Situated Activity

and Identity Formation

Introduction

Social psychology has often seemed less an amalgamation of psychology and sociology than an awkward appendage of each field, pretending to a distinctive domain of common interest, but differing by disciplinary origin "in definition and in execution" (Stryker 1977:145). Thus, members of each branch differ in the topics researched, methods used, journals read, works cited, texts employed, and appraisals of contributions to knowledge in the area (Wilson and Schafer 1978). If this were merely a difference in focus, we should expect to find a heuristic complementarity of emphasis, with psychologists stressing intrapersonal aspects of problems that sociologists approached in terms of role-related interactions. However, where there should be interface there is too frequently irrelevance.

In the area of situated action, where the two social-psychological traditions should merge, the problems and prospects for convergence within the discipline appear (Boutilier et al. 1980). At this analytic level, psychological processes become fully manifest in a distinctly social field and the actions of an individual influence others present. Similarly, the social realities of the environment infuse the activity of the individual who is affected by the presence of others. Thus, at the place where activity becomes a social process, we seek to explore the potential unity of the field.

Despite major differences of theory and method there is general subscription to Allport's definition of social psychology as "...an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Allport 1968:3). Consideration of this statement leads us to ques-

tion what it is about the presence of others, in fact or fantasy, that transforms organismic processes into social-psychological phenomena. We believe that an adequate answer to this question involves the fundamental conceptualization of the data with which the discipline deals.

We see the resolution of disciplinary disparities in the adoption of a relational conceptualization of social psychological phenomena. Rather than begin our investigative quests with units of analysis that prejudice the organization of the field into self-contained systems of selves and social structures that ensure boundary disputes, let us begin with the boundary itself. If we start with social acts as units of analysis, we avoid creating conflict between individual responses striving for expression against a repressive social fabric and normative demands requiring sanctioned implementation against resistant psychological forces. We propose that the defining properties of social acts are situated identities. Situated identities are conceived as the attributions that are made from salient perspectives about an actor's presence and performance in the immediate social context. In the following pages, we will explore the bases of this conceptualization, its elaboration into a formally testable model, and studies that embody research on its hypotheses.

Attribution: Behaviorism and Interactionism

Skinnerian behaviorism and Meadian interactionism are, in many essential respects, similar in their view that the transactions between the environment and the organism create the phenomena of ultimate explanatory reference. Mead (1962:77-78) speaks of objects being "constituted" by the actor's purposive relation to them, in the sense that there would be no food if there were no organisms with digestive processes. Similarly, Skinner points out that we have no reason to believe that any particular stimulus configuration would be responded to discriminatively unless the organism were reinforced for doing so (Skinner 1964). The external environment for social-psychological purposes is seen as coming into being and into possession of whatever "qualities" it is assigned by virtue of its inclusion in some functional or pragmatic interaction with a sentient organism. Both theorists take a similar approach to self-knowledge: we come to know ourselves and "qualities" assigned to the internal environment because we learn such responses. Bem's (1972) recent behaviorist theory of self-perception is perfectly compatible with interactionist ideas so long as we recognize that the categories of perception are socially defined.

The emergence of distinctively attributional theories from Heider's work parallels even more directly the issues and the approach we wish to take. Heider (1958) argues eloquently that we respond, not to a world of stimulus configurations, but to a world of organized dispositional qualities: invariant structures and processes. This arises from the continual pressures to attain perceptual economy, maintain stable orientations...
to the invariant features of variegated experiences, and ensure predictability of events. If we had to attend to the peculiarities of all stimuli manifestations that we encounter, that task alone would overload our capacities and leave us no time to process the inputs and coordinate responses to them. Furthermore, we would be stuck with a meaningless flux of unique and nonrecurrent events that would make anticipation impossible.

To avoid this maladaptive state of affairs, Heider claims that we selectively perceive the world in terms of its dispositional qualities. The phenomena of constancy illustrate the process—we experience an approaching object as possessing the constant dispositional characteristics of shape and size despite variations in distance from it or in angles of view. Two things should be noted. First, the experience is immediately given; it does not require a calculated readjustment of sensory input. Second, the imposition of constancy demands a rather sophisticated implementation of an interpretive system of relational judgments regarding distance, location, movement, and so on. It is this categorization of stimuli into objects with dispositional qualities and knowledge of the lawful relationships among the properties that enables us to progress to prediction. Awareness of what things are is apprehension of how they fit into an orderly sequencing of events: the characteristics of objects are defined by the causal systems connecting them. The advantage for the prediction of events is obvious: active adjustment and manipulative intervention are facilitated.

Heider applied these same principles to the perception of persons who occupy special status as sources or origins of activity. Their activity appears invariant only if we attend to its apparent goal-direction. Activity sources in the inanimate world, such as volcanoes, may explode erratically, but the consequences of an eruption (for example, the lava flow) are grossly predictable and therefore avoidable. However, if a person explodes with anger over something we have done, avoidance of the ensuing harmful consequences is not such a simple predictive matter. An angry person may succeed in harming us in a number of alternative ways, any of which can be adjusted to take account of the avoidance activity we might take. Personal causality possesses what Heider calls equifinality: the means are varied, but the eventual goal is invariant. The dispositional imputations that permit us to predict this goal and take adaptive action to adapt to contingently variable means depend upon our identification of the purposes and intents of the actor. Thus, the dispositional qualities that lend stability, coherence, and predictability to the interpersonal environment involve judgments of aims, wishes, desires, emotions, motives, and other qualities not imputed to the inanimate environment.

From Heider, we glean how the individual attributes dispositional characteristics to others. Like Heider, symbolic interactionists view the person as perceiver of his world. But they regard the stance outlined thus far as a basic framework from which the bulk of analysis proceeds. For this reason, their work aids us in delineating the importance of others’ presence for the individual. For example, a key phrase of this perspective, "role-taking" (Mead 1962; Turner 1962), will provide a much clearer understanding of the impact of others’ presence (real, imagined, or anticipated) on an individual. Role-taking refers to a central process by which actors take into account the others’ responses to them. Heider also recognizes this aspect of the other in his discussion of the other as perceiver. He notes that an actor needs to take into account, not only the dispositional qualities of the other, but the dispositions the other attributes to the actor. For this reason, an actor’s perceptions of the other take on a reactive quality. Since Heider does not give this aspect of the process much emphasis, nor does the attribution research based on his work, we depend upon symbolic interactionism to provide a more fully developed view.

The importance of others’ dispositional attributions becomes obvious if we think about the total reinforcement we experience in our everyday lives. Much of it flows directly from other persons (acceptance, affection, approval, and so forth) and most of the remainder is mediated by them. During the developmental years this dependency is even more intense. It is during that period that, through the process of role-taking, the self emerges, and the person learns to control and evaluate his or her behaviors. In the same way, the person learns the processes that are effective in self-monitoring and self-evaluation.

From our perspective the paramount thing learned through the process of role-taking is how the self will be responded to by others. As we have seen, others’ reactions are a function of the dispositional inferences they make about persons and their actions. Thus, it is evident that in order to anticipate, much less control and manipulate, these responses, the individual must come to view his or her own activity from others’ (dispositional) perspectives. Since the ultimate referents of these perspectives are internal qualities, it follows that individuals learn about their internal environment by the same reflexive process. In short, they learn to see themselves in the same dispositional terms and to view their activities and actions as expressing these attributes. The adoption of this perspective transforms mere behavior into conduct.

**Behavior, Conduct, and Situated Activity**

We will distinguish behavior, conduct, and situated activity, defining the differences between them in terms of their incorporation of social perspectives. This lays the groundwork for the construction of situated-identity theory's conception of social realities as dispositional dimensions relating actors through acts to objects of orientation. We illustrate this with the story, "Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and the Tar Baby" (Harris 1949).

Once upon a time, Brer Rabbit encounters a tar figure erected by Brer Fox as a trap. Brer Rabbit attempts to carry on a polite conversation with the Tar Baby but gets no response. Brer Rabbit first assumes that this lack of response is due to deafness, but when he shouts the Tar Baby still does
not respond. This leads Brer Rabbit to assume that the Tar Baby is "stuck up" and needs to be taught how to "talk to 'specttabble fokes' " (Harris 1949:53). In this attempt, Brer Rabbit punches the Tar Baby and becomes hopelessly stuck. And so Brer Fox catches Brer Rabbit.

Before Brer Rabbit leaves home, his behavior may range from stretching and scratching to fixing breakfast. He may be engaged in mere behavior, psychologically oblivious to others' presumed or potential presence. This kind of behavior is irrelevant for social psychology. We are concerned only with events that occur when an actor orients himself to a field in which others are psychologically present. This latter type of event we will call conduct to distinguish it from behavior (McCall and Simmons, 1966:39-62). Brer Rabbit's conduct begins when he leaves his home and prances down a path aware that at any moment he may be observed. The imagined presence of others is presumed to activate an orientational set to perceive the environment in psychologically dispositional terms. At the most fundamental level, this orientation of the person toward himself and events does not require perception by others, nor others' actual awareness of, or responsiveness to, the perceiver. In acts we categorize as conduct, it is possible that the entire process is imaginary: it is not necessarily conscious or self-reflexive.

What characterizes the orientation of a person who is engaged in conduct is what Heider calls the arousal of "a general readiness to perceive psychologically. ..." (Heider 1958:57), and what interactionists generally regard as internalized "role-taking." It means primitively that the individual apprehends himself as related to the environment in terms of his own dispositions. Conduct is roughly equivalent to what Goffman (1963) calls an "interactional tonus," a general level of motor activity and disciplined management of personal front that signifies the readiness of a person to be observed by others. As he notes, this is such a general and pervasive orientation that a person is most likely to be totally unaware of it-for example, the diffuse maintenance of ". . .a certain level of alertness as evidence of his availability for potential stimuli, and some orderliness and organization of his personal appearance. . ." (Goffman 1963:30) as evidence of self-control.

Brer Rabbit's conduct becomes situated activity when he notices the Tar Baby and identifies it as a potentially sentient other. Now his conduct occurs from an orientation that includes particular others' perspectives, where particular refers not only to specific individuals but to types or categories of persons as well. Conduct becomes situated activity when it is anchored outside the self and constrained by presumed monitoring. Thus, we define situated activity as conduct in the symbolically defined space and time within which an actor presumes that events are being or might be monitored by another. The monitoring does not have to coincide with the action, as when traces are left or accounts are planned, and, as with the Tar Baby, it does not have to be actual monitoring, merely presumed or potential.

The important aspect of situated activity is that it provides the conditions under which identity formation occurs. Brer Rabbit could not have passed the Tar Baby in that sociocultural milieu without facing the choice between greeting and silent disregard. This choice translates to characterization along dimensions of rude-polite, respectful-dis respectful, and so forth. He becomes in a sense inextricably engaged in situated activity by the mere presence of a potential monitor, less pointedly and dramatically so than the Tar Baby who is directly addressed, but unavoidably so nonetheless. Goffman puts it nicely: "Whatever an individual does and however he appears, he knowingly and unknowingly makes information available concerning the attributes that might be imputed to him and hence the categories in which he might be placed...the physical milieu itself conveys implications concerning the identity of those who are in it" (Goffman 1961:102). Further, an individual's action ". . .inevitably expresses something about him, something out of which he and others fashion an image of him" (Goffman 1961:97, emphasis added).

Goffman (1959) has stressed that it is necessary for people to establish their respective identities almost before they proceed with interaction, since "who one is" in an encounter defines how he or she is expected to act and how others are obliged to treat him or her. In general, identity claims set the pattern for status, affective, evaluative, and power relationships that will prevail during any activity sequence. With the major dimensions of social responsiveness at stake, it is not surprising that people attend to identity claims.

Dispositional inferences are continuously being made about persons. However, what is done is often less important than how it is done. Even when a person acts in perfect accord with normative expectations, he or she still acts with a certain style, timing, vitality, and so on. Furthermore, information is conveyed even in the absence of "events" by a person's dress and demeanor and by the fact that he or she is present (or absent) at a particular time and in a particular place (Stone 1962). Although what causes an event is of interest, an understanding of the dispositional nature of persons, as ongoing sources of causality, is more important for the prediction of a wide range of future events.

Situated Identity Theory

Situated identity theory emerges from the idea that identity formation is the fundamental process of social perception and the cornerstone of interaction. This theory proposes that we define the phenomena of social action in terms of the dispositional attributes that flow from the perspectives of given perceivers of the event field. Situated activity is conceived as an ongoing process of establishing, affirming, modifying, and sometimes destroying situated identities. Situated identities are not properties possessed by or imposed upon persons, nor are they located in some externalized environmental structure. Instead, they define the relationships between the actor and the environment at any given point. The social reality at any moment is the complex of situated identities generated from all of the perspectives that are relevant to the events in a social field.
Although we anticipate that the model eventually will be elaborated to deal with multiple and divergent perspectives, it seems advisable to focus initially on relatively simple situated activity sequences involving similar perspectives. This idea of similar perspectives immediately suggests normative action sequences. Such an interpretation may at first appear to limit severely the range of a social psychologist's investigation. However, this emphasis on normative action sequences is not a serious limitation on initial inquiries, if we accept that most situations are socially defined and that norms are continually emergent and, therefore, relatively pervasive.

Thus, we restrict our investigations to situated activities that meet a consensus criterion—people must agree on the particular attributional dimensions that are relevant to an act, and they must further agree on how to characterize the act along each dimension. When these conditions are met, we can say that the activity is normatively structured.

When an activity sequence has a coherent normative structure, then certain attributional dimensions become relevant to describe participants whereas other dimensions are not salient. For example, performance at a solitary task of personal interest may lead to inferences about an individual's persistence, competence, and carefulness, but it is unlikely to generate any impressions about his or her friendliness, reliability, or cooperativeness. These latter attributions would become relevant if the task were joint and the outcome of mutual importance. However, it is still unlikely that routine performance would generate attributions about honesty, courage, and so forth.

The existence of consensual definition also depends on agreement about how an action is to be evaluated along the relevant dimensions. For example, suppose that our solitary task performer makes a series of mistakes. Some people may see the performer as essentially competent, but careless. Others may attribute his or her errors to incompetence, but continue to characterize the performer as careful. The same two dimensions will be relevant for both groups, but they will not agree on how to rate the actor. Since there is lack of consensus on relevant dimensions, we do not have the formation of a normatively structured situated identity.

The issue thus addressed by situated identity theory becomes how potential actions dispositionally characterize an actor for similar others who are taking the role of the actor. Our focus of inquiry is upon the relationship between the dispositional imputations that others make about each of a set of alternatives at a choice-point in the flow of situated activity, and their expectations about the choices that actors make when faced with such a decision. In a particular sense, we are asking for normative definitions of the social action field from the perspective of similar others. Since most attributional dimensions are evaluative, the mere perception of action in these terms is usually an evaluation of it as well. Even if the consequences of actions carry no other sanctions, these evaluations are sufficient justification for calling the emergent expectations normative. Once formed, these normative definitions are then compared with expectations about the actor's choices.

Thus, we have alternative choices faced by an actor that are similarly perceived in situated identity terms by similar others. These observers face the problem of deciding which option the actor will choose. It may be that the alternatives are similarly valued, even to the point of being identical. If this is so, and the observer knows nothing about the personality, past, or preferences of the actor, there would be no basis for formulating an expectation of what the actor might do. However, "to the extent that alternatives are differentially valued, we suppose that the observer expects the individual to choose the action that is socially desirable. Therefore, in the absence of any other criteria, normative expectations about conduct should be a function of the social desirability of alternatives.

The procedures that operationalize these ideas can best be presented by describing an early study that differs from most subsequent work in that it involves a non-laboratory setting. A naturalistic setting allows us to show that situated identity processes operate under conditions in which the person cannot be viewed as giving a self-conscious presentational performance for public consumption. Given widespread concerns about evaluative apprehension (Rosenberg 1969) in the laboratory and the feeling that it amplifies normal levels of concern about social approval by providing continuous observation, it is important to explore situated identity formation when respondents and their responses are anonymous. Carl Hovland and others (see for example Hovland et al. 1953) conducted extensive research on persuasive communications in natural settings. G. Knight and C. N. Alexander (unpublished data) adopted this approach to study respondents who were members of an audience hearing an impersonal persuasive appeal concerning a private medical problem. The appeal recommended that a preventive action be taken outside the context of the message presentation without the knowledge of the persuasive source.

Situating Identity Formation in Natural Settings

Janis and Feshbach (1953) originally suggested that excessively frightening messages would trigger "defensive avoidance" reactions and reduce compliance with a recommendation to act, despite the increased threat from consequences of noncompliance. Some research continued to support these findings, but an overwhelming number of subsequent studies has shown a positive relationship between the magnitude of fear aroused and the tendency to intend to or actually comply with the recommended preventative action (McGuire 1969; Leventhal 1970). Since none of the previous fear-appeal studies manipulated efficacy of the recommendation in an adequate way, we created our own stimulus materials and varied the efficacy of the recommendation as a cross-cutting, independent variable.

Although there are problematic exceptions, the relationship between fear arousal and attitude or behavioral change has often been positive when recommendations have been highly efficacious—that is, efficiently
preventive and relatively easy to follow. Inverse relationships have been found when the recommended actions entail only slightly efficacious behaviors—actions that are difficult, demanding, and uncertain in preventive outcomes. We defined efficacy as the perceived probability of preventing the negative consequences associated with noncompliance and as the costs involved in following the recommended action. Efficacy, so conceptualized, is not only independent of the magnitude of threat, but also independent of the amount of loss if noncompliance is chosen.

One hundred twenty-eight unmarried Stanford undergraduates were recruited to participate voluntarily in an "Experimental Impressions Study." Subjects listened to an authoritative lecture on birth defects, entitled "The Disinherited Children." It dealt with congenitally deficient children whose impairments were traceable to nonhereditary origins: if parents had sought appropriate pre-pregnancy advice, these defects could have been foreseen and averted. A "Uterine Tap" was recommended for mothers-to-be; this examination could detect the imbalance in a woman's endocrine system that was alleged to cause the birth defects.

There were four control versions of the arousing lecture, and four experimental versions. Sixteen subjects responded to each of the eight versions of the persuasive communication. The level of threat (fear-arousal) was varied independently of the recommendation's efficacy. For the first seven minutes, each version presented an identical discussion of nature's physiological preparation of females for motherhood and the importance of proper hormone balance in insuring a healthy, normal conception and birth. During the last seven minutes, the messages departed radically to effect manipulation of the relevant variables. Although much of the information as presented was essentially fictitious, the contents of the tapes were loosely related to medical fact so that they sounded plausible to anyone not specifically knowledgeable on the topic. Factual distortions and exaggerations were freely employed to assure successful manipulations of the independent variables.

In the Low-Fear condition, remarks were confined to a review of the relevant variables. The High-Fear condition, however, placed considerable emphasis on the unpleasantness of the deformities that arise from pregnancies during periods of hormone imbalance. Apart from miscarriage, the potential consequences included: discolored teeth, massive birth marks, dwarfed limbs, blindness, mongolism, and Siamese twins. In both versions the recommended Uterine Tap could not cure hormonal imbalance, but it could indicate whether conception should be risked at any given point. In the High-Efficacy condition, the Tap was described as quite painless, easily and quickly done, available at local doctors for a moderate fee, and accurate in detecting significant imbalance 85 percent of the time. By contrast, the Low-Efficacy description noted that it was a new technique, still rather clumsy, and might require repeated samplings. The Low-Efficacy Tap did not involve much pain, was understood to be within most couples' financial means, and was available at a few hospitals in the area. Its accuracy of diagnosis was not conclusively specified, but it was estimated to be around 60 percent. Our respondents were told that the presentation was excerpted from a longer lecture heard by an audience of young couples attending adult sex-education programs sponsored by church groups, public education series, and the Planned Parenthood Association. The stimulus couples were reported to be either contemplating marriage or recently married but presently childless.

Based upon both the persuasive communication and the description of the attending couples, subjects in each experimental condition estimated the percentage of "audience" women who would comply with the recommendation to secure the Uterine Tap. Half of each experimental group evaluated a stimulus woman who chose to comply, while the other half judged one who decided not to comply. Each stimulus woman was rated on nineteen bipolar adjective scales, the adjective pairs (attribute dimensions) having been selected by the experimenters. Finally, subjects were asked to circle the five dimensions they found most relevant to forming an overall impression of the woman they had evaluated.

To establish the effectiveness of the manipulations, portions of the tapes were played to four control groups who rated the communication's characteristics as they believed the audience would. Two control groups heard the first seven minutes of the tape (neutral information) and either the Low-Fear or High-Fear segment, but without the final portion that described the recommendation's characteristics: the components of accuracy (p < .01), availability (p < .05), and painlessness (p < .01) were all significantly greater under high efficacy, and inexpensiveness was in the same direction—though not significantly so. Control groups perceived the stimulus qualities as intended, and we concluded that our construction of the tapes successfully manipulated the variables of experimental interest.

Observers in the High-Efficacy conditions estimated that 83.1 percent of the women hearing the high-efficacy message and 63.8 percent hearing the low-efficacy message would comply. In Low-Efficacy conditions, 53.8 percent compliance was expected for High-Fear, 67.5 percent for Low-Fear. Both differences by Fear were significant at the .01 level by t-test. Thus, increases in fear arousal were directly associated with compliance estimates in High-Efficacy conditions, but inversely associated in low efficacy.

Differences in the mean evaluations of compliant and noncompliant women on the five dimensions selected as most relevant in each of the four conditions parallel the estimated compliance. This rank-order coincidence is what we hypothesized: the more positive the dimension ratings associated with compliance rather than noncompliance, the greater the percentage of persons expected to comply.
Additional situated identity studies in natural settings have stressed the reactions of others as well as the role of events in constructing situated identities. In one early study, Alexander and Epstein (1969) showed the effects of others' reactions on the situated identities of an actor who always made the same choice. They created a role-conflict situation in which a young boy was torn between pitching in a ball game or preparing a term paper due for a class the next day. The boy discussed his dilemma with alter, who was either a fellow student or the teacher. He always decided to pitch, and alter reacted with either approval or disapproval. To the extent that disapproval was anticipated and received, the boy was characterized as more dynamic and motivated to take the action he decided upon. More recently, Rudd (1976) looked at informal persuasion attempts by interacting peers in natural settings and found that the acceptance or rejection of an influence attempt changed the situated identities of both participants.

These themes of the role of events and the reactions of others in shaping the alternative situated identities available to the actor reappear in the laboratory situations, which have been used more frequently than natural settings for situated identity studies. Despite its "fish bowl" atmosphere at times, it is important to test hypotheses about situated identity formation in laboratory settings because they are intentionally created to be free from normative standards that govern behavior. Experimenters typically strive to construct situations that are unfamiliar and novel, precisely to deprive subjects of extra-experimental social standards for conduct and previous expectations about appropriate behavior. Thus, a demonstration that situated identities emerge in these artificially contrived situations would provide powerful evidence for the pervasiveness of these processes. We turn now to those studies.

**Situated Identities in Laboratory Settings**

Alexander and Knight (1971) simulated an experiment conducted by Carlsmith et al. (1966) to replicate and extend the now classic study by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) about the effects of counterattitudinal forced compliance on attitude change. The scenario of these experiments involves a subject who first performs dull, boring tasks and is then asked to make favorable statements about them for differential reward. In the extended replication he not only makes these statements to another, allegedly naive subject, but in another set of conditions puts them in an essay for the experimenter only.

Dissonance theory predicts that the subject's subsequent liking for the tasks will vary inversely with the amount of reward he is given for lying about them. This was the relationship found in the original experiment, its replication, a simulation by Bem (1967), and the situated identity study for the face-to-face conditions. However, when the tasks were favorably described in an essay for the experimenter, a direct relation obtained between task liking and payment level in both the experimental and the situated identity studies. The result was not predicted by dissonance theory, which could not specify the crucial difference between the types of presentational conditions.

Alexander and Knight obtained dimensional evaluations of stimulus persons who chose one of the five middle response categories (-2 to +2) on the 11-point task-liking scale. Each response category was assigned a score equal to the mean rating received on the most relevant situated identity dimensions. These scores were correlated with the percentage of people who estimated that each response category would be chosen. The average Pearsonian correlation of these two sets of scores in the four conditions was .9, showing clearly that the desirability of the situated identity associated with a response category related closely to the proportion expecting that category would be chosen. In every condition the situated identity scores predicted the modal response.

Madaras and Bem (1968) were able to explain the risky-shift phenomenon in terms of the dispositional evaluations of those whose choices ranged from risk to conservatism following small group discussions. The tendency for groups to advocate higher levels of risk-taking than did their individual members acting alone was explained in terms of our cultural predisposition to consider and favor risk-accepting positions. Risk-takers were rated as being stronger, faster, harder, and more active, successful, masculine, good, and sociable than those rejecting risks. Changes in the description of the decision-making situation, introducing the possibility of harm to others, produced the opposite effect, shifts toward conservatism in group opinions. The investigators found that these changes shifted the dimensions controlling the decision to moral aspects of the choice, so that risk-takers were characterized as significantly less good and more cruel.

Alexander and Lauderdale (177) examined one experiment (Zelditch et al. 1980) in a systematic series of studies of the relationship between status characteristics and expectation states (Berger et al. 1972). In this study, two subjects thought they were responding together to a judgmental task. The induction phase of the experiment led them to believe that one had high ability and the other low ability. They were then shown stimulus patterns and asked to judge them, after which they saw how the other person had responded. Each stimulus pattern was shown a second time, and they were given the opportunity of staying with their initial decision or changing it. The independent variable was the ability status of the judge, and the dependent variable the number of times the judge's final and initial choices were the same on twenty critical disagreement trials (alter's responses were controlled by the experimenter for both subjects).

The actual number of changes in the original study and the number of changes estimated in the simulation were virtually the same, and there was a high positive correlation between the situated identity evaluations of stay-patterns and the estimations of their frequency of occurrence. Again, the absolute number of cases per response category and, therefore, the shape of the distribution of responses corresponded closely to the distribution of the situated identity ratings in both conditions.
Alexander and Weil (1969) found the Prisoner's Dilemma game ambiguous enough to permit players to choose diverse goals, from cooperative maximization of both players’ gains to cut-throat efforts to maximize the difference between one's own score and that of the other. The study presented an example game in which one player won decisively over the other, and asked subjects to characterize both players in terms of two very differently biased sets of situated identity dimensions. On one list the winner could be seen as clever, enterprising, and intelligent, whereas the loser had to appear naive, gullible, and submissive. On the other list, however, the winner's attributes were greediness, selfishness; the loser was seen as considerate, friendly, and generous. When the subjects played the game after seeing the latter list, cooperation rates tripled. The addition of money to the game shifted player goals toward cooperation, but it altered the relevance of the situated identity lists, producing unexpectedly similar cooperation rates in the two list conditions. Nevertheless, the results established that subjects played this experimental game to create the most favorable situated identities and were willing to risk losing the game to obtain positive evaluation.

Focusing on the effects of alter's situated identity, Alexander and Sagatun (1973) interpersonally simulated Gerard and Mathewson's (1966) extended replication of the Aronson and Mills (1959) experiment dealing with the effects of initiation severity on subsequent liking for a group. They hypothesized that the instructi–al manipulations, interacting with the level of shock employed to manipulate severity, changed the identity of the experimenter to produce differential regard for him.

When the experimenter provided a rationale for the stimulation (either the elaborate discussion-group initiation or a simple justification of the importance of the experiment and the subject's participation in it), it was felt that subjects accepted his concern and the need for electrical shock. When he cursorily presented a set of stimuli to see what effects they would have, as in the noninitiation condition, subjects were likely to experience the events as arbitrary and to become hostile toward the experimenter when he administered painful shocks. In the former justified conditions, an increase in shock level reinforced perceptions that the experimenter was seriously and sincerely concerned to take whatever steps, even painful ones, were necessary to conduct a valuable study.

This is what was found. The justified experimenter who gave stronger shocks received higher ratings as warm, friendly, personal, casual, honest, and interesting. The arbitrary experimenter was rated more negatively on these dimensions when he increased the intensity of the shocks. Evaluations of the experimenter correlated positively with liking for the group discussion across all six conditions of the experiment, and these variables also showed consistent and substantial correlations within each condition. The results parallel the original findings that initiation severity increases attraction to the group, while the unrelated presentation of aversive stimulation decreases the attractiveness of subsequent exposure to the same group discussion.

Rosenthal (1966) summarized the effects of experimenter variations in warmth on subjects' responses with a succinct "like me, like my stimuli" hypothesis, and this fits the above data as well. That hypothesis is actually a situated version of the more generally hypothesized association between similarity and attraction (Newcomb 1961; Byrne 1969). This relationship was explored in a situated identity study by Touhey (1974), who followed the attraction-similarity paradigm in designing a study in which persons exchanged opinions about twelve issues. In three different conditions, subjects found that they agreed with the other person on none, half, or all of the issues. Observers estimated the attraction subjects felt toward the other as a result of varying similarity and replicated the positive association between similarity and liking.

In the fifteen conditions constructed to obtain situated identity ratings, subjects were shown expressing one of five levels of interpersonal attraction toward the other, cross-cutting the three levels of attitudinal similarity. Persons who were more attracted to the other than their similarity warranted were described as submissive, dependent, passive, trusting, and naive. When they were less attracted than expected on the basis of similarity, they were rated as cold, dominant, indifferent, and suspicious. Positive characterizations were reserved for those who showed levels of liking expectationally appropriate to the degree of similarity. Touhey's data thus revealed that specific levels of attraction are expected to correspond to particular degrees of similarity, such that situated identity evaluations predict precisely the association between attraction and similarity.

Problems of Social Desirability

These early studies in situated identity formation have stressed that the context and sequence of events leading up to the dependent variable choice have created response alternatives that differ in social desirability. Although the situations we examined were designed to test various theories, we find that the results from those situations are more parsimoniously and precisely explained by the social desirability differences that characterize the situated identities associated with response options. The interpretation of this state of affairs is exactly analogous to employing judges to determine whether or not the items in a psychological scale are biased by social desirability.

In scale construction, the judges determine potential bias by characterizing item responses in terms of social desirability, just as our observers characterize situational response alternatives. If respondents to the item alternatives on the scale-analogues of respondents to the dependent variable choices in experimental settings-show a preference for those responses that are socially desirable, we do not draw any conclusions about the characteristics the scale was intended to measure (in experiments, about the hypothesized causal relationship the dependent variable responses were supposed to establish). The scale is declared invalid, and the researcher must go back and reconstruct it to eliminate the social desirability bias.
Relationships between an invalid scale and other variables are not thereby discredited; they are simply regarded as improperly tested. Similarly, none of the situated identity studies refute any of the theories that have been tested in the experimental situations we have examined; they merely show that appropriate tests have not been made. In those particular settings, situated identity theory provides an obvious, more comprehensive, and compelling explanation of the results.

The only solution for those who wish to demonstrate the operation of psychological processes in social fields is to construct fields that do not imbue response alternatives with desirability loadings that favor response selections supporting the theory's hypotheses. We feel that the evaluative factor so pervades the realms of social stimuli (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957) and response settings that investigators should feel obliged to demonstrate that their manipulations and measures are not contaminated before they extend claims of support for this or that hypothesis (see Alexander and Scriven 1977). Although we believe situated identity formation can better account for a wide range of previous experimental findings, there is no particular benefit for the development of the theory to continue demonstrating this in one experimental setting after another.

We began to search for non ambiguous situations in which the response alternatives did not so frequently produce differentially desirable situated identities. This is not an easy task. Even sociologists are likely to underestimate the extent to which socially defined situations are normatively structured in terms of the differential evaluations accorded alternative actions. However, these circumstances do exist and, as the theory would predict, do not produce expectations that favor the choice of one over another alternative.

Our goal was to test derivations of the theory's postulate that situated identity dimensions provide the bases for expectation formation. To do this, it is necessary to show that the particular dimensions associated with a choice alternative are responsible for the selection or rejection of that action. When the dimensions related to each alternative are bound together by the halo effect of differential desirability, this cannot be done convincingly. Otherwise unrelated dimensions become intercorrelated to the extent that they have evaluative similarities. With social desirability equalized, we can examine the comparability of situations in terms of their particular dimensional components.

There are two sources of information relevant to expectation formation in this kind of response situation: the characteristics of the person or knowledge about that person's previous behavior. Thus, we either described a person in terms of situated identity dimensions variably related to the choice alternatives in the situation or provided information about past behavior involving alternatives of varying similarity to those presently confronted. The crucial question is the adequacy of our definition and measurement of relevance. Elaborating the implications of this focus leads us to propose specific conceptual and operational definitions of situational comparability and of the validity of manipulations and measures. That is the aspect of situated identity theory that we will discuss next.

Situational Comparability

Situated identity theory defines two situations as equivalent if the choice alternatives in each are characterized respectively by the same ratings on the same relevant dimensions. When the dimensions of relevance differ or the ratings on relevant dimensions differ, they cease to be equivalent, but they may be regarded as comparable. It is the function of theory to define the criteria of comparability for the hypothesis being tested.

In a study by Alexander and Mac Murray (unpublished data), we defined comparability of experimental conditions in terms of the rank equivalence of the rated importance of trait dimensions and similarity of mean ratings on those dimensions. We constructed seven everyday situations that had clearly defined, situated identities associated with two choice alternatives. The choice-points in the two situations were said to be comparable if (1) roughly the same dimensions were chosen as most relevant in both and (2) ratings on these dimensions were similar. Non-comparability resulted when no alternatives were similar. We found that observations of choices in one situation related to prediction of choices in the other to the extent that comparability existed. Predictions were no better than chance in the noncomparable situations, but were 89 percent accurate with comparable situations. When situated identity descriptions were substituted for previous behavior, similar results were obtained. Predictions ranged from chance levels for subjects provided with descriptions on "noncomparable" dimensions to 85 percent accuracy when the dimensions used in the descriptions were identical to the most relevant dimensions in the situations.

Alexander and Rudd (1980) conceptualized items from the Machiavellian scale as response situations and performed a situated identity variation of "item analysis" with them. They found that items correlating most highly with the rest of the scale evoked dimensions central to the Machiavellian syndrome, and responses to those items were differentiated by ratings along the dimensions. Items that correlated poorly with the rest of the scale did not elicit the relevant dimensional components of Machiavellianism, and responses to them did not show rating differentials. In consequence, observers were able to reproduce total scale scores from knowledge of how respondents had answered discriminant items, but were unable to make accurate predictions based on responses to nondiscriminant items.

This approach to situational comparability enables us to define rather precisely what we mean by that term when it is used to refer to comparisons across experimental conditions or to the creation of "conceptual" replications of conditions. Such precision in definition and the ability to measure situational comparability should reduce the need to rely on intuition and assumption. One area in which it can be most helpful involves the interpretation of the effects of independent variable manipulations. When creating experimental and control conditions, re-
searchers attempt to follow identical procedures and present identical event sequences in both conditions except for whatever is necessary to effect the manipulation of the independent variable. Frequently, the possibility arises that the manipulation actually destroyed the comparability of the conditions.

For example, in the original Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) experiment discussed earlier, subjects were offered either one or twenty dollars to make positive statements about the tasks. Critics charged (Chapanis and Chapanis 1964) that the twenty-dollar payment was so large that it produced incredulity, suspicion, and even resentment (at being bribed to lie) on the part of subjects. In other words, subjects in the high reward condition became different persons (characterized by disbelief, mistrust, hostility, and so forth) from those in the low reward condition. If this did occur, they might be responding to the dependent variable in terms of these characteristics rather than in terms of the intended effects of differential reward. To avoid this possibility, replications and subsequent studies employed less extreme reward differences. More reasonable incentive levels were assumed to diminish the risk of destroying conditional comparability.

Unfortunately, our study showed that even with smaller reward differences, there were still widespread and unintended changes reflected in the relevance of the situated identity variables. Only two of these could be considered acceptable in terms of the aims of the manipulation—increased materialism and justification were associated with increased reward level. Even though this modest manipulation of money seems like a relatively pure and abstract manifestation of the conceptual variable of differential reward, it produced substantial situated identity changes in this particular situation. Significant differences were found in the relevance of the following dimensions: intelligent/simple, sportsmanly/unsportsmanly, sincere/insincere, positive/negative, cooperative/competitive, flexible/rigid, independent/dependent, and self-confident/self-doubting. Such far-reaching effects discredit the validity of the manipulation.

For a particular manipulation to have validity it must selectively differentiate conditions in terms that are theoretically specified. Although information at the point when the dependent variable responses are made is not sufficient to establish the validity of the independent variable manipulation, it does set necessary criteria that cannot be violated if that validity is to exist. The manipulation can be invalidated if it does not alter the relevance and ratings of specified dimensions as theoretically required, or if it alters the relevance of, and ratings on, situated identity dimensions other than those specified.

The same thing can be said for the "conditions under which" hypothesized relationships are expected to obtain. For example, in the forced compliance studies, dissonance is supposed to be created by the subject's misrepresentation of task enjoyment. When the task-loving response to indicate true attitude is finally expressed, one would presume that the response would reflect on the subject's honesty or at least consistency. Yet neither is a relevant dimension. There is no indication from the situated identity data that the veracity of the subject was seen as a salient issue.

This indicates that the events probably did not create the conditions assumed necessary for dissonance arousal.

On the other hand, there are indications that the conditions created by face-to-face and essay differences in presentation of the counter-attitudinal statements were successful. Friendliness, warmth, pleasantness, likability, and maturity are attributes more relevant to describe the subject when statements are made directly to another person. Intelligence, activity, and materialism are more relevant to the construction of an essay for the absent experimenter. The last two dimensions may result from the activity's aim of producing a substantive item for which payment will be received. Thus, despite the complex changes in actions and audience between these two types of conditions, we find the situated identity data straightforward and commonsensical. We have no reason to doubt the validity of the manipulations from the effects they have on the dependent variable responses.

Defining the Situation

It should be evident, however, that we cannot completely define the validity of independent variable manipulations in terms of the effects that appear only at the time dependent variable responses are made. Manipulations may have effects that are not manifest in dependent variable responses. To assess them it is necessary to gather situated identity information at the time they are introduced. The flow of situational events is a continual process that creates and transforms situated identities from moment to moment. In fact, the nature and impact of an event is defined in terms of the changes it effects in the situated identities of participants. Therefore, these consequences must be measured at the time of impact.

The immediate effects of an event do not exhaust its influence, however, as we have stressed with regard to assessing manipulation validity in terms of the situated identities associated with dependent variable responses. Subsequent events in a sequence are structured, in part, by the events that precede them. The implications of an event that falls early in the sequence may not be evident until later response possibilities emerge. Everyday life is no stranger to events that seemed inconsequential at the time of their occurrence, only to be regarded as crucial later. These effects are no less real for being unrecognized at the actual moment the original event took place.

Thus, situated identities are not static: they emerge and are elaborated through the total sequence of events within a situation. Situated identity theory follows Meadian interactionism in conceiving of objects as situationally constituted from the perspectives of the participants in the ongoing activity. Objects exist within the context of the situation by virtue of the action orientations of participants toward them. We conceptualize response categories as prototypical objects that are constituted by action
sequences; hence, what they are is determined by attribute dimensions the sequence makes relevant to define them.

The proverbial example of an item serving as either food or missile is frequently used (McCall and Simmons 1966:51-52) to illustrate this with a physical object. The tomato becomes a truly different object depending on actor orientations. If hungry, the person attends to its ripeness, color, taste, cleanliness, and perhaps even its past history of fertilization and pesticide exposure. If angry, he or she is more likely interested in its firmness, weight, and size. The object is defined by different sets of properties under the different conditions. Furthermore; preference ratings along the same dimensions may vary with orientation. If you were going to eat the tomato you would not pick one that was either very hard or rottenly mushy. These qualities, however, make the most desirable missiles, and the choice between them depends on one's relative interest in inflicting injury or insult.

Such examples are helpful in disabusing us of the ordinary notion that objects possess fixed qualities, but they do not convey the full meaning of the conceptualization involved. The social reality we envisage is defined by relationships among actors and objects of orientation, rather than a world composed of organisms and things defined in terms of their qualities. It is by virtue of involvement in ongoing activity sequences that organisms and things become persons and objects defined in fundamentally relational terms. However, the flow of events in the locally realized situation is not the only process that creates and transforms situated identities.

Actors enter settings with portions of their identities already established. This identity information can come from a person's previous actions outside the present situation, or, in the absence of information on action choices, social characteristics (such as age, sex, and race) as well as social categories (such as occupation and group membership) serve as cues to "packages" of identity information. These packages can be seen as culturally established summaries of previous events and actions. They are not necessarily reflective of "true" pasts, but they function in the same manner as information about past events. And, like past events, they modify or transform the situated identities created by event sequences.

Previous research has dealt with the power of situated events to determine the possible identities of persons whose characters emerge within the situation. Actors in these studies have typically been without distinctive personal and social characteristics, relevant pasts and futures, or extra-situational ties to ongoing events outside the immediate focus. We need to investigate processes of situated identity formation with actors who possess character and potential apart from the situated aspects of their activity and with actions and object orientations that occur trans-situationally.

A comprehensive approach to defining the situation requires specification of the principles by which actors organize the relevant perspectives that define their relations to the environment. This organization or configuration of the situated identities generated from all relevant perspectives constitutes the definition of the situation. Thus, propositions need to be developed to explain how situated identity configurations emerge, accommodate new elements, and change over time.

Summary

The individual becomes fully engaged in processes of relevance for social psychology when oriented to a field of events in which others are psychologically present. Conduct becomes situated activity when it is anchored outside the self by the presumed monitoring of a specific other or type of other whose perspective on events is recognized through role-taking. The psychological presence of a particular other sustains a coherent orientation toward the sequence of events that occurs in the symbolic time and space where monitoring possibilities are implied. From such orientation to an event sequence, situated identities emerge.

A situated identity is the set of dispositional imputations that are made from a given perspective about an actor on the basis of the actor's relational to objects of orientation. The term, dispositional, refers to properties of events that relate to the invariant structures and processes of the interaction of actors or objects with their environments. The dispositional characteristics of persons reflect their capacities and inclinations for acting on, and responding to, events. These are the dimensions in terms of which actors are perceived as equipped for, and oriented to, action possibilities.

The definition of the situation for a given actor is the configuration of situated identities that is created by each of the perspectives that are salient for him or her. We view this social reality as a continual flow of sequential choice possibilities, at each point of which the actor confronts an array of actionable alternatives. Each alternative is defined by the situated identity it can actualize. Thus, the actor chooses the personage he or she will become at each choice-point in an activity sequence. Under certain specified conditions, situated identity theory predicts that actors will prefer an alternative to the extent that it is more socially desirable than the others available.

We have reviewed support for this hypothesis from both naturalistic and laboratory settings derived from studies designed to test propositions in diverse areas of social psychology: responses to fear-arousing persuasive appeals, role-conflict situations, interpersonal influence attempts, dissonance, group decision making, conformity, cooperation and competition, experimenter effects, and interpersonal attraction. This research has recently been extended to circumstances in which alternative choices are similar in the social desirability of their situated identity implications. Under these conditions actors are expected to choose alternatives that affirm the identities they have established by previous actions in comparable situations. Specifying precisely how situational comparability can be defined is a major contribution of this effort.

In future development of situated identity theory there will be consid-
eration of circumstances in which there are multiple, possibly conflicting perspectives that define the situated identities associated with a given response alternative. This can come from the simultaneous presence of others with different perspectives. It also arises when the situated identity implications of past or future activity or of social characteristics and category memberships imply the choice of a present alternative that is less than optimally desirable. This development will focus on principles that govern the integration and organization of the total configuration of situated identities that define the situation for the actor at a given time.

Situated identity theory is ultimately concerned with the principles that govern change over time in these configurational structures. The unfolding of events and the elaboration of activity sequences make the situated identities available to actors contingent upon the past generated. The nature of current activity is also affected by the careers and characteristics that participants bring with them from other situations. And both the personnel and interactive setting are influenced by the larger patterns of social activities in which they are embedded. These patterns are the roles and institutions within which social interaction occurs.

NOTES

I. Dimensions selected as most relevant vary from condition to condition. Sincerity is relevant in all conditions; flexibility in all but High Fear/Low Efficacy; cautious in all but High Fear/High Efficacy. Rationality is relevant in both High-Efficacy conditions, friendliness in Low Efficacy, and anxious in High Fear. Believing, curious, interested, and active are relevant in one condition each.