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## 6

# A SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON PRIVACY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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In the psychological literature, there is a well-documented bias known as the *fundamental attribution error* (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Ross & Nisbett, 2011). It describes the general human tendency to attribute another person's action to their character or personality instead of attributing it to situational factors outside of their control. As researchers, we often tend to overestimate the effect of dispositional factors and, vice versa, underestimate the power of situations in shaping behavioral outcomes. This bias can also be found in the field of privacy research. Whereas many theories acknowledge (albeit often underspecify) the contingency of privacy-related behaviors on contextual or situational factors (e.g., Altman, 1975; Laufer & Wolfe, 1977; Nissenbaum, 2010; Omarzu, 2000), the vast majority of empirical work investigates relationships on an aggregate, non-situational level. For example, Westin (1967) already argued that “individuals are constantly engaged in an attempt to find sufficient privacy to serve [...] their individual needs of the moment” (p. 44). More recently, Nissenbaum (2010) perhaps made the most convincing case for the contextual and situational dependency by noting that privacy expectations “are systematically related to characteristics of the background social situation” (p. 129). Yet, much empirical research, such as, e.g., investigations of the privacy paradox (Kokolakis, 2017) or the privacy calculus (Krasnova & Veltri, 2010; see also chapter 7 by Dienlin in this volume), neglects contextual or situational contingencies. Here, variables such as privacy concerns are assumed to be stable across time, but to vary between people. These between-person differences are then assumed to be systematically linked to general behavioral tendencies, that is between-person differences in privacy-related behaviors. Whether concerns or privacy-related behaviors vary across contexts or situations is rarely, if ever, investigated.

In 2018, I, therefore, published the book *Situational Privacy and Self-Disclosure* (Masur, 2018) in which I argued that such an “aggregating” approach neglects the considerable variance in behaviors across situations, contexts, and media environments. Neglecting situational dependency ultimately fails to predict under what circumstances people engage in self-disclosure and privacy protection behavior. I attempted to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for studying privacy and self-disclosure from a situational perspective, or more precisely, tried to make the manifold situations people encounter in their daily lives amenable to empirical investigation. Building on person-situation research in psychology (cf. Rauthmann et al., 2015), the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure emphasized situations as pivotal units of analysis, identified relevant situationally

varying factors related to both the person *and* the environment and asked how these interacted with more stable person characteristics in predicting and explaining situationally observable disclosure decisions. Based on the theory, I investigated self-disclosure in smartphone-based communication situations and found that only a third (28%) of the variance in disclosure was explainable by stable, person-related characteristics (Masur, 2018, p. 274). In contrast, a much larger part of the variance was attributable to situational variance – a finding that was consistent with similar investigations of other behaviors (Ross & Nisbett, 2011, p. 3). I further found that *who* one is disclosing to in a particular situation and *how much* one wants to disclose something at a given time are much better predictors of self-disclosure than stable privacy concerns or privacy literacy.

Yet, I also realized the limitations of the theory: The somewhat crude differentiation of situational and non-situational factors related to both person and environment was empirically appealing (as it easily translates into data-gathering methods such as experience sampling and statistical approaches such as multilevel modeling), but grossly oversimplifying. It completely ignored other sources of variation in self-disclosure including, for example, contextual influences such as norms, role perceptions, or transmission principles (Nissenbaum, 2010). Further, although assuming that only what people perceive in a situation becomes relevant for their behavior, the distinction between the objective situation (objectively measurable external cues of the environment) and the psychological situation (the subjective construal of a situation in a person) was underspecified – a quite common problem in situational research (Rauthmann et al., 2015). The theory further rested upon a rather strong assumption that the individual processes the environment without disruption and that the decision to disclose results from a purely rational decision-making process. An assumption that is quite vividly falsified by work on heuristics and biases in privacy decision-making processes (see chapter 8 by Liao et al. and chapter 25 by Acquisti et al. in this volume).

With this chapter, I aim to reinvigorate the situational analysis of privacy and self-disclosure processes, with a particular focus on its applicability to social media. To this end, I first summarize the major tenets of the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure (Masur, 2018) and discuss its usability for studying privacy perceptions and self-disclosure on social media specifically. I then proceed to outline potential extensions of the theory that address the limitations outlined above. Finally, I discuss theoretical and empirical implications for future research.

## **The Theory of Situational Privacy and Self-Disclosure**

In simple terms, the theory argues that focusing on the changing characteristics of situations allows for better predictions of when people perceive different levels of privacy and, in turn, feel able to disclose themselves. Although this may sound simple and intuitive, it has major implications for how we think about, conceptualize, and study privacy processes. It requires us to define the situation as a unit of analysis and identify relevant situational factors that can be investigated as predictors of privacy-related behavior across all potential situations. The major challenge is the following: How can we investigate the manifold universe of possible situations without resorting to clustering similar situations into conceptual buckets, which are by definition simplifications and abstractions? In the following, I will lay out the major tenets of the theory while already pinpointing at potential limitations and weaknesses.

### ***Situations as Units of Analysis***

Rather unnoticed in communication science, there is an entire field that investigates how situations can be conceptualized and operationalized for empirical research (for overviews, see, e.g., Magnusson, 1981b; Rauthmann et al., 2015; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2020; Saucier et al., 2007). Although social scientific theories tend to acknowledge that the person and the situation at any

given moment are inextricably interwoven, there is less consensus about how to describe, explain, and predict person–situation interactions (Rauthmann et al., 2015). The exact mechanisms remain underspecified or vary considerably depending on the theoretical lens that is applied. For example, vibrant debates relate to the question of whether situations exert direct influence or whether it is only the environment “as it is perceived” (Magnusson, 1981a) that determines people’s behavior. At the same time, it remains rather unclear how exactly situations are interacting with more stable person variables, where situations begin and end, and whether there are any meaningful taxonomies for comparing different “classes” of situations (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2020).

For the purpose of the theory and aligning with quite traditional approaches in situations research (e.g., Lewin, 1951; Rauthmann et al., 2015; Reis, 2008), I defined situations as “the entirety of circumstances that affect the behavior of a person at a given time” (Masur, 2018, p. 136). The situation itself is thereby construed by the perception of the individual, yet determined by external cues (physically present, scalable, and relatively objectively quantifiable stimuli; Block & Block, 1981). This definition may have been surprising given the central emphasis on *behavior*. However, it turned out that starting from an observable behavioral act of a person at a given time is a good baseline for identifying relevant circumstances and factors that matter in that situation. We thus need to ask how we can break down the “entirety of circumstances” at a given time. The solution is what I call a “grid approach”<sup>1</sup>: In the first step, we differentiate personal and environmental factors on one axis and situational and non-situational on a second axis. This two-dimensional matrix thus consists of non-situational person factors (e.g., personality, skills, knowledge, etc.) and situationally varying person factors (e.g., internal factors such one’s own motives, needs, mood, etc.) on the one hand and stable environmental factors (e.g., cultural context) and situationally varying environmental factors (e.g., interpersonal assessment of other people present such as trust or closeness and perceptions of external factors such as perceptions of the situational cues) on the other hand. Attempting to explain variation in, for example, self-disclosure across social situations then requires us to identify variables in each of these cells that are present and measurable in any potentially occurring situation (cf. Omarzu, 2000). Which specific variables are relevant depends on the studied behavior. For self-disclosure, personality facets such as extraversion or risk aversion may be more meaningful factors than the need for cognition. Similarly, the need for closeness and intimacy may be stronger situational drivers of self-disclosure than the need for relaxation and escapism. The combination of factors then reflects *situational profiles* that should have a particular influence on the behavior of interest. As shown in Figure 6.1, situations are thus characterized by a potentially infinitely precise combination of, and at the same time rather limited number of, parameter values.

This approach circumvents the problem of clustering certain situations into labeled classes to simply compare behavior across them (what we typically do when we use a scenario-based approach; e.g., Facebook vs. WhatsApp, online shopping vs. social media). This focus on relevant factors that characterize situations makes *any* situation amenable to empirical investigation, while directly offering explanations for why different situations lead to different behavioral outcomes.

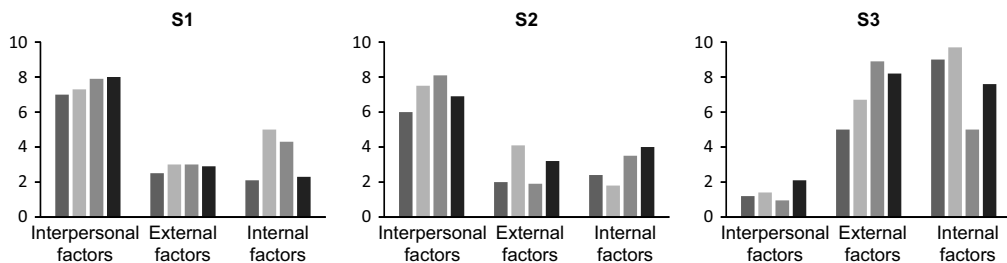


Figure 6.1 Situational Profiles Based on Environmental and Personal Factors

Such an approach is particularly useful for studying behavioral differences on social media platforms because, instead of comparing, e.g., TikTok with Instagram or Facebook with Twitter, it creates profiles for all situations *within* these platforms. An important implication is that it is perfectly possible that similar situations (S1 and S2 compared to S3 in Figure 6.1) occur on different platforms, but elicit the same behavioral response due to their similar situational profile. The grid approach is also useful to account for potential interactions between the identified factors. For example, it allows us to consider the moderating effect of a stable person characteristic such as privacy cynicism (see chapter 13 by Ranzini et al. in this volume) on the influence of some external cues such as presence of a large and unknown audience. As often argued (Hoffmann et al., 2016), a general cynicism may make potentially privacy-threatening situational factors (such as a large audience or no encryption) less important for the decision to self-disclose. In other words, it allows investigating how between-person differences determine the power of situational influences.

### Pre-Situational, Situational, and Post-Situational Processes

Based on the situation definition outlined above, the theory outlines how individuals a) at times actively choose or manipulate the environment to create situations that align with their desired level of privacy or simply stumble into new situations, b) evaluate the environmental circumstances (external and interpersonal factors) in combination with their own personal needs and motives to determine whether it is safe and appropriate to disclose themselves, and c) post-situationally evaluate the effectiveness of their pre-situational privacy regulation, their environmental assessment, and their self-disclosure outcomes (see Figure 6.2 for a simple overview).

The theory thereby rests on several assumptions that align with prior research (e.g., Altman, 1975; Dienlin, 2014; Omarzu, 2000; Westin, 1967; for a more thorough discussion of prior research, see Masur, 2018, chap. 7.2): First, it assumes that the level of privacy is determined by the

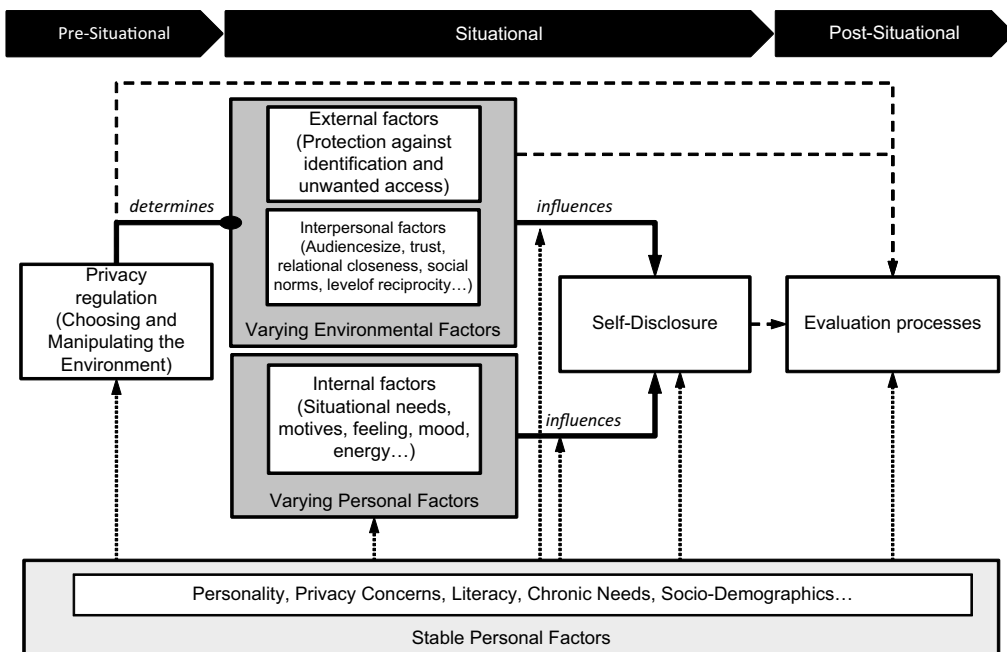


Figure 6.2 Simplified Overview of the Theory of Situational Privacy and Self-Disclosure

perception of environmental factors in a given situation. More specifically, the level of privacy is determined by those external cues that constitute a form of limited access or limited identification (e.g., Altman, 1975; Dienlin, 2014; Laufer & Wolfe, 1977; Westin, 1967). For example, if potential recipients of my disclosures are all deemed trustworthy (an interpersonal environmental factor), this should heighten the perceived level of privacy. Using the real name instead of a pseudonym (an external factor) in a public environment (such as, e.g., Twitter), in contrast, should lower the perceived level of privacy. A second assumption of the theory is that people require a certain level of privacy in order to be able to satisfy more fundamental needs, such as being able to self-disclose (Dienlin, 2014; Omarzu, 2000). Thus, only if the combination of environmental factors suggests an appropriate level of privacy (rather than always a high level; cf. Nissenbaum, 2010), do people feel able and will engage in self-disclosure. Otherwise, they will refrain from doing so (a form of privacy regulation by withdrawing into what Westin called “reserve”). However, the theory does not suggest that people always disclose if they find themselves in a situation with an appropriate level of privacy. The third assumption argues that people’s self-disclosure is determined by both the perceived level of privacy and relevant personal factors such as their motivation, mood, and needs in the respective situation. It is here, where the interaction between the person and the environment becomes particularly salient on a situational level: It is both an appropriate level of privacy, as determined by the combination of environmental factors and the person and his/her needs and motives that drive behavior. The interaction of both types of factors, however, may be more complex than that. For example, the level of energy at a given situation may explain whether or not people actually correctly perceive environmental cues. Similarly, some environments may elicit particular motives and needs and vice versa, people may seek certain environments based on their momentary needs (see also chapter 3 by Trepte in this regard). In the theory, this is accounted for by the pre-situational privacy regulation mechanism. Based on their privacy needs, people choose or actively construct situations that fit their needs (the fourth assumption of the theory). With regard to social media, for example, people may actively choose to use a dyadic, encrypted messenger service such as Signal to share private information with friends and family members. This way, they actively manipulate the situation to align with their privacy needs. Within Signal, the perceived level of privacy is high as it uses encryption (external factor: Which constitutes a strong protection against unwanted access) and potential recipients of the disclosure are highly controllable (interpersonal factor: Only trusted individuals).

A final aspect of the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure refers to the role of stable person factors. Those factors refer to aspects of a person (traits, dispositions, general tendencies) that people bring into any situation and that may thus alter or affect how the individual regulates situations, how s/he perceives external and interpersonal factors, and whether or not they remain relevant for the disclosure decision. Such factors may directly or indirectly, via interaction with the situational processes described above, affect whether or not an individual discloses. For example, a higher level of privacy literacy (see also chapter 11 by Masur, Hagendorff, and Trepte in this volume) may provide users with more knowledge about which platforms are more privacy-friendly and which are more privacy-invasive and thus considerably determine their privacy regulation and thus their ability to choose situations that suit their privacy needs (pre-situational privacy regulation, see Figure 6.2). Similarly, higher literacy may provide individuals with the means to better evaluate certain external cues (e.g., whether or not a mediated communication environment is actually encrypted and thus protected against unwanted access) and thus render such a factor more influential (situational privacy perception, see Figure 6.2). And finally, it may also determine a user’s ability to evaluate the effectiveness of privacy regulations strategies or the accuracy of situational evaluations (post-situational evaluation processes, see Figure 6.2).

The theory outlined above serves well to provide first insights into how personal and environmental factors interact in influencing disclosure decisions. In fact, it proved valuable in

designing a multi-method study that combined survey methods, smartphone tracking, and event-based experience samplings to gain a rich resource for modeling situational profiles (Masur, 2018, chaps. 9 and 10). In this study, I found that disclosure decisions depend much more on situational factors than stable person factors. Interpersonal assessments of the situation, including how trustworthy, similar, and relationally close potential recipients were in a given situation (compare, e.g., dyadic conversation with a close friend via the Facebook Messenger with a public tweet on Twitter), how many other people could gain access to the disclosures (compare the potential audience of a Facebook status update with a message posted in a WhatsApp group chat), and whether or not the disclosure was a response to an earlier disclosure by the recipient (users are generally more open to share if someone else opened up to them), explained a considerable amount of the variance and more than stable person characteristics. Further, internal factors such as how much a person wanted to disclose in that situation were a comparatively strong positive predictor – it could even be seen as a basic requirement for self-disclosure.

### **Extensions and Challenges**

After several years, I realized that the theory has certain limitations or gaps, which at the same time provide ample opportunities for extensions. A first weakness relates to the somewhat artificial dichotomy between situational and non-situational factors, which does not capture or represent the manifold factors with varying stability. The theory remained ambiguous with regard to how concepts such as, for example, “episodes” or “contexts,” which are often used and discussed in the media use literature, could be integrated. Second, the difference between what constitutes the objective situation (the environment “as it is”) and the psychological situation (the environment “as it is perceived”) was acknowledged but underspecified. More granularity is needed to describe the within-person processes that explain the true mediating effect from external cues via information processing to rational vs. heuristic decision-making and actual behavioral outcome. Third, the focus remained too much on the specific factors themselves and failed to acknowledge that particular situations may have their own interesting (meta-)characteristics such as, e.g., complexity, similarity, or strength. Adding this extra conceptual level may be useful, for example, to identify situations that are particularly prone to lead to privacy violations/turbulences, particular behavioral outcomes, or types of information processing (e.g., rational vs. heuristic decision-making). In the following, I will discuss and reflect on each of these three potential extensions.

### ***Stability and Duration***

In defining the situation as “the entirety of circumstances that affect the behavior of a person at a given time” (Masur, 2018, p. 136), I consciously reduced the complexity of what a situation can represent down to an empirically fruitful baseline. However, the reality of situation research in psychology is much more complex, albeit as a natural consequence, more confusing and conflating as it is desirable. In fact, defining what exactly constitutes a situation has been a difficult issue in the literature because scholars tend to use and conflate different concepts (Reis, 2008). Table 6.1 provides an overview of typically used terminology in relation to situationally inspired research. What this overview shows quite vividly is that we can often organize different situation-related concepts with regard to their stability (or duration) in time. This is an important organizing principle that is tremendously helpful for theorizing situational influences.

In the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure, I already alluded to this principle by differentiating *stable* person and environmental factors from *more fleeting* factors. Yet, if we really start to identify the sources for this variation in the stability of factors, we realize that stability is rather a continuum on which various sources of situationally relevant factors can be placed. In the same way,

Table 6.1 Overview of Different Concepts in Relation to Situational Research

Concept	Stability/Duration	Example
Occurrence	- -	Receiving a message by another user
Situation	-	Chatting with another user, multiple messages back and forth
Episode	+	Using social media to chat with others, browse the news feed, post something
Contexts	+ +	Facebook, a particular group of friends
Environment	+ + + +	The Netherlands, 21st century

Note: This table is inspired by Table 1 in Rauthmann and Sherman (2020). Minus signs represent less stability, and plus signs indicate longer duration and higher stability. Characteristics related to each term thus differ in their duration and stability across time.

as we look at comparatively stable person factors such as personality or skills (which are in fact not that stable and are subject to change across a person’s lifespan), we can look at, e.g., contextual factors that likewise exhibit a certain stability beyond each situation (I here refer to the sociological concept of context as described by, e.g., Nissenbaum, 2010). For example, whenever I meet my family, the type of interactions, the specific people present, and the topics we talk about are fairly similar. So there are indeed a number of potential contextual influences that are more stable (or re-occurring) than truly situational factors. Yet, switching between contexts is something that happens daily (e.g., if I leave my family and go to work) and relevant factors are thus nonetheless less stable in how they influence my behavior compared to my personality, which I always carry with me from situation to situation.

The appeal of using stability as an organizing principle becomes even more clear if we go back to the situational profiles (see again Figure 6.1) and how they are composed of factors with varying stability. They can be made up of person characteristics (black color in Figure 6.1, stability: +++), contextual factors (medium gray, stability: ++), almost non-changing environmental factors such as cultures (dark gray, stability: ++++), and truly situationally varying person and environmental factors (light gray, stability: -). By incorporating even more granularity by further distinguishing occurrences and situations, we could even start to take within-situation processes into account (stability: - -).

Another interesting aspect of distinguishing such concepts and their associated stability is the possibility of “nesting” or “grouping” situational measures within them. Based on the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure, I argued that we need to sample situations within people (similar to repeated measurements) as it allows us to group these situations within individuals (conceptually similar to a multilevel approach). But the dichotomy between situations (the lower level) and the person (the higher level) is artificial. We could basically go so far as to postulate more of such concepts (e.g., situations, contexts, persons, environments ...) and investigate their true explanatory power in predicting the behavior or outcome of interest. Such concepts do not even have to be nested in one another (e.g., nesting = situations in person, which in turn, are nested within cultures), but could exhibit similar levels of stability (and thus represent independent sources of variation). For example, media environments (somewhat akin to contexts) can likewise be seen as a somewhat stable organizing concept (stability: ++). By grouping situations in media environments, we do not lose a situational lens, but rather provide yet another level from which factors can be extracted that can, in turn, be included in situational profiles. For example, if we group situations into various social media platforms, we can then ask which factors define these platforms (e.g., anonymity, persistence of content, ...) and include them in the situational profiles. This has interesting implications for empirical investigations and the way we generally specify models for predicting behavior (which I will discuss in the future perspectives section



further as follows). By grouping potential antecedents of behavior and the behavior itself in various concepts of varying stability (situations, context, persons, environments, media environments), we might become more sensitive for potentially influential sources of variation in behavior and also might ask more specifically which of those sources matter the most. Given the possibility of grouping in different variables, we are further sensitized to explore potential interactions between such grouping factors.

Going back to the example of self-disclosure on social media, for example, it could make sense to consider (1) truly situational characteristics (personal factors such as motives, needs, and mood; environmental factors such as specific audience for an individual post), (2) contextual factors (personal factors such as role perceptions in a group chat with friends vs. work colleagues or family; environmental factors such as exhibited norms and transmission principles, but also external cues such as time of the day, location), (3) platform/media-related characteristics (e.g., environmental factors such as norms on a platform), (4) person characteristics (e.g., personality, general concerns, literacy ...), and (5) environment characteristics (e.g., culture in which the interaction takes place). Not only do we start to truly consider relevant factors that may drive people's behavior in a situation, we also ask which source of variation is most important and how different sources of variation interact in shaping behavioral outcomes. Remaining with the example suggested above, we could, for example, investigate how certain comparatively stable person factors (e.g., personality) are particularly activated in certain contexts (a person-context interaction) or how norms are made salient in particular situations (a context-situation interaction). That said, if we truly want to capture such interactions, it becomes important to reconcile objective and subjective perspectives on situations, which I will discuss as another potential extension of the theory in the following.

### ***Subjective vs. Objective Situations***

In the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure, I assumed that all factors are individuals' psychological perceptions of external and environmental cues and their internal, cognitive, and affective responses. Such a perspective aligns with the so-called "processing principle" (Rauthmann et al., 2015), which argues that environmental factors (physically or digitally present, scalable, and relatively objectively quantifiable stimuli) only matter and become influential for people's behavior if they are perceived. Yet, the question of how individuals interpret and process situations is more complex and deserves more scrutiny. By focusing only on the psychological representation of external cues and explaining how this psychological situation drives people's behavior, we ignore that the psychological representation is the consequence of *information processing* of environmental and external cues and thus also fail to acknowledge both objectivist and subjectivist perspectives in situation research (cf. Rauthmann et al., 2015). This is problematic as information processing may not always work perfectly and instead may be restricted depending on other situational factors (including both traits and states and the external cues themselves).

By integrating external cues and information processing as potential within-person processes, a more complete picture emerges. Figure 6.3 represents an extension of Figure 6.2's middle part and provides an overview of how information processing can be integrated as a mediator between the objective and the subjective/psychological situation.

In the first step, environmental cues (outside of a person, thus alluding to an environmental-ecological perspective on situations that aims to identify objective stimuli) are processed by individuals. This refers to the selection, filtering, evaluation, interpretation, and meaning assignment as described in common dual-process models (e.g., Kahneman, 2013; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). This processing can be rather implicit (impulsive-affective) or explicit (reflective-cognitive) (Rauthmann et al., 2015). At the same time, both stable and situationally varying person factors (the difference between traits and states; i.e., factors with different stability) guide, influence, and change how such cues are, selected and

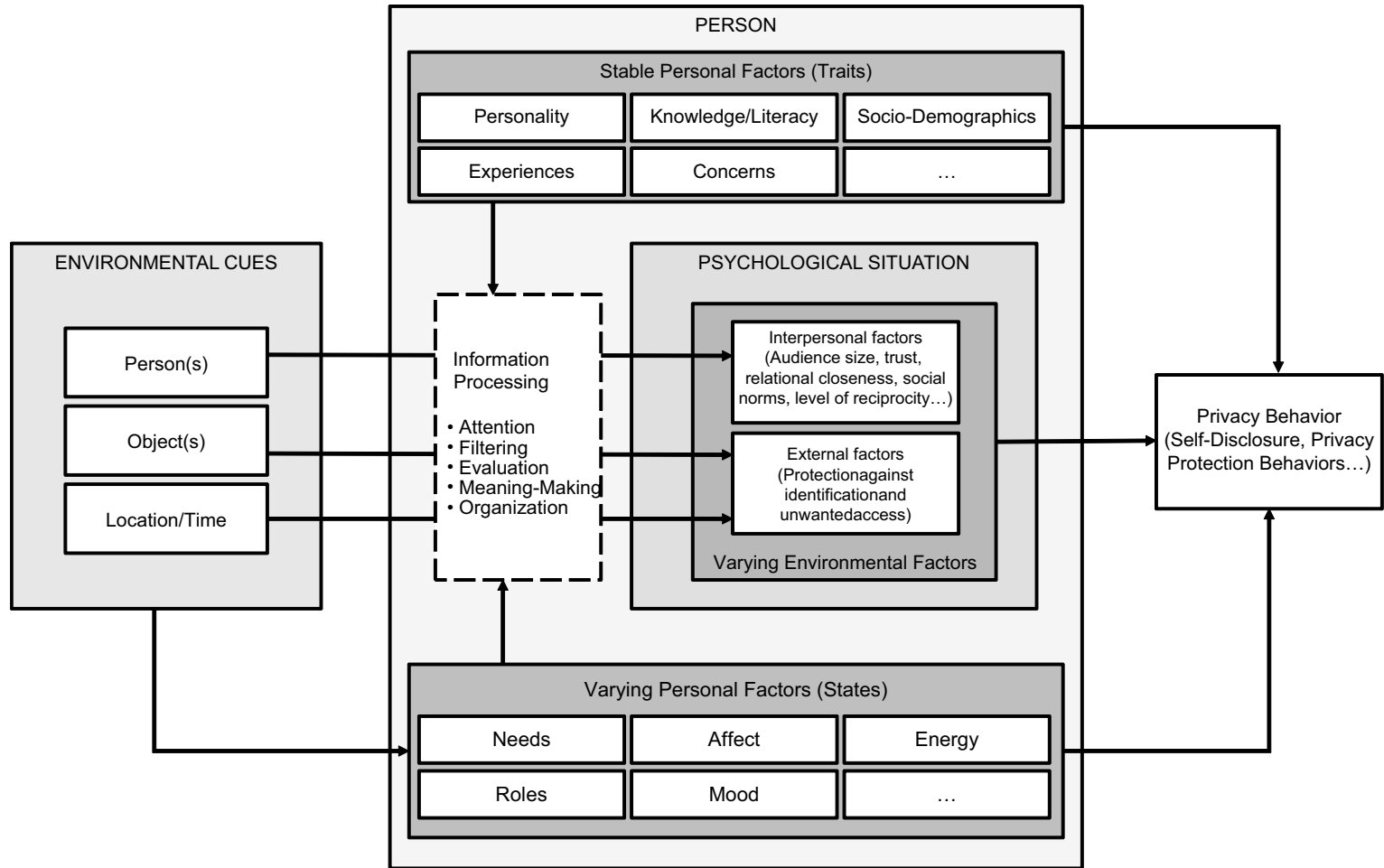


Figure 6.3 A Simple Process Model of Situation Perceptions and Their Relationship to Behavioral Outcomes

interpreted (Magnusson, 1981b) and thus likewise determine a person's psychological representation of the situation (Block & Block, 1981; Rauthmann et al., 2015; Reis, 2008).

By adding this extra layer or mediating process, new insights can be gained: First, we can investigate differences in how people perceive situationally varying environmental cues as the information processing (including amount of attention payed to particular cues, filtering principles, evaluative process, meaning-making, and cognitive organization) is influenced by both stable and more varying person factors. The interaction between person and environment is thereby more explicitly included, resulting in some beneficial implications: The model becomes less based on a rational-choice paradigm as non-rational information processing such as the use of heuristics (see chapter 8 by Liao et al. in this volume) or the influence of cognitive biases can be integrated. For example, in situations in which a user of a social media platform is rather tired (situationally varying person factor) and has previously made only positive experiences (a comparatively stable person factor that this person brings into every situation), the attention towards environmental cues may be low and some cues may even be unconsciously filtered out. The evaluation may thus be limited to a single factor (e.g., who is the recipient of my disclosure) and trigger a simple heuristic (e.g., bandwagon heuristic: "Everybody does it, so it must be safe" or positivity bias: "I never had negative privacy experiences, hence it will be safe now as well") that, in turn, produces a behavioral response (a high level of disclosure).

Second, the inclusion of objective external stimuli opens up the possibility to investigate the differences between persons in construing the psychological representation of a situation and thus very explicitly focuses on person-environment interactions in explaining behavior (see also chapter 3 by Trepte). As already mentioned earlier, this provides a lot of possibilities to include prior research that primarily investigated person characteristics (e.g., privacy concerns, privacy literacy, privacy cynicism ...) into a more holistic model that accounts for how such stable person characteristics influence and determine behavior in a specific situation. Most importantly, however, it does so without flattening situational variance in the outcome variable into aggregates and general behavioral tendencies and remains granular and on the situational level.

### ***Situation (Meta-)Characteristics***

Another implication of the situational perspective and particularly the use of the "grid approach" to identify situational profiles is the possibility of investigating meta-characteristics of situations. Although situational profiles represent a combination of relevant factors, certain combinations may stand out as they represent particular types of situations that foster, limit, hinder, or even inhibit certain behavioral responses or, at an earlier stage, the information processing. For the study of privacy and self-disclosure on social media, meta-characteristics such as the complexity or strength of a situation as well as their promotional vs. inhibitory character represent another level of abstraction that can help to explain irrational or paradoxical behavioral outcomes (Rauthmann & Sherman, 2019).

If we go back to potential situational profiles, it should be obvious that there could be situations that are more *complex* than others. Let's imagine a person A engages in a conversation with another person B via WhatsApp and would like to share some private pictures of a vacation. Judging the level of privacy based on environmental cues is comparatively simple: Only one, potentially trustworthy recipient is present (interpersonal assessment comparatively easy), the conversation is comparatively well protected against outside access (end-to-end encryption), and there is hardly much more to take into account. Compare this to a situation in which a person wants to share the same pictures on Instagram. Here, the evaluation of the level of privacy is inherently more complex: A potentially unlimited and unknown audience (if the person has a public profile) makes interpersonal judgments difficult or at least uncertain, external cues that would suggest protection against identification and access by other users are blurry and (without literacy) difficult to understand, and

there may be considerable uncertainty what the provider does with the information. This complexity of mediated situations, in fact, may explain some of the irrational, privacy-risky behavior of social media users. Given the manifold factors that need to be considered, many may resort to heuristic processing or limit their attention to very specific, but often insufficient factors (e.g., what is the benefit?) and thereby inappropriately judge the true level of privacy. The often-described context collapse on social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012) is a good example describing the complexity of judging situations on social media where multiple, traditionally distinct social contexts converge into one large, heterogeneous audience. Accordingly, perhaps the situational meta-characteristic “complexity” may account for a large amount of the variance we observe in media users’ privacy behavior or moderate the information processing in the situation.

A second meta-characteristic that is related to complexity can be termed *similarity* (alternatively, it can also be thought of as familiarity vs. novelty). A situational lens also helps us understand the level of similarity between some situations (see again Figure 6.1; S1 is rather similar to S2, but quite different to S3) and, vice versa, the *uniqueness* of some particular situations. For example, sharing a tweet on Twitter, a status update on Facebook, or a public post on Instagram are comparatively similar situations in that the combination of factors that make up the situational profiles are fairly similar (e.g., large heterogeneous audience, low protection against unwanted access). The similarity of these situations thus explains similar disclosure observations or engagement in privacy protection strategies. Sharing a video on TikTok or SnapChat similarly shares a common combination of relevant factors (e.g., ephemerality of the posts, protection through “being lost in the crowd”). In contrast, we can also imagine situations that are rather unique (and thus rare) and therefore represent unusual combinations of situational factors. What is unique or common, of course, depends on the person. For example, a person that uses Instagram and Facebook several times a day may constantly encounter somewhat similar situations on these platforms, but the moment this person uses SnapChat (something this person rarely does), the subsequent situations on this platform are, in comparison, rather unique. At the same time, the uniqueness of a particular situation may also stem from an unusual strength of a parameter: For example, being approached by a stranger via a social media platform (supposedly a rather rare occurrence) emphasizes interpersonal assessments (e.g., trustworthiness) to a degree that it represents a unique situation. In sum, it seems reasonable to assume that familiar situations should activate habitual, heuristic responses, while novel situations may require more active cognitive processing.

A third meta-characteristic is related to what has been known as the “strong situation hypothesis” (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Mischel, 1977). According to Mischel (1977), strong situations are those that “lead everyone 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 require skills that everyone has to the same extent” (Mischel, 1977, p. 347). In contrast, rather weak situations are less uniform and thus less homogeneously perceived, they do not generate similar expectancies concerning behavior and generally do not offer sufficient incentives for its performance and may require specific skills or abilities. A common assumption in the literature was that strong situations negate trait influences on behavior and weak situations increase their power in shaping behaviors. Although there is little evidence for this rather common claim (Cooper & Withey, 2009), the strength of a situation in shaping a particular behavior (independent of whether it activates personality traits or negates their influence) can nonetheless be a useful unit of analysis. In the context of privacy and self-disclosure on social media, one could argue that there are situational profiles that are particularly strong in driving people’s behavior. Although a mere hypothesis at this point, it could be worthwhile to identify those situations that uniformly lead to high levels of self-disclosure for one person or even different people – or in contrast to low levels of disclosure and high levels of privacy protection behaviors. Are there particular combinations of situational, contextual, and media-related characteristics that elicit the same behavioral outcomes in

(almost) all users? An example might be the general high willingness to disclose very private (medical) information to a doctor, even if this person is not particularly close.

### **Future Perspectives**

With the potential extensions and considerations outlined above, my aim was to reinvigorate the situational analysis of privacy and self-disclosure processes in social media. For the time being, I hope they serve as inspiration and potentially interesting stepping stones for further theoretical development and potentially innovative empirical investigations that go beyond traditional survey or experimental methods to truly capture situational variance. In this last section, I develop some future perspectives for theory building and further some considerations for empirical investigations and methodology.

### ***Theoretical Desiderata***

Despite many calls for acknowledging the cultural and political (e.g., Masur et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2011), contextual (Nissenbaum, 2010), and situational dependency (Acquisti et al., 2015; Masur, 2018) of privacy processes, the ways in which privacy is investigated remains mostly on the aggregate, between-person level. As mentioned before, this may be due to the fact that a lot of related theories acknowledge situational dependency, but remain vague with regard to how situations, contexts, and environments should be operationalized. To overcome these challenges, I propose several theoretical perspectives for future research.

First, although I outlined several angles from which situations can be defined and operationalized to make them amenable to empirical investigation, there are still gaps and missing pieces. For example, temporal concepts such as occurrence and episodes are difficult to account for theoretically (and empirically). The temporal and spatial boundaries of situations remain vague as they are only defined by the presence of a combination of factors. More research is needed to clarify these concepts and organize them in a coherent theoretical model.

Second, the consolidation of objective and subjective perspectives on situations is of utmost importance. My theory already acknowledged that only subjective perceptions matter for behavioral outcomes, but neglected how people construct psychological situations. This is unfortunate because, as outlined above, it ignores the information processing between external cues and the cognitive representation of these cues within persons. A stronger focus on subjective information processing will help to understand how people differ and how situational constraints (whether originating from the environment itself or from within the person) affect, limit, or increase attention and filtering of external cues.

Third, I proposed meta-characteristics of situations as potentially interesting factors that so far have not yet been considered when trying to explain privacy outcomes. Although they seem intuitively fruitful in explaining certain phenomena, their derivation (both theoretically and empirically) is unclear. Is it really just the combination of factors that account for differences in complexity and strength? More research is needed to better understand the role of such meta-characteristics within broader situational frameworks.

Fourth, I argued that media environments themselves can be interesting, somewhat stable organizing units for explaining variance in privacy-related behaviors. Defining relevant factors related to media environments is an important endeavor and scholars can draw from the rich literature on defining and characterizing media environments.

### ***Empirical and Methodological Considerations***

At this point, you may wonder how the ideas expressed throughout this chapter translate into practical research. To make the theoretical ideas expressed in this chapter empirically investigatable,

we need to find novel methodological solutions, often requiring the combination of different methods such as survey, experience sampling, behavioral observation, and log data. The experience sampling method (Barrett & Barrett, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987), which allows sampling from people’s real-life experiences, provides situational measures that can then be nested in different concepts of varying stability. Granular log data of browsing behavior or app use can similarly be seen as an intensive longitudinal sampling that allows the nesting into different concepts of varying stability. The interesting implication is that we can then use a multilevel framework (Geiser et al., 2015; Hox, 2010) to account for variance in our variables of interest (e.g., situationally assessed self-disclosure, privacy behavior, use of certain websites, ...) on various levels (see Figure 6.4). By cross-classifying them into concepts such as persons ( $P_1, \dots, P_n$ ), contexts ( $C_1, \dots, C_n$ ), media environments ( $M_1, \dots, M_n$ ), or even higher level grouping factors such as environments, nations, cultures, and political systems ( $E_1, \dots, E_n$ ), we gain the ability to quantify their relative influence on the privacy outcome of interest in a multilevel framework. We can, for example, specify an intercept-only model where self-disclosure is nested in persons, contexts, and media environments (I purposefully leave out the higher order level of environments to simplify) as follows (Hox, 2010, p. 173):

$$y_{i(pcm)} = \beta_{0(pcm)} + e_{i(pcm)},$$

where the level of self-disclosure  $y_{i(pcm)}$  of an individual  $i$  with the cross-classification of persons  $p$ , contexts  $c$ , and media environments  $m$  is modeled by the intercept (or overall mean)  $\beta_{0(pcm)}$  and a residual error term  $e_{i(pcm)}$ . The subscripts  $(pcm)$  are written in parentheses to indicate that they are on the same (cross-classified) level. They indicate that we assume that the intercept varies independently across persons (each person has generally a different average level of self-disclosure), contexts (general disclosure levels differ between contexts such as work or family), and media environments (disclosure levels generally differ between public, such as Facebook, and

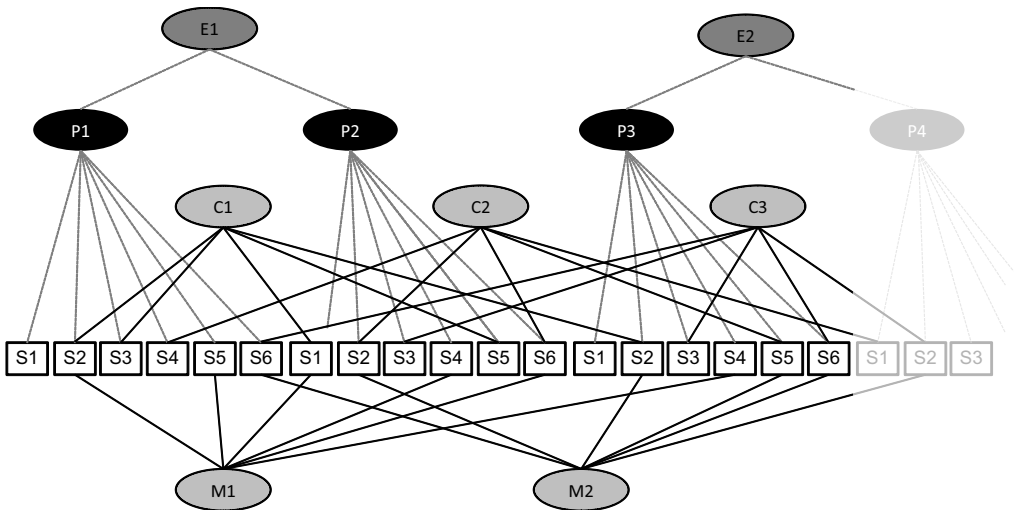


Figure 6.4 Variance Decomposition in a Multilevel Analysis Framework

Note: Possible nested structure of how situationally measured variables can be clustered in concepts of varying stability: E = Environments; P = Persons; C = Contexts; M = Media environments.

more private, such as Signal, media environments). We can thus model this intercept with the following formula:

$$\beta_{0(pcm)} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0p} + v_{0c} + w_{0m} + e_{i(pcm)}$$

The components  $u_{0p}$ ,  $v_{0c}$ , and  $w_{0m}$  thereby denote the residual error terms for each of the three included levels. Technically, interactions between the three levels can also be included if one has the assumption that their interplay explains additional variance in the outcome variable. Predictor variables can further be added at each level (including the situational level, but here, we can again distinguish variance of the situational predictor variables at all included levels; see e.g., random-effect between-within modeling; see, e.g., Bell et al., 2019).

Based on the cross-classified intercept-only multilevel model, we can decompose the variance by computing intraclass correlation coefficients, which represents the proportions of the variance explained by each level (as well as the residual, unexplained variance). By adding predictors on these different levels, we can then explore how the situational profiles (the combination of different factors from different levels of stability, see Figure 6.1) predict the outcome behavior. If we look at Figures 6.1 and 6.4 in combination, we can get an idea of how certain factors that make up the situational profile relate to the different levels of stability. For example, an internal factor such as how one perceives one's own role in a fixed social setting (e.g., the medium gray bar in the group internal factors, Figure 6.1) is something that is located on the contextual level (C, medium gray level in Figure 6.4).

Why is this approach superior to, e.g., a single experiment? First, it translates the situational perspective into a statistical model that can be used to analyze intensive longitudinal data. Second, by not isolating an effect in a single, and potentially rather artificial setting, it captures real-life variance across situations and thus allows specificity without losing generalizability. And there are indeed examples of such more fine-grained studies in the literature. For example, although not focusing on privacy processes, Bayer et al. (2016) combined log data and event-based experience sampling to trigger smartphone surveys in response to users' naturalistic Facebook postings. This way, they were able to capture emotional experiences right after certain social media use situations and investigated various predictors ranging from active posting, location, mood, etc., using a similar, yet simplified (only two levels) multilevel design as outlined above. Using a similar design, I likewise used event-based experience sampling to trigger short surveys right after people used certain apps (Masur, 2018) and measure a variety of interpersonal assessments (audience size, trust, closeness, reciprocity ...) and personal factors as well as the level of disclosure. By combining this with measures from a presurvey that assessed relevant person traits (e.g., concerns, personality, literacy), it allowed to study both stable and fleeting antecedents of disclosure in one, simple two-level multilevel framework.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I aimed to reinvigorate a situational perspective on privacy processes in social media. Building on the theory of situational privacy and self-disclosure and incorporating recent developments in situational research in psychology, I proposed several angles from which situational processes can be theorized and studied. These refer to more rigorous integration of potentially important, yet differently stable sources of variation in privacy behavior, including situations itself, potentially episodes, contexts, media environments, persons (as their own grouping factor), and larger environmental settings (including culture and political systems). Furthermore, I argued to put a stronger emphasis on integrating both objective and subjective perspectives on situations to better account for the ways in which person-environment interactions affect the processing of external cues and thus potentially influence behavioral outcomes. Finally, I proposed to consider

meta-characteristics of situations including complexity, similarity (and uniqueness), strength, and promotional vs. inhibitory character as they may help to particularly identify situations in which turbulence, violations, or threats to contextual integrity may occur. Although not organized in a coherent model or theory at this point in time, it is my hope that the outlined perspectives will help to place *situations*, in both their specificity and generalizability, as a pivotal unit of analysis in privacy research and thereby overcome some of the inherent limitations in investigating privacy processes on social media solely from a between-person perspective.

## Note

1 As a sort of conceptual grid with several dimensions that is put over each situation to create situational profiles.

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