of individual differences. Despite situational strength's intuitive appeal, however, little information exists regarding its construct space. This review (a) categorizes extant operationalizations into four facets (constraints, consequences, clarity, and consistency), (b) examines the empirical literature on situational strength–relevant hypotheses, and, on the basis of the proposed taxonomy and literature review, (c) provides several avenues for future theoretical and empirical research. It is the authors' hope that these efforts will encourage additional research and theorizing on this potentially important psychological construct.*

**Keywords:** *situational strength; interactionism; moderator; strong situation; personality*

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Psychologists generally recognize that behavior is a joint function of individual differences and situations (Chatman, 1989; Cronbach, 1957; Endler, 1993; Hattrup & Jackson, 1996; Mischel, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Weiss & Adler, 1984). Unlike in the study of individual differences however, “there is a good deal of confusion concerning how situations should be conceptualized” (Funder, 2006: 27). Nonetheless, many theorists have argued that

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“situational strength” is among the most important situational forces to consider (Hattrup & Jackson, 1996; Hough & Oswald, 2008; Murphy & Dziewieczynski, 2005).

Despite situational strength’s prominence in the research literature, a number of questions remain regarding its nature and structure. Thus, before moving forward, it is important to offer a formal definition that can be used to help guide the remainder of this article. Drawing from previous theorizing (e.g., Cooper & Withey, 2009; Forehand & von Haller Gilmer, 1964; Hattrup & Jackson, 1996; Mischel, 1973, 1977; Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Weiss & Adler, 1984), situational strength is defined here as *implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors*. Situational strength is posited to result in psychological pressure on the individual to engage in and/or refrain from particular courses of action; this pressure in turn is posited to reduce relevant behavioral variance and attenuate subsequent trait–outcome relationships.

Although situational strength is an intuitively appealing idea, most theoretical discussions provide little in the way of specific guidance for operationalizing it. Researchers interested in examining situational strength’s effects have therefore been forced to utilize a host of ad hoc operationalizations, meaning that statements about its overall merit are difficult to make (Cooper & Withey, 2009). Thus, the purpose of this article is to begin developing a common framework regarding situational strength’s structure and effects by (a) reviewing its theoretical literature to better understand the general mechanisms through which it likely operates, (b) using existing operationalizations to deductively develop a potential facet structure, (c) examining the extent to which hypotheses regarding the restriction of variance in behavioral outcomes and the moderation of relevant predictor-criterion relationships were supported in extant empirical studies, and (d) exploring the implications of the proposed facet structure across diverse areas of study that posit important direct or indirect effects of situations.

## Situational Strength’s Historical Context

*Early theorizing.* Although it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when social scientists began arguing that “the situation” (or various characteristics thereof) might restrict the expression of individual differences, the works of several early theorists are relevant. For example, many early sociological and organizational analyses conducted in the early part of the 20th century suggested that one of the primary intended or unintended consequences of bureaucracies is to minimize the impact of individual preferences (March & Simon, 1958). For example, Max Weber (1922/1978) argued that bureaucracies provided a set of rationally developed, rule-based procedures designed specifically to overcome the processing shortcomings of individuals, thereby increasing efficiency but also minimizing individual freedom of choice. In a similar vein, Merton, Gouldner, and Selznick (as cited in March & Simon, 1958: 37) argued that bureaucracies are “designed to control the activities of the organization members” by emphasizing the importance of authority, the reliability/predictability of individual behavior, and the need for accountability.

Midcentury thinkers also hypothesized about the ways in which organizational forces are likely to affect human behavior. Focusing specifically on the instantiation of creative behaviors, Rogers (1954) argued that relevant individual differences (e.g., openness to experience,

an internal locus of evaluation) are most likely to be expressed when situations provide psychological safety and freedom. Thus, one of his primary postulates was that relevant trait expressions are not triggered by environmental cues but are, rather, “permitted to emerge” (p. 256) when environmental conditions are right—a perspective that is consistent with the theory underlying situational strength. This view was largely similar to that of Milgram (1965: 74), who, reflecting upon his obedience studies, observed that

One aim of the research was to study behavior in a strong situation of deep consequence to the participants, for psychological forces operative in powerful and lifelike forms of the conflict may not be brought into play under diluted conditions.

Even more concordant with the conceptualization of situational strength presented here, Forehand and von Haller Gilmer (1964) argued that formal and informal characteristics of organizational situations have the ability to influence the behaviors of employees in three ways: defining stimuli, constraining freedom, and providing rewards and punishments. These authors also attempted to begin defining the specific organizational entities most likely to affect employee behavior. For example, they argued that variability in the hierarchical structure of organizations, systems complexity, leadership style, and the nature of an organization’s goals serve as conduits through which relevant behavioral information is communicated. Unfortunately, however, the foundations of situational strength put in place by these authors were never thoroughly developed by subsequent theorists. Although contemporary theorizing is covered in greater detail in a latter section, it is important to note here that most (if not all) modern discussions are based *not* on the earliest conceptualizations of situational strength outlined previously but instead on the ideas of Walter Mischel.

In 1968, Mischel published his classic book, *Personality and Assessment*, which is frequently cited as a turning point in the development of personality psychology and is sometimes argued to have led to a crisis for trait researchers (Endler & Parker, 1992). Although Mischel’s ideas are sometimes summarized as “personality does not matter” or even as “there is no such thing as personality,” his primary point was actually more subtle. Specifically, Mischel argued that personality cannot be studied in a vacuum; instead, the complexity of human behavior and its determinants must be studied from a perspective that accounts for the simultaneous and interactive impact of individual differences and situational characteristics. Indeed, Mischel (1973: 254) later argued that his early work had been “widely misunderstood to imply that people show no consistencies, that individual differences are unimportant, and that ‘situations’ are the main determinants of behavior,” whereas in reality his work “was aimed at clarifying the limitations of trait psychology as insufficiently sensitive to the role of situations, to the discriminativeness of behavior, and to the complexity of personality and its multiple and interacting determinants” (Mischel, 1999: 456).

Mischel began exploring the question of situational influences on individual differences in a series of articles and book chapters published in the 1970s (most noticeably 1973 and 1977). Here, he stressed the importance of better understanding how, when, and why individual differences are most likely to be important predictors of behavior and when they are more likely to be nullified by situational influences. Specifically, Mischel (1973: 276) began laying the foundation for subsequent thought in this area by arguing that:

psychological “situations” and “treatments” are powerful to the degree that they lead all persons to construe the particular events the same way, induce *uniform* expectancies regarding the most appropriate response pattern, provide adequate incentives for the performance of that response pattern, and instill the skills necessary for its satisfactory construction and execution.

He further argued that individual differences are most likely to directly affect behavior “when the situation is ambiguously structured . . . so that subjects are uncertain about how to categorize it and have no clear expectations about the behaviors most likely to be appropriate” (Mischel, 1973: 276). Thus, he helped to lay the foundation for the general idea underlying what is now typically referred to as “situational strength” (or sometimes “situation strength”).

Mischel’s work led to an important shift in social scientists’ thinking about the behavioral expression of personality. But, as some have recently argued, situational strength is too often viewed as an intuitively appealing truism as opposed to a theoretical construct in need of conceptual development and empirical verification (Cooper & Withey, 2009). Although we generally agree with this critique, it is also important to trace the development of situational strength subsequent to the ideas outlined by Mischel.

*Contemporary theorizing.* Some of the social scientists who were most influenced by the idea that situational strength restricts the behavioral expression of various individual differences were theorists in the organizational sciences who were struggling to define the role of personality traits in the prediction of valued outcomes. For example, Weiss and Adler (1984: 21) argued that “the aim of the typical laboratory experiment is the creation of strong situations” and, as a consequence, the effects of personality variables in laboratory settings are often muted. These authors therefore proposed that research examining the effects of personality on work outcomes should either be conducted in laboratory settings specifically designed to create a level of situational strength that is appropriate for testing the question at hand or should take advantage of naturally occurring variability in situational strength via real-world settings. These authors also argued, however, that a way to conceptualize and measure situational strength was needed to adequately achieve either of these aims—a need that still exists today (Meyer & Dalal, 2009).

Snyder and Ickes (1985: 904) contributed to this discussion by stating that situational strength should be viewed as “the most important situational moderating variable” and by arguing that theorizing would be improved by identifying the specific variables that affect a situation’s strength. Davis-Blake and Pfeffer (1989: 387) used strength to argue that dispositional research in organizations is relatively futile because “most organizational settings are strong situations that have a large impact on individual attitudes and behavior.” More recently, R. J. Schneider and Hough (1995) argued that norms, roles, expectations of others, social relationships, the nature of tasks, and physical characteristics of the job all affect situational strength, although little information was provided about precisely *which* characteristics of these broad categories are relevant to situational strength. Similarly, Tett and Burnett’s (2003) view of situational strength as a necessary, albeit not sufficient, force to consider in personality-outcome relationships is useful and interesting, but would also benefit from a more comprehensive conceptualization.

Finally, situational strength has been used as a means to understand diverse cross-level interactions. The underpinnings of situational strength as a multilevel concept were implicitly

suggested by Forehand and von Haller Gilmer (1964: 378) when they argued that relevant characteristics “need not covary systematically between levels of a single organization; a department may be rule centered even if the company is not, and vice versa.” Yet, the thorough development of situational strength as a multilevel phenomenon did not begin in earnest for another 35 years (i.e., Mullins & Cummings, 1999). Given that many contemporary organizational science questions are inherently multilevel in nature, the current article also outlines ideas for the continued development of situational strength as a multilevel phenomenon.

*Remaining theoretical questions.* Despite some important conceptual advances in the development of situational strength and its growing use in a variety of disciplines, theorizing regarding the specific mechanisms through which it affects relevant outcomes is currently lacking (Cooper & Withey, 2009). For theoretical understanding and practical applications of situational strength to be advanced, at least three important issues must be addressed. First, it is important to examine the construct space of situational strength to determine if it can be better represented by a reasonable number of facets. Second, it is important to examine whether these facets affect *all* nonability traits uniformly or if some facets affect the expression of some traits more so than others. Lastly, if facets do in fact have differential effects on the expression of various behaviors and trait–outcome relationships, it will be necessary to develop theory regarding the specific mechanisms through which these facet-based effects occur. The following section begins addressing the first issue by suggesting that the construct space of situational strength may be able to be described by four broad facets (i.e., clarity, consistency, constraints, and consequences).

## A Potential Facet Structure

The four-facet structure outlined in this section was derived deductively, by reviewing extant operationalizations of situational strength (as well as related constructs) for common themes. Although we do not necessarily argue that this is *the* structure of situational strength (i.e., our approach assumes that extant operationalizations represent an adequate sampling of situational strength’s construct space), we do believe that it provides a useful starting point. For each of the four facets, we provide a construct definition, an explanation of the mechanisms through which it restricts the behavioral expression of traits, and an extended example from the published literature.

*Clarity.* The first category of operationalizations of situational strength, *clarity*, is defined here as *the extent to which cues regarding work-related responsibilities or requirements are available and easy to understand*. Operationalizations that are relevant to this facet restrict the expression of individual differences by unambiguously providing information regarding the specific behaviors that are expected from employees. Clarity can be influenced by a variety of organizational sources of information, including well-developed and well-communicated procedures, a salient organizational climate (including well-established norms), and clear instructions and support from one’s supervisor.

One published operationalization that represents a lack of clarity is “structural ambiguity,” which has been shown to weaken negotiation situations, thereby allowing for gender-based individual differences in tactics and outcomes (Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005). These authors drew from Mischel’s work on situational strength to argue that the provision of information about the amount of resources able to be distributed in negotiation, the market value of the object in question, and relevant fairness of norms/expectations would minimize gender differences in outcomes such as negotiated starting salary and the purchase price of goods and services. Their argument was that the presence of relevant information would mute naturally occurring gender differences in assertiveness and other traits that influence negotiation-related performance. These authors obtained effects consistent with this perspective via a field study wherein situational strength was operationalized as structural ambiguity at the industry level and via a lab study wherein situational strength was operationalized as information pertaining to the market value of the object of negotiation.

*Consistency.* The second category of operationalizations, *consistency*, is defined here as *the extent to which cues regarding work-related responsibilities or requirements are compatible with each other*. Thus, this definition focuses on the idea that various sources of information may provide either similar (i.e., consistent) or different (i.e., inconsistent) information about the external desirability of specific behaviors. Operationalizations that are relevant to this facet restrict the expression of individual differences by providing cues that *uniformly* (see Mischel, 1973) indicate the appropriateness of a particular course of action. Consistency can be influenced by a variety of organizational sources of information, including receiving compatible information from relevant others (e.g., organizational authorities), receiving similar information across time, and having company policies that do not contradict each other and/or other external guidelines (e.g., industry norms, government regulations).<sup>1</sup>

One published operationalization that represents consistency is “supervisory support climate,” which has been shown to provide an important buffer between stressful events and posttraumatic distress among firefighters (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007). Although these authors did not draw specifically from situational strength, their results are consistent with its underlying theory in the sense that the relationship between being exposed to the events on September 11 and posttraumatic distress was attenuated when multiple supervisors demonstrated supportive behaviors and encouraged psychologically healthy responses (e.g., seeking counseling). Specifically, these authors found that distressed employees are more likely to seek and receive the help necessary to avoid negative psychological outcomes when multiple supervisors emphasized the importance of such assistance.

*Constraints.* The third category of operationalizations, *constraints*, is defined here as *the extent to which an individual’s freedom of decision and action is limited by forces outside his or her control*.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with the existing constraints literature, the present conceptualization is posited to “inhibit the expression of ability and motivation” (Peters, Chassie, Lindholm, O’Connor, & Kline, 1982: 9), but is also more broadly conceived to include situational characteristics that restrict the expression of individual differences by preventing employees from exercising their own *discretion* pertaining to decisions about which tasks to perform, as well as how and when to perform them. Constraints can be influenced by a variety of sources of information, including formal policies and procedures, behavioral monitoring systems, close supervision, and external regulations.



Two operationalizations of situational strength (transferability of skills and job market favorability) were recently utilized in a scenario-based lab study wherein undergraduate business students were asked to indicate the extent to which they (based on their personality and situational characteristics) would likely engage in a variety of behaviors designed to help their organization as it adapted to market changes (Withey, Gellatly, & Annett, 2005). These variables are relevant to constraints because their presence limits the number and variety of legitimate job alternatives, thereby preventing employees from seeking employment elsewhere, regardless of their individual differences profile or relevant job attitudes. For example, meta-analytic evidence (Zimmerman, 2008) suggests a significant positive relationship between disagreeableness and voluntary turnover, but the theory underlying situational strength predicts that this correlation should be attenuated among employees who have highly specialized skills and/or are employed in a depressed job market, because these forces prevent the pursuit of alternative courses of action.

*Consequences.* The final category of operationalizations, *consequences*, is defined here as *the extent to which decisions or actions have important positive or negative implications for any relevant person or entity*. Operationalizations that are relevant to this facet restrict the expression of individual differences by encouraging those behaviors that decrease the probability of negative outcomes and/or increase the probability of positive outcomes. Consequences can be influenced by a variety of sources of information, including the nature of the task itself as well as performance-contingent rewards/punishments enacted by supervisors, regulatory agencies, and other relevant external entities.

The notion that the consequences of one's actions can serve as a specific operationalization of situational strength was examined by a recent meta-analysis (Meyer, Dalal, & Bonaccio, 2009). Specifically, these authors hypothesized and found that the conscientiousness-performance relationship is attenuated in occupations wherein job-related errors are likely to lead to deleterious outcomes. Drawing directly from situational strength, the rationale provided for this prediction focused on the idea that the threat of negative outcomes accruing to oneself, others, or the organization leads to conscientious behaviors among all employees (i.e., regardless of one's standing on *trait* conscientiousness) because these behaviors are most likely to minimize the probability that negative outcomes will occur. Thus, the competitive advantage that conscientious employees typically enjoy in weak occupations is muted in occupations wherein errors are likely to lead to severe consequences.

*Relationships among the facets.* Before discussing additional implications of this model, it is important to address the similarities between and differences across these facets. On one hand, these broad categories demonstrate nontrivial, conceptual (and likely empirical) overlap, in that each is a broad operationalization of a common construct (i.e., situational strength). On the other hand, it is also important to note that each operationalization is posited to operate through a relatively unique set of psychological mechanisms. For example, someone who conforms to the will of his or her supervisor out of fear of punishment (i.e., relevant to consequences) engages in the intended behavior(s) for fundamentally different



reasons than someone who conforms because his or her supervisor has given very clear instructions regarding the most appropriate course of action (i.e., relevant to clarity). Because failing to follow clear instructions might also increase the probability of experiencing negative consequences, these perspectives should be viewed as related but not synonymous.

The notion that the four broad operationalizations of situational strength are not redundant with each other suggests that (a) each facet provides distinct conceptual information and (b) the ultimate strength of a given situation is a function of the unique effects of each facet. For example, a situation wherein one's supervisor provides specific instructions pertaining to the best way to complete a task (high clarity) is stronger than a situation wherein these instructions are not present (low clarity). That being said, a situation wherein these instructions are present is weaker than the same situation wherein one's supervisor also threatens to garnish subsequent wages if these instructions are not followed (high clarity *and* high consequences).

Continued theoretical and empirical work however is necessary to determine precisely how these facets combine (i.e., in an additive or a multiplicative manner) and the effects of various facets "disagreeing" with each other (e.g., one indicating strength but another indicating weakness). Although space limitations prevent a thorough discussion of these points, it is important to note here that, similar to the use of criteria (Schmidt & Kaplan, 1971), facet-based moderators likely are most appropriate when elucidating the specific psychological mechanisms through which situational strength operates, whereas composites are best suited for assessing its net practical effects on a given relationship.

## Multilevel Considerations

In addition to demonstrating that situational strength is best conceptualized as a multifaceted construct, with each facet and the combinations thereof deserving additional theoretical attention, the studies outlined previously implicitly suggest that situational strength can also be operationalized as a multilevel construct. Thus, this section explores the hierarchical nature of situational strength by reviewing the extent to which extant operationalizations have been conceptualized at a variety of levels of abstraction (with subsections arranged from broad to narrow levels). The implications of each level on the structure of situational strength as well as its continued study and application are also considered where appropriate.

*National culture.* At a very broad level of abstraction, various aspects of national culture can be argued to influence the level of situational strength a given individual experiences. Although they have not typically been viewed through the lens of situational strength, many of the cultural dimensions identified by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness studies (i.e., Project GLOBE; see House, Javidian, Hanges, & Dorfman, 2002, for an overview) can be predicted to minimize the expression of individual differences by shifting one's focus toward external, behaviorally relevant information.

For example, "uncertainty avoidance" is defined as "the extent to which members of an organization or society strive to avoid uncertainty by reliance on social norms, rituals, and

bureaucratic practices to alleviate the unpredictability of future events” (House et al., 2002: 5). High levels of this cultural tendency are posited to homogenize behavior by discouraging members from using their own discretion to address issues and by encouraging solutions with a strong historical precedence. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures on the other hand, members tend to use their own discretion and idiosyncratic judgments when deciding on a particular course of action, thereby placing less of a precedent on the judgments or perspectives of their predecessors. In this sense then, uncertainty avoidance could be viewed as a broad operationalization of situational strength (most relevant to the consistency and clarity facets). Indeed, ideas at a similar level of abstraction were presented by Gelfand, Lim, and Raver (2004), who developed theory surrounding the potential effects of society-level “accountability” in organizations (most relevant to consequences). Furthermore, Mullins and Cummings (1999) drew directly from situational strength to argue that various society- and industry-level forces (e.g., environmental uncertainty, industry norms—both of which are directly relevant to clarity) likely affect the extent to which the personality characteristics of a given organization’s decision makers influence strategic change decisions.

*Organizational climate.* A narrower potential operationalization is represented by B. Schneider, Salvaggio, and Subirats’s (2002) work on “climate strength.” These authors maintained that a strong organizational climate—one in which there is a high degree of consensus among employees regarding the types of behavior that are expected and/or desired by the organization (most relevant to consistency)—is a good exemplar of a strong situation. This study was concerned not with how the situation (in this case, organizational climate) influences trait–outcome relationships, but rather with the main effects of the situation on outcomes. Specifically, the authors found some evidence to support the contention that the impact of climate favorability on outcomes is augmented in strong climates and attenuated in weak climates. The authors also found evidence to support the (related) contention that strong climates restrict variability in outcomes.

*Occupational characteristics.* One recent meta-analytic test of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2009) found theory-consistent moderating effects of occupation-level constraints and consequences on the conscientiousness-performance relationship. This study was focused specifically on the occupational level of analysis because situational data were obtained through the Occupational Information Network (O\*NET), which provides information about the task, physical, and social characteristics that one expects to find in a given occupation. Thus, this was a relatively conservative test in the sense that it isolated occupation-level effects by implicitly assuming that (for example) all accountants experience identical levels of situational strength, irrespective of the fact that variability in relevant characteristics likely also exists at additional levels of abstraction (Forehand & von Haller Gilmer, 1964; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

*Temporal fluctuations.* Situations, and consequently the strength of situations, can also vary across different tasks within the same job and potentially even within a given task over time. For example, some tasks in which a professor routinely engages are highly structured (e.g., formatting a grant application to meet agency specifications) whereas others are quite

amorphous (e.g., determining what content to cover in a graduate seminar). As another example, time pressure is highest just prior to an impending deadline. Indeed, the classic example of strong and weak situations (red and yellow traffic lights, respectively; Cooper & Withey, 2009; Mischel, 1977) implicitly demonstrates how the strength of situations can be highly transitory.

Empirical evidence of the impact of changing situations is provided by Fleeson (2007), who demonstrated within-person variance in the types of situations experienced as well as a within-person main effect of situations on behavior. For example, a situational strength–relevant dimension studied by Fleeson was task orientation (which was defined to include elements like obligation, imposition, deadline nearness, and evaluation). Fleeson found that the task orientation of a situation varied widely across measurement occasions and that the within-person expression of conscientious *behaviors* tended to be more common in situations that required a higher (compared to a lower) task orientation and that the within-person expression of behaviors that are related to agreeableness tended to be less common in these situations.

An area of research that may be relevant to fine-grained operationalizations of situational strength is job/work design, in that many of the key constructs utilized in this literature can be said to influence the immediate strength of a given situation. For example, each of the three components of autonomy (i.e., the opportunity to schedule one's work, make job-relevant decisions, and determine the most appropriate methods to use; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006) can be viewed as instantiations of "constraints" because reduced autonomy implies that external forces have limited one's freedom of decision and action. Furthermore, task-relevant feedback (most relevant to clarity) that is delivered immediately (e.g., a fuel consumption monitor that provides information to help fine-tune driving habits) can be viewed as a relatively microscopic instantiation of situational strength because direct and easy-to-understand informational cues help to guide subsequent actions.

Thus, situational strength may provide a useful lens through which many relevant contextual constructs may be viewed (Meyer & Dalal, 2009). That being said, it is also important to note that studying transient (as opposed to chronic) differences across and within situations will likely require comparatively new and unfamiliar methods of data collection and analysis (e.g., experience sampling methods and multilevel regression models; Hormuth, 1986; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Yet, because a large percentage of the variance in *behavior* (or job performance) is within-person variance (e.g., Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch, & Hulin, in press; Deadrick, Bennett, & Russell, 1997; Ilies & Judge, 2005) and because a potentially large percentage of the variance in *situations* appears to be within-situation variance (Fleeson, 2007), the notion that situational strength also changes across relatively microscopic units of analysis might represent an area of substantial opportunity for research on situations in general and situational strength in particular.

*Multilevel recommendations.* Given the previous discussion of situational strength as a multilevel phenomenon, it is important to provide some general recommendations regarding the ways in which organizational scientists might approach multilevel situational strength theory and research. First, it is important to point out that organizational scientists should be explicit about the level(s) of abstraction at which a given operationalization exists. This

includes (but is not necessarily limited to) formally stating that a particular level is the focus of a given study and using labels that accurately reflect this (e.g., “occupation-level situational strength,” “society-level consequences”).

Second, theoretical explanations regarding the mechanisms through which a given operationalization operates should be consistent with the level of abstraction at which one’s situational strength data exist. For example, if a researcher is interested in examining the ways in which society-level consequences moderate the relationship between employees’ antisocial personality traits and their likelihood of engaging in illegal accounting procedures, it would be expected that data be collected across cultures. In cases where data exist at a level of analysis lower than the desired level, it may be possible, using an appropriate composition model (Chan, 1998), to aggregate the data up to the desired level. Thus, the overall message is that just like predictor and outcome data (Diez Roux, 2002), moderator data should exist at a level that is consistent with one’s research question; when this is not possible, relevant steps should be taken to ensure that subsequent procedures are conducted in a manner that is consistent with current multilevel practices.

Third, it is important that researchers remain open to the possibility that the effects of situational strength at a particular level of analysis need not necessarily generalize to additional levels. For example, finding that achievement motivation predicts performance better in unstructured jobs than in highly structured jobs does not necessarily imply that achievement motivation predicts performance better for unstructured *tasks* within a given job. It may very well be the case that some effects are consistent across levels, but, especially in the absence of strong multilevel theory, generalizability across levels should be empirically tested on a case-by-case basis. In addition, future theory and research might focus on whether the strength of observed effects varies systematically across levels (e.g., effects at more proximal levels might tend to be stronger than those at more distal levels).

Overall, because the theory necessary to make *a priori* predictions about the extent to which a given operationalization of situational strength will likely affect a given trait–outcome relationship does not yet exist, it is important to examine the extent to which published primary studies have articulated the rationale underlying their predictions and their subsequent observed level of support. These issues are addressed here via a review of the empirical literature.

## Review of the Empirical Literature

*Literature search.* We obtained relevant studies in three ways. First, we examined the references sections of the Cooper and Withey (2009); Lissek, Pine, and Grillon (2006); and Meyer et al. (2009) articles, all of which contained several studies of relevance to situational strength. Second, we conducted PsycInfo and Google Scholar searches using the following phrases (located anywhere in the text of a study, as opposed to solely in the title or abstract): *situational strength*, *situation strength*, *strong situation*, and *weak situation*. Third, we were also interested in reviewing the relevant portions of literatures on constructs that could legitimately be considered operationalizations of situational strength, even in cases where they were not explicitly labeled as such (e.g., the job/work design literature). To locate these

studies, we searched for relevant words or phrases (e.g., *accountability, autonomy, climate strength, consequences, job design, stability, substitutes for leadership*) that occurred in conjunction with other words or phrases that reflect the proposed effects of situational strength (e.g., *moderator, moderation, incremental validity, incremental variance, restriction of variance, interaction term*).<sup>3</sup> For example, although there is a large research literature on autonomy, we were interested only in those studies (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1993) in which autonomy was posited to restrict variance in outcomes and/or to interact with traits to influence outcomes. All literature searches used in this study included the year 1968 to coincide with the publication date of Mischel's seminal critique emphasizing the role of situations in personality-behavior relationships.

Each of the studies obtained via the three aforementioned steps was then manually examined for relevance on the basis of its title and abstract. In total, we obtained 153 relevant empirical studies with a total sample size of 54,630. These 153 studies included a total of 397 tests of situational strength-related hypotheses. Of these 397 tests, 352 examined the moderating impact of situational strength on trait-outcome relationships, whereas the remaining 45 were tests of the impact of situational strength on the restriction of variance in outcomes. There was a trivial amount of nonindependence across studies.

*Descriptive statistics.* Although all studies utilized here involved operationalizations relevant to situational strength, as well as tests of situation strength-related hypotheses, only 36% were conducted under the formal rubric of situational strength. For example, despite being clearly relevant, several studies neither included key phrases such as *situational strength* and *strong situation* nor cited any important references in the situational strength literature (i.e., Mischel, 1968, 1973, 1977; Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Weiss & Adler, 1984). Of the 153 studies used here, 13% included operationalizations best classified as *clarity* (e.g., Beaty, Cleveland, & Murphy, 2001; Bowles et al., 2005), 14% included operationalizations best classified as *consistency* (e.g., Jansen, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006; Zickar, Gibby, & Jenny, 2004), 44% included operationalizations best classified as *constraints* (e.g., Adkins & Naumann, 2001; Barrick & Mount, 1993), and 13% included operationalizations best classified as *consequences* (e.g., Chuang, Liao, & Tai, 2005; George, & Zhou, 2001). The remaining 16% of operationalizations either represented a combination of facets or were not classifiable into any of them.

Finally, we note that the median sample size across all tests of the impact of situational strength conducted within a traditional moderated multiple regression framework was only 221. Taken in conjunction with the levels of unreliability and range restriction typically associated with psychological research and the fact that interaction terms typically exhibit very small effect sizes, such a sample size is associated with unacceptably low statistical power in tests of moderation (Aiken & West, 1991; Chaplin, 1997). That being said, this value represents the median sample size across a variety of types of analysis; thus, it is also important to examine the specific ways in which extant studies tested hypotheses of relevance to situational strength.

*Moderation hypothesis.* Of primary interest was the hypothesis that situational strength moderates trait-outcome relationships, such that the obtained relationships are stronger in

weak than in strong situations. Of the 352 trait-outcome relationships in which the moderating impact of an operationalization of situational strength was assessed, 58% reported statistically significant findings. In this regard, two issues are particularly noteworthy. First, 71% of studies that assessed moderation using a group design test statistic (e.g., an  $F$  test) yielded statistically significant results at the conventional .05 level, compared to 46% of studies that assessed moderation using moderated multiple regression, and this difference in percentages was itself statistically significant ( $z = 3.75, p < .01$ ). Thus, relative to assessments of naturally occurring variance in situational strength, manipulations (typically in the laboratory) and/or extreme groups studies of situational strength were more likely to yield significant moderation effects. Second, 90% of all statistically significant moderated multiple regression results and 96% of all statistically significant group design results were significant in the direction consistent with situational strength theory (i.e., the impact of a trait on an outcome is stronger in a weak than a strong situation).

Another way of assessing the impact of moderation is to focus on effect size rather than statistical significance. Such an approach also helps to reduce concerns regarding inadequate sample sizes in the primary studies. Across the 167 trait-outcome relationships that were tested for moderation using moderated multiple regression analysis, and that additionally reported an  $R^2$  for main effects (plus control variables, if any) as well as a  $\Delta R^2$  for the interaction term, the interaction term on average explained an additional 2.0% in criterion variance beyond the 20% explained by main effects. This value compares favorably to the effect sizes of categorical moderator variables found in a recent review (Aguinis, Beaty, Boik, & Pierce, 2005).

The extent of moderation did not vary significantly across the four facets of situational strength: Average  $\Delta R^2$  values were 2.0%, 1.7%, 1.6%, 2.0%, and 2.4% for consequences, constraints, clarity, consistency, and the mixed/unclassifiable category, respectively,  $F(4, 153) = 1.55, p > .05$ . The extent of moderation also did not differ significantly across the two most common outcome domains: Average  $\Delta R^2$  values were 1.6% for job performance (which was the outcome in 31% of studies) and 2.4% for job attitudes (which were the outcomes in 22% of studies),  $F(1, 107) = 2.46, p > .05$ . We were unable to examine whether the extent of moderation differed across predictor (i.e., trait) domains because no predictor domain other than personality was assessed by a meaningfully large number of studies in our sample.

*Restriction of variance hypothesis.* In addition to moderation, we were interested in the hypothesis that strong situations (relative to their weak counterparts) are associated with less variance in criteria (i.e., outcomes). Tests of this contention often involved dichotomizing (or polychotomizing) situational strength and then assessing whether the amount of variance in behavior/performance criteria was lower under conditions of high situational strength than under conditions of low situational strength. Of the 45 tests for restriction of criterion variance, 78% reported support for this contention.

*Summary of the empirical review.* This review generated several noteworthy findings. First, there is fairly convincing support for the contention that strong situations restrict variance in criteria. In a subsequent section, we discuss potential meta-analytic implications of this finding. Second, there is middling support for the contention that strong situations



attenuate relationships between individual differences and criteria. Two caveats, however, are important here: (a) The theory necessary to predict which specific facets will and will not moderate which trait-outcome relationships is in need of continued development, and (b) extant studies have frequently lacked the statistical power necessary to test this contention. Thus, the lack of unambiguous support for this hypothesis is not surprising and suggests the need for both better theory and better empirical inquiry. Third, there are no large differences in effect sizes across outcome domains and facets, but future research would benefit from not only better assessing the entirety of situational strength's construct space but also from examining effects across a more diverse set of predictor-criterion relationships.

### Situational Strength's Implications for Interactional Research

Given the history of theoretical and empirical research on situational strength, as well as researchers' relatively inchoate understanding of the nature and structure of situations in general, we believe that both the four-facet framework introduced in this article and our review of relevant empirical literatures have the potential to better inform interactional research in a variety of organizational science disciplines. The present section briefly outlines a few such areas.

*Validity of personality predictors.* Perhaps the most important implication of situational strength is that it is commonly believed to explain cross-situational variability in the criterion-related validity of noncognitive individual differences (Mischel, 1977; Mullins & Cummings, 1999; Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Weiss & Adler, 1984). Thus, the long-standing debate in the organizational sciences between those who believe that personality variables are important predictors of relevant job outcomes (Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007) and those who are more skeptical (Morgeson, Campion, Dipboye, Hollenbeck, Murphy, & Schmitt, 2007) can be reframed to incorporate situational strength (Murphy & Dziewieczynski, 2005). Specifically, the debate should not be about *whether* personality constructs predict job performance but rather about the *conditions under which* they predict job performance—a more complex perspective, but also a potentially more useful one (Mischel, 1973).

Thus, we hope that one of the ultimate outcomes of the present article is that it allows organizational scientists to better calibrate estimates of the expected criterion-related validity of a given predictor by actively incorporating situational strength. Indeed, the meta-analysis mentioned previously (Meyer et al., 2009) indicates that the observed (i.e., uncorrected) criterion-related validity of conscientiousness varies from  $r = 0.09$  in prototypically strong occupations (e.g., "nuclear equipment operation technician") to  $r = 0.23$  in prototypically weak occupations (e.g., "barber"). Thus, information such as this may be able to be used by practitioners to more accurately estimate the utility of various nonability predictors. As discussed in the following sections however, situational strength can also be used to address important interactional questions in research areas that have not typically drawn from a situational strength perspective.



*Occupational health and safety.* Given that a purported outcome of situational strength is the homogenization of observed behaviors, strong situations are, partially by definition (i.e., through the presence of consequences as a facet of situational strength), more common in those occupations and industries wherein mistakes and errors carry an increased risk of negative outcomes. However, increased situational strength may be viewed by some as stressful and overly constraining (cf. deCharms, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and may therefore have deleterious effects on psychological health and well-being (see Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994, for similar ideas). If this is indeed the case, situational strength might paradoxically enhance occupational safety while detracting from occupational health. The broader point is that strong situations are unlikely to be “good” or “bad” per se and that researchers should instead determine the valued outcomes (criteria) for which strong situations are beneficial versus those for which strong situations are detrimental.

*Person–environment fit.* One of the core ideas expressed in the person–environment fit literature is that a mismatch between individuals’ needs and environmental supplies can have deleterious effects on performance, attitudes, and health (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Within the context of situational strength, some employees may view highly constraining environments as stifling and frustrating, whereas others may find the regimented and predictable nature of constraining environments to be comforting and relaxing. If these differences do in fact exist, they would suggest that employees’ justice perceptions, levels of need fulfillment, and psychological reactions are partially a function of their individual differences profile and partially a function of the nature of the strength of the situation they are experiencing. In this sense then, the conceptualization of situational strength presented here may be a useful way to assess persons’ needs and environmental supplies in mutually commensurate ways (Tinsley, 2000).

*Organizational justice.* Another theoretical perspective with potential connections to situational strength is organizational justice. For example, informational justice (i.e., the adequacy of explanations and other communications; Colquitt, 2001) is relevant to the situational strength facet of clarity, several of the procedural justice criteria outlined by Thibaut and Walker (1975) and Leventhal and colleagues (Leventhal, 1980; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980) such as process and decision control (i.e., the ability of affected parties to express their views regarding procedures and outcomes) are relevant to the constraints facet, and consistency in the justice literature (i.e., the similarity of procedures across people and time) has strong parallels with the situational strength facet of the same name. One potential implication of this connection is that some aspects of justice (e.g., high procedural consistency) are associated with situational *strength* whereas others (e.g., high process and decision control) are associated with situational *weakness*. Thus, although we do not disagree with a recent call for more interventions aimed at promoting organizational justice (Greenberg, 2009), we caution that the specific aspects of justice sought to be manipulated should be chosen with care to avoid undesired changes in levels of situational strength as well as potential repercussions associated with the outcomes outlined previously.

Addressing the issues outlined in this section would be substantially easier to the extent that situational strength is treated as a psychologically meaningful and scientifically rigorous construct. The following section highlights ways in which this process might best progress.

## Future Directions

*Continued examination into dimensional structure.* Although we believe the four-facet conceptualization outlined here is an important advance, it is possible that more or fewer categories of operationalizations exist. Thus, we encourage continued theoretical development and empirical tests of alternative structures of situational strength that might also serve to move our understanding of this phenomenon forward. Although the structure outlined here was derived by attempting to find common themes among extant operationalizations, this approach assumes that the existing corpus of studies is a *representative* sample of situational strength's theoretical construct space. Thus, inductive theorizing that focuses on additional (or alternative) categories of operationalizations might be fruitful. Ultimately, however, direct empirical tests of operationalizations and their effects will need to be conducted—a task that would be better addressed if a standardized instrument designed specifically to measure the four facets of situational strength was available.

*Development of a standardized instrument.* A standardized instrument developed specifically to assess the facets of situational strength will be able to be used alongside traditional job-analytic tools to help “analyze the context within which the job is embedded” (Murphy & Dzieweczynski, 2005: 349). Thus, there are many potential benefits of such an instrument. First, it would allow researchers interested in examining the effects of situational strength on relevant trait–outcome relationships to do so in a way that is not only consistent across studies (which is not the case at present, as evidenced by our review of the empirical literature) but that also helps to develop a general situational strength literature—the absence of which is duly noted in Cooper and Withey's (2009) review. Second, it would allow for an assessment of the relative importance (Azen & Budescu, 2003) of the dimensions of situational strength, helping researchers to determine which dimensions are necessary and/or sufficient to adequately understand a given interactional question. Third, it would help researchers determine whether the situational strength dimensions interact with each other—and, if they do, whether these interactions are synergistic or antagonistic. Fourth, it would allow for large-scale analyses of the relative levels of situational strength that likely exist in diverse situations, the results of which could then be compiled into centralized databases (e.g., O\*NET) that could help inform future practice and research.

*Meta-analytic implications.* A more thorough understanding of situational strength and its effects on behavior might also have implications for meta-analysis. Specifically, it has been argued that criterion unreliability “is a function of, rather than independent of, the situational variables that moderate validities” (James, Demaree, Mulaik, & Ladd, 1992: 3). It has also been argued that range restriction in criteria might be a function of situational constraints rather than a statistical artifact (Peters & O'Connor, 1980). Indeed, our review of the empirical literature yielded fairly compelling support for the contention that strong situations reduce variance in criteria. Thus, the practice of “correcting” effect sizes for criterion unreliability and range restriction in meta-analyses (and, less commonly, in primary studies) may inadvertently mask the impact of contextual factors such as situational strength—that is,

such practices may make predictor-criterion relationships appear more robust to situational variation than they actually are. Future meta-analytic research should test this idea with regard to situational strength. If this effect is indeed found to exist, this would mean that relevant meta-analytic corrections should only be conducted when a case is presented as to how potential sources of criterion range restriction and unreliability operate independent of situational strength.

## Conclusion

Although situational strength has long been recognized as a potentially important mechanism through which situations homogenize behaviors and influence the extent to which relevant outcomes are predictable via nonability individual differences, the scientific foundations of this concept are currently lacking (Cooper & Withey, 2009). As a consequence, the construct space of situational strength is theoretically ill defined, there is no agreed on way to conceptualize or measure it, relevant literatures lack decisive empirical tests, and there is little consensus regarding the nature and discernable impact of its actual effects.

We attempted to address these issues by examining extant operationalizations of situational strength and by suggesting that situational strength can be represented by four facets: clarity, constraints, consequences, and consistency. It is important to point out, however, that we view this structure as a meaningful way to begin a dialogue about these issues, not as an endpoint per se (i.e., we recognize and embrace the need for continued theorizing). Thus, we view the ideas and findings presented here as important steps toward determining whether situational strength is a meritorious organizational concept or an undeservingly accepted truism.

## Notes

1. Although other labels for this facet are possible, the term *consistency* is used similarly in psychometrics (i.e., *internal consistency* represents the extent to which items are interrelated; Cortina, 1993) and in personality (i.e., *behavioral consistency* represents the extent to which behaviors are similar across contexts; Funder & Colvin, 1991). The conceptualization of consistency provided here however also accounts for the fact that a given situation would score high with respect to consistency to the extent that relevant cues are similar over time.

2. The research literature on situational constraints appears to have developed relatively independently of the research literature on situational strength. Thus, there is a key difference between the traditional perspective on situational constraints and our situational strength-based perspective. According to the traditional perspective, the available options are not only reduced but also degraded in overall quality because it is the *good* options that are abridged. Thus, constraints would be expected to exert a negative main effect on performance: The greater the constraints, the worse the performance. Our situational strength-based perspective on constraints is more general because we focus on the reduction of *all* available options (regardless of the overall quality thereof), meaning that the main effects of our conceptualization of constraints may be negative, positive, or nonexistent. These differences notwithstanding, both perspectives would argue that constraints lead to a restriction of variance in theoretically relevant criteria as well as an attenuation of relationships between these criteria and noncognitive individual difference predictors (e.g., Peters & O'Connor, 1980).

3. A complete list of keywords is available from the authors.

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