Restoring Agency to the Human Actor

William B. Swann, Jr.[1] and Jolanda Jetten[2]
[1]University of Texas at Austin and [2]University of Queensland

Abstract

A cursory read of the social psychological literature suggests that when people find themselves in strong situations, they fail to display agency. The early classic studies of conformity, obedience, and bystander intervention, for example, are renowned for showing that when challenged by strong situational pressures, participants acquiesced—even if it meant abandoning their moral principles or disregarding their own sensory data. Later studies of learned helplessness, ego depletion, and stereotype threat echoed this "power of the situation" theme, demonstrating that exposure to (or the expectation of) a frustrating or unpleasant experience suppressed subsequent efforts to actualize goals and abilities. Although this work has provided many valuable insights into the influence of situational pressures, it has been used to buttress an unbalanced and misleading portrait of human agency. This portrait fails to recognize that situations are not invariably enemies of agency. Instead, strong situational forces often allow for, and may even encourage, expressions of human agency. We examine the nature, causes, and consequences of this phenomenon. We endorse a broader approach that emphasizes how responding to situational pressure can coexist with agency. This new emphasis should create greater convergence between social psychological models and the experience of agency in everyday life.

People lack agency. This is, at least, the impression readers might take away from reading the social psychological literature. In study after study, participants surrender to the pressures and cues in the immediate situation rather than agentically expressing their idiosyncratic goals, values, capacities, and dispositions. The roots of this impression can be traced to several iconic demonstrations of the "power of the situation," including a propensity to repudiate unambiguous sensory data in response to group pressure (Asch, 1955), yielding under pressure applied by an experimenter (Milgram, 1963) or "warden" (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973), or displaying apathy in response to the distress of another (Darley & Latane, 1968). More recent investigations have provided further testimony to the power of situational forces to suppress individual initiative and abilities.

Make no mistake: The past emphasis on the power of the situation to suppress agency has produced deep, enduring, and important insights into the human condition. Nevertheless, assuming that situations and agency represent different ends of a continuum encourages researchers to take responsiveness to situations as evidence of lack of agency. This assumption is misleading because people exercise agency—the capacity and intention to control their own behavior and outcomes (Bandura, 2006)—by assessing the situation and determining how best to reach their goals while remaining faithful to their beliefs and dispositions. Within this framework, human functioning is socially situated and culturally embedded. Behavior grows out of the dynamic interplay of intrapersonal and environmental determinants, including the capacity of people themselves to alter the course of events. Bandura (2006) notes that agency has several other properties, including forethought (thinking about how to effectively pursue goals in the future), self-reactivity (propensity to regulate behavior in the service of goals and purposes), and self-reflectiveness (the tendency to reflect upon past experiences and change behavior that seems more apt to achieve goals).

Within this framework, people act agentically when they rely on their assessment of the situation as well as

Corresponding Author:
William B. Swann, Jr., UT Department of Psychology, 1 University Station, A8000, 108 E. Dean Keeton, Austin, Texas 78712-0187
E-mail: Swann@utexas.edu

their goals, beliefs, dispositions, and so on. Exercising agency requires being responsive to the situation rather than being in competition with the situation (e.g., Bandura, 2006). Moreover, agency can be manifested in a variety of ways. For instance, responsiveness to situations may reflect the defeat of the form of agency that is on the researcher's radar but victory of a form of agency that the researcher has overlooked. Consistent with this, later in this article we show that in some experiments, strong situational pressures crushed one form of agency while activating another form of agency. In other experiments, situational pressures amplified rather than suppressed the expression of agency either in the immediate situation or at a later time.

In short, the relationship between situations and human agency is far more nuanced than the power-of-the-situation narrative suggests (a point acknowledged both by Asch and Milgram).[1] Our goal here is to bring this more nuanced story to the attention of theorists and researchers. To set the stage for our argument, we examine the events that gave rise to the current assumption that situations are the enemies of agency. In particular, we ask how the field of social psychology came to champion this belief. We start with a brief synopsis of the intellectual history of the power-of-the-situation approach, including the classic studies that grew out of the movement.

Origins of the People-Lack-Agency Theme in Social Psychology

The idea that situations are powerful determinants of behavior was first codified in the early behaviorist approaches (e.g., Watson, 1913). It appeared soon thereafter in one of the first social psychological textbooks (Floyd Allport, 1924). Although Allport rejected radical forms of behaviorism (which eschewed all discussion of cognitive and emotional mechanisms), he endorsed the idea that studying the impact of situations was more important than studying the impact of consciousness, as he saw consciousness as epiphenomenal. Later, Floyd's brother Gordon incorporated Floyd's emphasis on situational influences into the definition of social psychology: "how the thought, feeling, and behavior of individuals *are influenced by* the actual, imagined, or implied presence of other human beings" (Gordon Allport, 1954, p. 1, italics added).

The complicity of ordinary Germans in the Nazi Holocaust provided fodder for the situationist assumptions of social psychologists. Milgram (1974), for example, acknowledged that his work was inspired by "the fact that many of my friends and relatives were badly hurt by other men who were simply following orders" (as quoted in Perry, 2013, p. 325). From a historical perspective, Milgram's emphasis on the power of the situation can be understood

as a much-needed antidote to the shortcomings of the trait-based formulations of the time (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). These approaches scrutinized the pernicious qualities of individuals while ignoring the powerful impact of social conditions on rank and file German citizens.

Some of social psychology's most prominent leaders later embraced these situationist themes (but see also Jahoda, 1959; Lewin, 1946; Moscovici, 1976). This trend continues to this day. For example, in the tradition of Floyd Allport, contemporary theorists Ross and Nisbett (1991) adopted a position that might be dubbed "behaviorism lite." On one hand, contrary to radical behaviorism, they acknowledged that cognitions (especially "construals") can influence the manner in which situations control behavior. Nevertheless, consistent with behaviorism, they asserted that situations have a much more powerful impact on behavior than characteristics of individuals. In fact, they even trumpeted the "principle of situationism" as the first leg of "the tripod on which social psychology rests" (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 8).[2]

The influence of situationism can also be seen in the widespread conviction that experimentation is the methodology of choice for understanding human social behavior. Within the typical experiment, participants are mostly reactive and unable to impose their personal prerogatives on implacable experimenters (Wachtel, 1973). Experimenters focus narrowly on the outcome measure of interest. As a result, when personal or group-based agency is expressed in a manner that defies the expectations of researchers, it often goes unnoticed. Furthermore, in data analysis, the effects of the situation constitute "systematic variance," while expressions of agency (and the goals values, beliefs, and dispositions that underlie such expressions) are relegated to the "error term." With these assumptions in hand and their eye on the situationist ball, early social psychologists proceeded to conduct a series of innovative studies of social influence processes. As we note below, to this day, these studies are often heralded as evidence that people lack agency and are too weak to stand up to powerful situational influences.[3]

The surprise people express when they learn about the results of the early classic studies of social influence is often taken as evidence for the fundamental attribution error (the tendency for perceivers to underestimate the impact of situations on the actions of target individuals; Ross, 1977). Given the power of situations to elicit socially undesirable behaviors from virtually everyone, the argument goes, compliance in such situations reflects qualities of the situation rather than the dispositions of individuals responding to the situation (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). Nevertheless, because agency (the capacity and intention to control one's own behavior and outcomes) is distinct from dispositions, our analysis here has no direct

bearing on the existence of the fundamental attribution error. That said, there are some interesting parallels between our reasoning and that of critics of attributional phenomena such as the fundamental attribution error. For example, just as some researchers have rejected the assumption that situational and dispositional attributions are hydraulically related (e.g., White, 1991), we reject the notion that agency and situations are hydraulically related. In fact, we suggest that situational pressures can *increase* as well as decrease expressions of agency.

Lack of agency in the classic studies

Social psychologists have focused specifically on whether people display agency in the face of one particular temptation: strong pressures in the immediate social situation. One of the first highly influential studies in this genre was the line-judgment study by Asch (1951, 1955). He asked how participants in an ostensible perceptual task would react when accomplices made judgments about the length of the lines that were clearly wrong. The finding was that participants caved to the pressure of the majority with surprising frequency. This led Asch (1955) to lament, "That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct" (p. 6). Contemporary textbook authors agree: "This is clearly the worst side of conformity: Some people went along with the group even though that meant doing something that was plainly wrong, even to them" (Baumeister & Bushman, 2008, p. 266).

A series of studies by Milgram (1963) focused on when and why people obey authority figures who encourage them to ostensibly hurt someone else. In the best-known of about 30 variations of the study that Milgram conducted, 65% of participants delivered the maximum of 450 volts to an alleged other participant. Milgram portrayed these findings as evidence that people eventually relinquish agency when exposed to extreme situational pressure: "The person gives themselves over to authority and no longer views him [or her] as the efficient cause of his [or her] own actions" (Milgram, 1974, p. xii). Today, this finding is often framed in popular undergraduate textbooks as demonstrating the power of situational forces over personality. For example, "Although personality characteristics may make someone vulnerable or resistant to destructive obedience, what seems to matter most is the situation in which people find themselves" (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2008, p. 282). Similarly, Myers (2014) concludes that "under the sway of evil forces, even nice people are sometimes corrupted as they construct moral rationalizations for immoral behavior" (p. 206).

A third line of investigation tested the idea that people will feel less responsibility to help others when in the presence of others than when they are alone. Consistent with expectation, Darley and Latane (1968) reported that as the number of onlookers to an emergency situation increased, the rate of helping decreased. Here again, features of the social situation determined whether people behaved in a morally desirable manner.

Perhaps the most celebrated test of the power of the situation was the Stanford prison experiment (Haney et al., 1973). Those assigned to the role of guard behaved in a dictatorial and derisive manner toward prisoners, who in turn became submissive and contrite. The researchers asserted that the key determinant of the behavior of participants was the role to which they had been assigned: "Guard aggression . . . was emitted simply as a 'natural' consequence of being in the uniform of a 'guard' and asserting the power inherent in that role" (Haney et al., 1973, p. 12). Similarly, Zimbardo (2007) concludes that the data illustrate "the power of situational forces over individual behavior" (p. 21). Moreover, in their textbook, Vaughan and Hogg (2014) interpreted the Stanford study as indicating that "ultimately, roles can actually influence who we are—our identity and concept of self" (p. 270). This fits with the conclusion that others have reached when trying to explain war atrocities such as those that occurred at Abu Ghraib. For instance, Schlesinger (2004) commented, "Abusive treatment of detainees during the Global War on Terrorism was entirely predictable based on a fundamental understanding of social psychological principles" (p. 111).

And if there was any lingering question regarding the common portrayal of the classic studies, note the labels with which the studies are routinely tagged: "the Asch conformity experiments," Milgram's "obedience to authority studies," the "bystander apathy," and "the Lucifer effect" effect. Yet despite the situationist narrative surrounding these studies, the investigators who conducted these studies actually found evidence for the power of agency as well as the power of the situation. For example, a close reading of Asch's work reveals that he was intrigued by evidence of both conformity and nonconformity and the kind of appraisals that participants made about the situation in which they found themselves. Similarly, whereas many people are aware of Milgram's 1963 paper where he reported that 65% of participants endorsed the maximum shock level, the key message of his 1974 book (wherein he emphasized the wide variability of obedience rates) has attracted far less attention. Finally, although the Stanford prison study is renowned for the cruelty of the guards and compliance of the prisoners, recent accounts of this study (Zimbardo, 2007) reveal that only some guards were overly aggressive and some prisoners actually openly rebelled.

In short, evidence of nonconformity and disobedience has rarely made its way into the narratives associated with work on social influence. And yes, it is true that later investigators explored the opposite tendency for people to agentically *act on* their convictions (Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982; Skitka, 2014; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012). Nonetheless, those arguing for the power of the situation have vastly outnumbered advocates of agency. Not surprisingly then, the power of the situation narrative has shaped the way that contemporary students—and likely laypersons and even many researchers—perceive this research. Next we show how this imbalance has manifested itself in recent years.

Lack of agency in more recent studies

We wondered if more recent work has also provided evidence of the tendency for situational pressures to compromise human agency. To find out, we searched the research literature conducted in the decades following the early classic studies for work that (a) involved a clear contest between participants and a powerful situational influence, (b) appeared to be replicable, and (c) commanded considerable attention for at least 10 years. We discovered that although researchers have continued to explore the power of the situation, the outcome measures have shifted from participants' responses to the actions of others onto the task performance of participants themselves. This shift onto agentic displays associated with task performance has compelled researchers to study individuals acting alone rather than in groups. This is an important change because it blocks the ability of individuals to restore agency by affiliating and connecting with other individuals in the experimental context. Before spelling out the implications of this development, we briefly review three exemplars of this new generation of power-of-the-situation research.

One of the pioneering and highly influential programs of research in this tradition focused on "learned helplessness." This work demonstrated that when people (or nonhumans) discover that their efforts to control their outcomes are consistently frustrated, they conclude that they are helpless and suspend further efforts at mastery (e.g., Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989; Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Seligman, 1975). These effects emerge even when participants are fully capable of successfully completing the task in question.

Effort withdrawal may also emerge when people undergo a phenomenon dubbed "ego depletion" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Researchers working within this tradition assume that self-control is like a muscle. Just as physical exertion can cause fatigue and degrade muscular performance, a few moments of mental exertion can sap people's "willpower," depriving them of the mental energy they need to regulate their own behavior. They consequently fall victim to situational pressures instead of pursuing important goals, thereby degrading task performance.

People may also withdraw effort after being reminded of a negative social stereotype that calls their competence into question. For example, research on stereotype threat has shown that reminding African Americans of their category membership can activate negative stereotypes about their intelligence (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Similarly, reminding female college students of their gender may activate stereotypes that women lack proficiency in math. Both types of stereotype threat undermine subsequent performance on standardized tests (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999). These performance deficits presumably occur because activating negative social stereotypes distracts people from tasks they are attempting to complete and fosters anxiety and performance monitoring. The resulting performance decrements produce negative expectations and feelings of hopelessness that may eventually undermine motivation to excel. An important feature of the theory is the assumption that susceptibility to such threats has little to do with characteristics of victims; instead, stereotype threats are extrinsic to actors or "in the air," affecting all those to which the stereotype applies (Steele, 1997).

From portrayals of the early studies on conformity and obedience to more recent studies on stereotype threat, a clear image of human beings comes into focus, one in which they are surprisingly powerless to resist strong situational forces. To determine if objective observers would also reach this conclusion, we conducted a study. We began by acquainting naive judges with accounts of the research discussed above that appeared in major social psychology textbooks. Each participant read a description of two randomly selected studies drawn from seven of the most widely used textbooks (E. Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 2013; Baumeister & Bushman, 2008; Gilovich, Keltner, Chen, & Nisbett, 2012; Kassin et al., 2008; Myers, 2014; Sutton & Douglas, 2013; Vaughan & Hogg, 2014). More specifically, participants read the method and results of two of the following studies: a classic learned helplessness study by Alloy, Peterson, Abramson, and Seligman (1984, from Kassin et al., 2008, $N = 126$), Asch's line judgment study (from E. Aronson et al., 2013, $N = 120$), an ego depletion study by Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, and Tice (1998, from Baumeister & Bushman, 2008, $N = 124$), the classic bystander apathy study by Darley and Latane (1968, from Gilovich et al., 2012, $N = 121$), a description of the Stanford Prison Experiment by Haney et al. (1973, from Myers, 2014, $N = 125$), Milgram's classic obedience study using the shock paradigm (1963, from E. Aronson et al., 2013, $N = 124$), and/or a classic stereotype threat study by
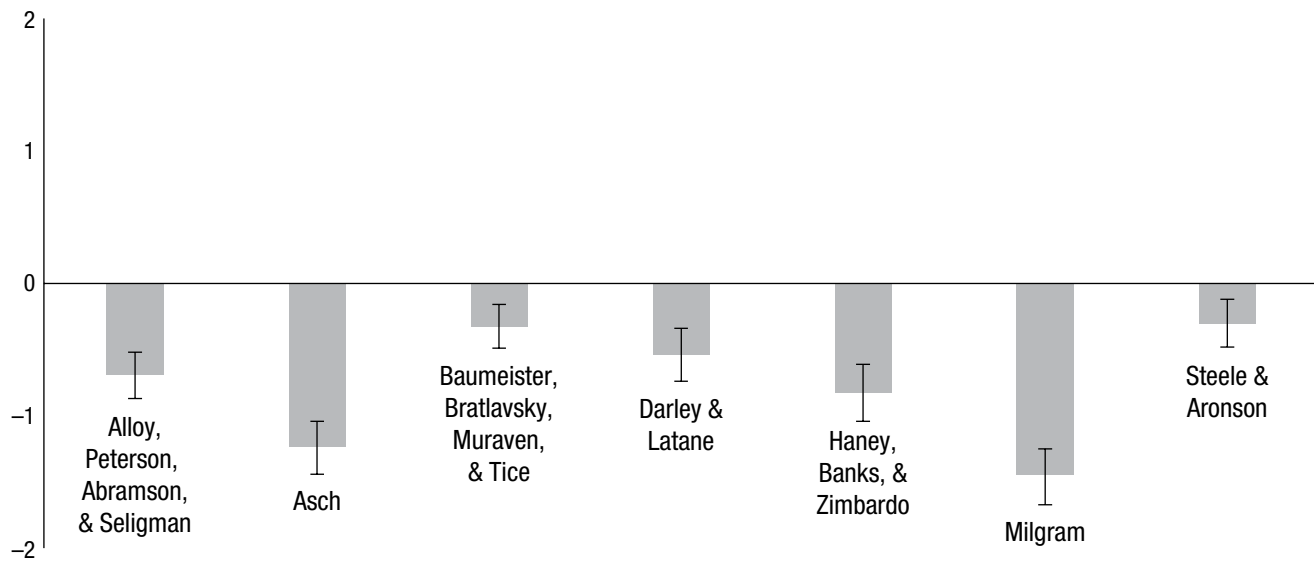
Fig. 1. Study 1. Mean ratings of the extent to which studies reveal that people lack agency (−3) versus possess agency (+3). Error bars display confidence intervals.

Steele and Aronson (1995, from Baumeister & Bushman, 2008, $N = 116$).

After reading the description of each study, participants rated the extent to which it depicted people as possessing agency on six 6-point scales ranging from −3 to +3. Specifically, participants rated the extent to which the studies revealed that people are "very weak" vs. "very strong," "lack agency" vs. "possess agency," "sheep-like" vs. "possess agency," "cave to situational pressure" vs. "defy situational pressure," "can be pressured to do things against their will" vs. "resist pressure to do things against their will," and "are powerful" vs. "weak." After reverse scoring the last item, the items were summed for each study. The resulting scales were internally consistent, with all alphas > .82.

The means in Figure 1 all fell on the "lack of agency" end of the scale, and in every case, the mean score was significantly different from the midpoint of the scale (all ps < .001).[4]

This evidence suggests that each of these highly influential and widely cited studies tend to paint a picture of humans as lacking agency in the face of situational pressures.

One could defend the people-lack-agency bias in the accounts of textbook writers by noting that they were trying to make their points clearly and provocatively and that overstating and oversimplifying findings is an effective means of attaining this end. Fair enough. Our point, however, is not merely that textbooks oversimplify but that they systematically oversimplify in the service of concluding that people lack agency. For instance, textbooks do not overclaim the degree to which people display disobedience or rebellion. Instead, their overclaiming

emphasizes the power of situational forces and the fecklessness of people who encounter them.

The popularity of the people-lack-agency narrative is surprising on many levels, not the least of which is that it would seem to confirm the fears that many Westerners have of being overpowered by the collective (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1994). Be this as it may, it raises an important question: Does the lack-of-agency narrative faithfully capture human nature? In naturally occurring settings, are people as unable to stand up to situations as the results of these studies suggest? After all, the results of any given experiment merely show what *can* happen when a given sample of participants are exposed to particular stimuli in a specific context. Experiments are not designed to provide information about the real-world *prevalence* of the phenomena under scrutiny.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to estimate the real-world prevalence of agency versus the power of the situation. Nevertheless, hints regarding the prevalence of agency in the classic studies can be gleaned from careful examination of the responses of participants in the original people-lack-agency studies as well as follow-ups to these studies—studies that were all intended to challenge individuals' agency.

Do People Really Routinely Surrender to Situational Pressures?

We began by taking a close look at laboratory notes from the classic demonstrations of the power the situation. As we will show, these notes provide a different and more complex picture of these studies than the one featured in

standard accounts. Rather than being passively buffeted about by powerful situational pressures, participants worked to find a way to pursue their own agendas within the limitations imposed by those pressures.

Revisiting classic evidence that people lack agency

Many believe that the early classic studies provide evidence of near-universal lack of agency. This is inaccurate. Consider the Asch (1955) line-judgment study. Although most participants in the Asch (1955) study displayed some evidence of conformity, 57% thwarted the majority more than half the time. Given that the dominant response was dissent, it is factually incorrect to characterize this study as evidence of widespread conformity. Furthermore, when participants did conform to the majority, most did not see themselves as passively yielding to the majority. To the contrary, postexperimental accounts of participants in the Asch study suggested that they were strongly influenced by a feeling of connection with, and obligation to, the other (ostensible) participants. Asch himself pointed out that when they declined to report their true perceptions of the length of the lines, it was often because they worried about embarrassing other participants (Asch, 1955). These participants were not ignoring their own perceptions; they merely prioritized their feelings of connection to, and empathy with, other individuals over the desire to be correct. Rather than being overwhelmed by the power of the situation, they agentically pursued their desire to be communal, even though it meant rendering judgments that they knew to be incorrect (e.g., Higgins, 2012; Jetten & Hornsey, 2012).

Acceding to the power of the situation was also far from universal in the Milgram study. In fact, although 65% of the participants in Milgram's "standard paradigm" complied with the teacher's injunctions all the way to the maximum level of shocks, the designation of the "standard paradigm" was arbitrary; in reality, the 65% condition was no more standard or representative of people's responses than any of the other variations (Russell, 2011). Compliance in the 30-odd variations of the paradigm ranged from 0% to 100%. Importantly, the vast differences in rates of compliance appear to have more to do with the connections that participants felt for other people in the experiment than with the power of the situation over the agency of participants. In particular, strengthening the connection with the experimenter (by decreasing psychological or physical distance to him) increased compliance with the experimenter; strengthening the connection with the leaner (by decreasing psychological or physical distance to him) decreased compliance with the experimenter (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).

Obedience in the Milgram paradigm thus reflected an individual's capacity to act by connecting with others rather than capitulation to the demands of a powerful authority figure. Further support for this possibility comes from analyses of reactions to the prompts that the experimenter delivered to the teacher (Burger, Girgis, & Manning, 2011). The experimenter begins politely ("Please continue") and becomes increasingly forceful and demanding, culminating in a direct order ("You have no choice, you must continue"). Contrary to the assumption that the effects were mediated by obedience, the more order-like the prompt (and thus the more the connection with the experimenter is challenged), the *lower* the rate of compliance. Instead, the most effective prompts asked for the participants' assistance in advancing science, and this pattern also emerged in simulations that varied the order in which different prompts appeared (Haslam, Reicher, & Birney, 2014). These findings make it easy to understand why, in an unpublished laboratory note, Milgram himself wondered whether it might be more accurate to label the phenomenon he had uncovered "cooperation" rather than "obedience" (Haslam, Reicher, Millard, & McDonald, 2015). They also support the conclusion that obedience in the Milgram study had more to do with misplaced trust than obedience (Perry, 2013) and that the results say more about the power of relationships than the power of the situation.

Further evidence for the importance of the connections people form in studies of social influence comes from a later investigation in which participants had an opportunity to form small coalitions against an authority figure (Gamson et al., 1982). In this study, rates of rebellion were quite high and compliance with the authority figure was relatively low. In fact, half of the groups completely refused to comply with the demands of the authority figure, and a mere 12% complied completely. Such evidence suggests that it is hazardous to use the results of Milgram's studies as a basis for concluding that people routinely knuckle under to the power of the situation. Instead, the nature of the coalitions people form with other human agents is determinative of the extent to which people defy or give in to the power of the situation. As such, one key to understanding conformity and obedience is identifying the conditions that promote agentic responding through coalition formation.

Similar issues arise when applying the power-of-the-situation narrative to the bystander intervention studies reported by Darley and Latane (1968). Recent studies have highlighted the crucial importance of the sense of connection participants have to the bystander in such studies. That is, when the victim is a member of one's own group, increasing the number of bystanders actually leads to *more* rather than less helping (Levine & Crowther, 2008; Slater et al., 2013). Apparently, when there is a connection between the bystander and victim (e.g., when a *fellow group member* is imperiled), bystanders are

expected to lend a hand, and the pressure to do so increases with increments in the number of group members who are observing. This finding suggests that helping was relatively low in the original Darley and Latane study because participants felt no connection to the victim. Unfamiliarity with the victim may also explain the (greatly exaggerated—Manning, Levine, & Collins, 2007) lack of helping in the Kitty Genovese incident that inspired the Darley and Latane research.

These relatively recent findings suggest that the Darley and Latane findings should not be regarded as providing a highly generalizable baseline for rates of helping behavior. In addition, they also show that to understand bystander behavior, we need to focus on the potential of coalition formation and shared group membership. The decision to help should be seen as an expression of agency whereby people help because they care about the victim (for an overview, see Fischer et al., 2011).

A distinctive set of concerns cloud interpretations of the Stanford prison study. First, questions have recently emerged regarding the prevalence of compliance in that study. Although textbook accounts of this study generally imply that compliance with the assigned roles was near universal, recent accounts of the study suggest otherwise (Haslam & Reicher, 2012). For example, in the first phase of the study, prisoners challenged the guards, refused to obey their orders, and mocked their authority (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 54). When guards responded by punishing such resistance, insubordination among prisoners escalated. The culmination occurred when two prisoners removed their caps and prison numbers and barricaded themselves in their cell, shouting "[T]he time has come for violent revolution!" (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 61). Precisely how this rebellion was crushed has never been spelled out, but Zimbardo himself (who designated himself the leader of the guards) may have been instrumental in the process. For example, he offered one of the rebellious prisoners preferential treatment to act as a "snitch" and somehow convinced him that it was impossible for prisoners to leave the prison. When the prisoner conveyed the news that "You can't get out of here!" to the other prisoners, it had a "transformational impact on the prisoners" (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 71). Henceforward, the prisoners stopped acting as a collective, and guards subsequently had little trouble crushing the resistance of individuals acting alone.

And prisoners were not the only ones who resisted the roles to which they were assigned. Despite Zimbardo's prodding, only "about a third" of the guards "became tyrannical in their arbitrary use of power" (Zimbardo, 1971, p. 154). Of the two thirds who refused to fall into the autocratic mode, some strove to be "tough but fair" while others were actually friendly to the prisoners, performing small favors for them (Haslam & Reicher, 2012).

No doubt, some of the participants assigned to the role of guards did indeed behave in a punitive and authoritarian fashion. Yet there are reasons to question whether situational pressures associated with mere role assignment were actually responsible for these effects. For example, Zimbardo did not simply assign participants to the role of guard; he provided them with instructions about how to implement their roles. Not surprisingly, those assigned to the role of guards in Zimbardo's prison study reported feeling obligated to do the bidding of Zimbardo (their self-assigned leader). This likely reflects the fact that he told guards to deprive prisoners of their sense of agency and autonomy—extraneous elements that went well beyond role assignment:

> You can create in the prisoners feelings of boredom, a sense of fear to some degree, you can create a notion of arbitrariness that their life is totally controlled by us, by the system, you, mean they'll have no privacy. They have no freedom of action they can do nothing, say nothing we don't permit. We're going to take away their individuality in various ways. In general what all this leads to is a sense of powerlessness. (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 55)

Indirect evidence suggests that the extraneous elements in the instructions that Zimbardo gave to his guards were crucial determinants of the outcome of his study. Consider the conceptual replication of the Stanford study filmed by the BBC. Participants reported to a mock prison where they were randomly assigned to the role of guards or prisoners. In contrast to the Stanford study, guards did not become authoritarian nor did prisoners become submissive. Although the BBC study differed in numerous ways from the Stanford experiment, at the very least it shows that role assignment does not inevitably produce the behaviors observed in the Stanford study. Of particular relevance here, it also provides further evidence of the importance of coalition formation in such settings. In the original experiment, a powerful experimenter formed coalitions with the guards and encouraged them to adopt an authoritarian stance against the hapless prisoners who were discouraged from forming coalitions. In the BBC study, the experimenter offered neither guidance nor support to either guards or prisoners. Despite this, prisoners spontaneously formed coalitions and organized a rebellion. The "powerful situation" in the two studies—role assignment—was identical; what made all the difference was the coalitions that emerged in the two studies either by design (in the Stanford study) or spontaneously (in the BBC study).

In short, several decades after the publication of landmark studies by Milgram, Asch, Darley and Latane, and Zimbardo, it is clear that most participants in these

experiments did not perceive themselves to be obeying, conforming, failing to help, or merely acting in accordance with assigned roles. Instead, participants seemed strongly motivated to navigate an unfamiliar situation by forming coalitions with other actors in the setting. In their eyes, at least, they remained true to their own convictions. It is thus misleading to conclude that participants in these experiments lacked agency or conformed to situational pressures mindlessly (e.g., Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). Instead, these classic studies suggest that people were active agents who attempted to form connections they hoped would help them see their way through the perplexing situations in which they found themselves.

Of course, the foregoing analysis relies, in part, on participants' explanations of the reasons for their behavior. One could discredit such reports by pointing out that retrospective reports of the causes of behavior are prone to bias (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1979; Wilson, 2002). Although retrospective reports are indeed unreliable at times, at other times they are quite valid (Ericsson & Simon, 1980). Moreover, there is independent evidence that agentically forming connections was on the radar of participants in the original classic experiments as well as follow-ups to those experiments. As noted above, the results of the many variations of the Milgram experiments illustrate that the key determinant of the behavior of participants was the relative strength of the connections they felt with the experimenter versus the learner (e.g., Reicher, Haslam, & Smith, 2012). Similarly, follow-ups to the Darley and Latane studies (Levine & Crowther, 2008; Slater et al., 2013) revealed much higher levels of intervention when participants felt connected to the victim. Collectively, these studies support the idea that, in response to powerful situational influences, an agentic desire to form connections, rather than passive capitulation, best explains the responses of participants in the classic studies.

Revisiting recent support for the people-lack-agency theme

If an agentic desire to form connections motivated the responses of participants in the classic people-lack-agency demonstrations, may it also have operated in more recent demonstrations that people lack agency? Probably not. As we noted earlier, whereas participants could express agency by forming a connection with someone in the classic studies, participants in the more recent studies had no opportunity to connect with anyone. This reflects the fact that because the more recent studies focused on individual task performance, the experimenters prevented them from interacting with others.

We begin with research on learned helplessness. This work highlighted the ways in which people's experiences with prolonged lack of control may dampen their subsequent motivation to master the environment, pursue goals, and realize their personal potential (e.g., Hiroto & Seligman, 1975; Seligman, 1975). Such motivational deficits are worrisome, as they might produce motivational deficits in contexts in which perseverance is necessary for success. This argument was later amplified by research indicating that uncontrollable situations tend to foster inefficient investment of cognitive effort that culminates in cognitive exhaustion (Kofta & Sedek, 1999; Sedek & Kofta, 1990).

In contrast to the early investigations of learned helplessness, subsequent perspectives offer a more nuanced and optimistic picture of responses to control deprivation. In particular, it appears that people's initial and most common reaction to control deprivation is to *amplify* efforts to exert control in contexts that offer the possibility of reasserting control (for a review, see Bukowski & Kofta, 2017). The early studies in this tradition examined the impact of control deprivation on subsequent attributional activity, with the assumption that attributions represent a means of making the social environment more predictable and controllable (for even earlier work on resistance against restrictions of freedoms, see Brehm, 1966; Wortman & Brehm, 1975). The researchers discovered that participants who were deprived of control were subsequently more sensitive to information regarding the causes of another person's behavior (Pittman & Pittman, 1980). Follow-up studies demonstrated that control deprivation also bolstered and refined subsequent information seeking (D'Agostino & Pittman, 1982; Swann, Stephenson, & Pittman, 1981) and inferential processing (Pittman & D'Agostino, 1985, 1989).

A related line of work suggests that, contrary to common understandings of depression, people who are mildly depressed may intensify their efforts to restore control by processing available information more carefully. Support for this possibility comes from research using the same outcome measures utilized in research on control deprivation by Pittman and colleagues. For example, depressed persons were particularly sensitive to information regarding the causes of another person's behavior (McCaul, 1983), displayed exceptionally high levels of interest in diagnostic information about an interaction partner (Hildebrand-Saints & Weary, 1989), and were less apt to display the correspondence bias (Yost & Weary, 1996). Consistent with our analysis, it appears that participants in these studies attempted to regain control (and agency) by connecting with others who found themselves in similar situations.

More recent research has demonstrated that control deprivation can actually stimulate approach motivation. In particular, participants who were deprived of control were energized by the experience in that they were subsequently more inclined to actively pursue goals (e.g.,

Greenaway et al., 2015). Moreover, the opportunity to respond to experiences with control deprivation by taking active steps to restore control had palliative effects in that it eliminated negative effects of deprivation on subsequent information processing (Bukowski, Asanowicz, Marzecová, & Lupiáñez, 2015).

Also consistent with this reasoning is evidence that threats to personal control can trigger compensatory efforts to restore control through allegiance to an agentic ingroup (Stollberg, Fritsche, & Bäcker, 2015). In particular, threatening university students' feelings of control (by having them contemplate aspects of their lives that induce feelings of helplessness) increased their support for educational innovations that were consistent with an ingroup's agenda. Presumably, in this instance, conforming to ingroup norms allows people to restore personal control. Here again, the evidence suggests that people are decidedly more resilient when they experience a loss of control than the early research on learned helplessness implied. Rather than responding to threats to control by giving up, people engage in active efforts to regain control through connecting with other individuals or groups.

The notion that people's experiences in the situation may induce them to give up is also featured in ego depletion theory (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). This formulation proposed that self-control is a limited resource that can be exhausted by attempting to control oneself. Such mental exhaustion theoretically lowers glucose levels, which in turn causes people to suspend further efforts to control themselves.

Although early explorations of this phenomenon seemed strongly supportive (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), recent accounts have suggested that the mechanism underlying these effects has little to do with decrements in glucose or a decision to give up. For example, early evidence that ego depletion caused diminutions in glucose (Gailliot & Baumeister, 2007) failed to replicate when more precise measures of glucose were used (Molden et al., 2012; see also Beedie & Lane, 2012; Kurzban, 2010). More telling, further studies and conceptual analyses indicated that ego-depletion manipulations do not sap motivation in any broad sense; instead, they sour people on the unpleasant "ego-depletion" task (for reviews, see Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012; Inzlicht, Schmeichel, & Macrae, 2014). For example, consider the evidence that goading people to complete an undesirable task (eating radishes rather than sweets) reduced later efforts to solve a second undesirable task (an unsolvable anagram task; Baumeister et al., 1998). Subsequent research revealed that this pattern failed to replicate when the second activity was valued in some way: when participants were rewarded for the activity (Boksem, Meijman, & Lorist, 2006), when they have a modicum of control over the activity (Hockey & Earle, 2006), or when

they were personally invested in it (Legault, Green-Demers, & Eadie, 2009). In addition, the ego depletion effect fails to emerge if the initial task is pleasant or valued. The underlying mechanism here may be that when experimenters encourage participants to eat bitter foods like radishes, it degrades their relationship with them and undermines participants' motivation to persevere on subsequent tasks. In contrast, providing participants with chocolates improves the relationship and motivates them to persevere.

In sum, recent research suggests that ostensibly depleted participants remain quite motivated to perform activities that they construed as expressions of personal agency. Hence, ego depletion does not produce mental exhaustion that impairs *ability* to perform *all* subsequent tasks; it merely encourages people to divert their agentic resources away from disagreeable tasks onto activities that interest them. Ironically, it appears that when ego depletion effects are observed, they demonstrate people's efforts to agentically divert their limited motivational resources onto activities that they deem worthy of their efforts.

Another contemporary approach that purports to capture a general tendency for people to withdraw effort in response to strong situational pressure is stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; for an integrative review, see Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). Here, merely recognizing the existence of negative social stereotypes may undermine performance in the short term even if victims themselves do not believe in the stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Over time, such performance decrements may lead targets of such stereotypes to withdraw effort. This message, of course, is quite commensurate with the power of the situation narrative that has been so influential in the field of social psychology.

To be sure, some have questioned the strength and replicability of stereotype threat effects (Flore & Wicherts, 2015; Ganley et al., 2013; Sackett, Hardison, & Cullen, 2004; but see Walton & Spencer, 2009). One reason why stereotype threat effects may be weaker than originally proposed is that people may actively resist stereotypic beliefs that are not "self-verifying"—that is, stereotypes that clash with enduring beliefs about themselves (Swann, 1983). Consider, for example, evidence that when people receive appraisals that challenge their self-views, they actively and agentically work to set the record straight by bringing those appraisals into harmony with their self-views (e.g., Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Hill, 1982). In fact, even denying people the opportunity to behave in an authentic (Harter, 2002), self-verifying manner (e.g., inducing those who see themselves as assertive to behave submissively) triggers compensatory self-verification strivings (Brooks, Swann, & Mehta, 2011).

Whether motivated by self-verification strivings or other processes, defiance of stereotypic appraisals can thwart stereotype threat effects. In one line of work, researchers explored the implications of collectively

challenging or affirming performance stereotypes (Smith & Postmes, 2010). Female participants in a group discussion session were prompted to question the stereotype that men outperform women on math tests. Later these participants outperformed participants who had been prompted to affirm the stereotype. Together with the earlier work on self-verification, this finding suggests that stereotype threat effects are less likely to occur when people are free to express and harness their personal or group-based agency. This qualifier is important. That is, although strong situational pressures may sometimes deprive lone individuals of opportunities to exercise agency in laboratory studies of stereotype threat, in naturally occurring contexts people can often exercise agency by resisting, or compensating against, the threats that they confront.

The foregoing research suggests an alternative to conventional strategies for counteracting stereotype threat effects. That is, standard remedies for countering stereotype threat effects (e.g., J. Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2001; Lewis & Sekaquaptewa, 2016) have focused on supporting individuals when stereotype threat arises (e.g., through mind-set interventions, social support, or self-affirmation) or reducing contextual triggers of stereotype threat (by reframing the task, removing threat cues). All of these interventions involve restructuring the situation so that people are either less likely to suffer from, or quicker to recover from, agency deficits. Although this approach has borne fruit, it fails to consider that targets of negative stereotypes are not mere passive victims of unavoidable "threats in the air." Rather, individuals may actively work to devise ways to agentically cling to the views they have of themselves or to directly challenge the negative stereotype personally or collectively—especially when their companions join with them in questioning the accuracy of the negative stereotype.

Upon close scrutiny, then, it becomes apparent that putative evidence that powerful situational forces routinely deprive people of agency has been overstated at best. In the classic studies, when participants faced powerful situational forces, they expressed agency by striving to form connections with other individuals who were present in the experiment. In the more recent investigations in which the capacity to form connections was unavailable, participants surrendered to situational pressures only when it was clearly unreasonable to do otherwise. In fact, in none of the studies included in our review did we find clear evidence that situational forces stripped people of their capacity to exercise agency. To the contrary, in some studies, we encountered evidence that situational forces sometimes *bolstered* agency (e.g., research on compensatory reactions to control deprivation and self-discrepant evaluations). This conclusion is also supported by recent explorations of phenomena

such as resilience, grit, and growth (e.g., Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Here again, when people confront powerful situational forces that clash with their salient agendas, they often resist and, if such forces prove intransigent, they try to circumvent them.

If the notion that situations systematically deprive people of agency is not supported by the empirical evidence, then how has this assumption continued to flourish in the social psychological literature? We suggest that social psychology's metatheoretical assumptions have played a major role in producing this state of affairs. But could these assumptions also influence the topics that researchers study and cover in major textbooks? To test this possibility, we conducted Study 2. A research assistant (who was blind to our hypotheses) counted the proportion of pages devoted to topics related to lack of agency versus agency in seven major social psychology texts (the same ones examined in Study 1). We then tallied the average proportion of pages devoted to the three most common forms of lack of agency (conformity, compliance, bystander effect) and the three most common forms of agency (dissent, deviance, resistance). The means displayed in Figure 2 reveal that far more space was devoted to topics focused on lack of agency (topics on the left side) than agency. Moreover, this tendency to favor evidence of lack of agency over agency was apparent in each of the texts we examined. Hence, it likely reflects the state of the art of social psychological research rather than bias on the part of the particular textbook authors.

Skeptics could point out that despite the pervasive emphasis on lack of agency in the social influence literature, many studies have been designed to identify *moderators* of lack of agency effects rather than lack of agency per se. In fact, many of the authors of the classic studies envisioned a key component of the balanced approach that we are advocating here. For example, in an attempt to understand how situational pressures moderate obedience, Milgram conducted roughly 30 studies designed to identify the boundary conditions of obedience to authority. Collectively, Milgram's studies offer a remarkably complete picture of the impact of situational pressures on obedience. Similarly, Asch (1955) conducted multiple variations of the original line-judgment task that revealed the conditions under which people rebel versus conform. Likewise, in the wake of the publication of his landmark paper on the bystander effect, Darley wrote an article entitled "Do groups always inhibit individuals' responses to potential emergencies?" in which he challenged simplistic readings and interpretations of the effect (Darley, Teger, & Lewis, 1973). Nevertheless, the manner in which a phenomenon is framed initially can have considerable impact on how it is understood and studied. Note, for example, that researchers generally
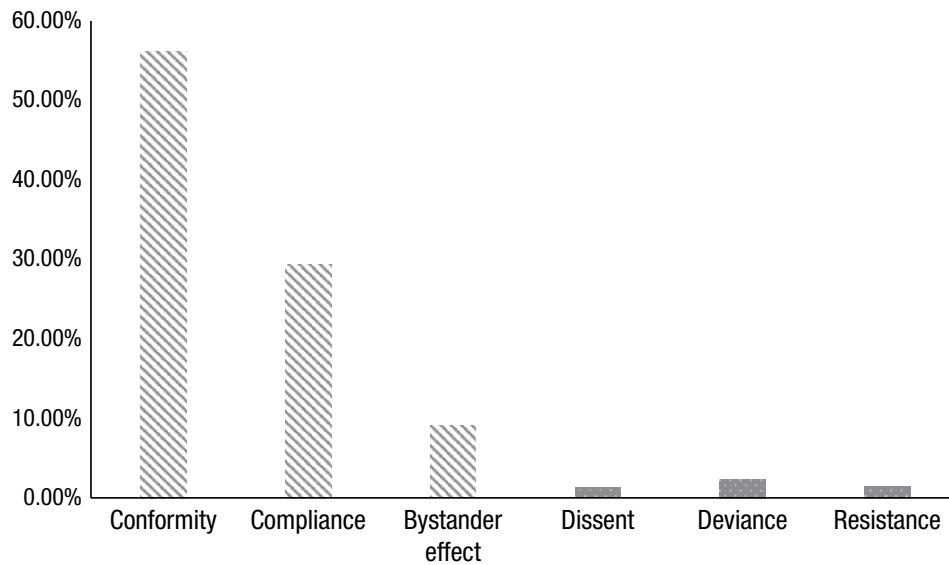
Fig. 2. Study 2. Average proportion of pages devoted to topics related to lack of agency versus agency.

construe moderator studies as demonstrating "a limit on the effect" rather than a distinctive phenomenon. In reality, however, rebellion is more than "a limit" on conformity; it is a phenomenon itself with a unique set of causes, mediators, moderators, and consequences (Jetten & Hornsey, 2014). Each of these phenomena requires independent conceptual and empirical study. Before recognition and analysis of these processes can occur, researchers must first recognize the existence of both sets of phenomena. Only then will the field achieve greater balance in the phenomena examined in Figure 2. We accordingly consider strategies for developing a more balanced and comprehensive vision of social psychological phenomena in the next section.

Toward a More Balanced Social Psychology

> The opposite of a great truth is also true. (McGuire, 1973, p. 455)

> If one psychological principle appears reasonable, then try reversing it, in order to see whether its contrary is just as reasonable. (Billig, 1987, p. 11)

We suggest here that one of social psychology's core metatheories—situationism—has inspired researchers to amass more than a half-century's worth of one-sided putative support for the notion that people lack agency. Although people clearly lack agency under some circumstances, a careful look at the evidence reveals that many participants in supposed demonstrations of lack of agency were in reality agentically pursuing their personal or group agendas. Moreover, examination of other ostensible evidence of the power of the situation suggests that people sometimes display agency despite, or even because of, situational influences. For these reasons, it is misleading to consider this body of research as strong evidence of the power of the situation. More generally, our review illustrates how a one-sided metatheoretical approach can lead researchers to don theoretical blinders that misconstrue the phenomena they are investigating.

Perhaps the greatest danger of a one-sided approach is that it can hinder progress by encouraging researchers to overlook important phenomena. In our review, we showed that early putative demonstrations of the power of the situation captured the imagination of the field. This served to "anchor" subsequent researchers on related phenomenon. They accordingly focused on social influence rather than resistance to social influence. The result is that the current social psychological literature is severely skewed toward phenomena that highlight the power of the situation over agency—conformity instead of dissent, learned helplessness instead of control restoration, ego depletion instead of ego resilience, stereotype threat instead of resistance to subjectively inaccurate stereotypes, and so on.

If social psychological researchers have failed to see evidence of agency in the behavior of their participants, how can their vision be improved? We believe that the cure for the current myopia is to broaden the lenses through which researchers scrutinize human behavior. As can be seen in the left panel of Table 1, to better recognize expressions of human agency, we should provide participants with more voice, additional choices and options, and additional time to take charge of the situation. To this end, the three

Table 1. Strategies for Broadening the Lenses Through Which Social Psychologists Study Behavior

Agentic responding promoted by providing participants with	Required methodological strategy
Voice	Complementing quantitative measures with qualitative ones
Choice and options	Ecologically valid research in naturally occurring settings
Time to control the situation	Extend temporal frame of research

distinct methodological strategies listed in the right panel of Table 1 should be utilized. The first strategy involves learning more about how participants are experiencing the stimuli to which they are exposed. For example, to varying degrees, Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo collected considerable data relevant to the agency strivings of their participants. Unfortunately, as these projects moved from data collection to data dissemination, the full richness of the findings was lost to the "power of the situation" refrain. This is unfortunate, because as our review suggests, if researchers do not determine and report why participants behaved as they did, they may draw erroneous conclusions regarding the meaning of participants' behavior.

Careful scrutiny of people's accounts have also persuaded researchers to rethink their understanding of crowd behavior. For decades, Le Bon's (1947) group mind theory provided the lens through which many behavioral scientists viewed crowd behavior. Once immersed in a crowd, Le Bon argued, people relinquish conscious control of their actions and are instead driven by primitive impulses. In this same tradition, Zimbardo (1969) contended that immersion in groups fosters a state of deindividuation in which people lose their capacity for self-evaluation and self-regulation, resulting in destructive behavior. Although these conceptualizations of crowd behavior as impulsive and random were widely accepted, they are not necessarily accurate. For example, careful analysis of the accounts of participants in an actual riot lent little support for group mind theory (Reicher, 1984). To the contrary, the reports of rioters and police offered converging evidence that the actions of rioters were a highly systematic and nuanced expression of rioters' deeply felt anger against police, whom they believed had abused them for years. The findings from this study were so compelling that they prompted researchers to revisit and reevaluate their understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of crowd behavior (see Postmes & Spears, 1998).

Qualitative research that probes people's spontaneous construals of theoretically relevant situations is especially useful in allowing researchers to accurately characterize and understand the phenomena under scrutiny. Such methodologies may be particularly useful during the exploratory phases of research (Rozin, 2001). They can also facilitate theory testing, not only by confirming the effectiveness of

manipulations but also by providing tests of new hypotheses about the processes under investigation. For many years, many held the misconception that people routinely react to emergency situations with panic (Quarantelli, 2001; Smelser, 1962). Drawing on self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), researchers recently corrected this misconception by providing evidence from field studies indicating that cooperation is more common than panic and that such cooperation often grows out of a shared identity arising from the common experience of the emergency itself (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2008). Such feelings of solidarity, in turn, muted panic reactions (Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2008; Vezzali, Drury, Versari, & Cadamuro, 2015).

The classic studies of social influence (e.g., Asch, 1955) also provide an example of the informativeness of self-reports in building and testing theory. In these studies, the accounts of participants revealed, among other things, the premium that many participants placed on connecting with other individuals in the experiment (Jetten & Hornsey, 2012). Unfortunately, this finding never made it into the lack-of-agency narrative associated with these studies.

One reason why the self-reports of participants in the classic studies were largely overlooked is that experimentalists have been notoriously distrustful of qualitative data (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1979), a distrustfulness that has led them to eschew self-reports (but see Ericsson & Simon, 1980). As Asch (Asch, 1952/1987) put it, "because physicists cannot speak with stars or electric currents, psychologists have often been hesitant to speak to their human participants" (pp. xiv–xv). Our review suggests that when researchers transcend their "physics envy" to utilize the information provided by the self-reports of participants, individual agency can be better understood, thereby enhancing the verisimilitude of the research. Taking such reports seriously may thus allow for a more balanced approach producing a richer, more nuanced characterization of people's reactions, one that may shed light on the opposite of the phenomenon that originally grabbed the attention of the researcher (e.g., McAdams, 1993; Pandey, Stevenson, Shankar, Hopkins, & Reicher, 2013; Shankar et al., 2013).

A second strategy for broadening the conceptual lenses of researchers is to complement experimentation with ecologically valid research in naturally occurring

settings. Field research characteristically embraces the second methodological feature of a balanced approach, ecological validity, or generalizability (cf., Mook, 1983). Laboratory experiments pluck people from the contexts in which they are normally embedded and observe their behavior in spatially and temporally constrained settings. A case in point is the Asch (1952) experiment, to which one participant reacted by noting after debriefing, "This is unlike any experience I have had in my life—I will never forget it as long as I live" (p. 467). Ecologically valid research provides a check on the veracity of the conclusions drawn from laboratory research (Cialdini, 2009; Gosling, 2004; Langer & Newman, 1979). This may necessitate suspending the usual compulsion that social psychologists have to reduce uncertainty as quickly as possible (Haslam & McGarty, 2001) and instead delineate the parameters of such uncertainty through field research. Nevertheless, these efforts may reap rich dividends in the form of insights into forms of agency that could not have been anticipated based on laboratory analogs of the phenomenon.

Ecologically valid field studies can also complement laboratory studies in important ways. Whereas experiments are optimal for demonstrating how people *respond to* situations, field studies can reveal how people *select and influence* situations (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Information about the ways in which people choose and shape situations is not only essential to broad questions such as the interplay of situations and personal qualities (e.g., the trait-situation and attitude-behavior debates), it can also offer insights into specific phenomena. For example, analyses of adolescent risk behavior have long implicated peers, with some arguing that peers shape as much as 50% of adolescent personality (Harris, 1998). Later analyses, however, revealed that adolescents are not simply passive responders to social influence. Instead, they play a very active role in social influence by systematically choosing to affiliate with peers who complement and amplify their own inclinations (e.g., Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005). Furthermore, in light of evidence that experiments may sometimes discourage participants from acting agentically and instead encourage mindless responding (Langer & Newman, 1979), field studies that encourage mindfulness provide a much-needed check on the generality of experimental findings.

Field studies also demonstrate that it is possible to harness agency to motivate healthier lifestyles. In a recent paper (Bryan et al., 2016), the researchers sought to induce adolescents to eat healthier by framing healthy eating as a strategy for taking a stand against manipulative and unfair practices of the food industry (e.g., marketing addictive junk food to young children). Relative to a traditional health education materials condition, the "take-a-stand" treatment led eighth graders to see healthy eating as more autonomy-assertive. They accordingly came to prefer healthy alternatives to sugary snacks and drinks.

The capacity of ecologically valid research to examine the selection of situations is also related to the third strategy of broadening researchers' conceptual and empirical lenses: the use of relatively expansive temporal frames. In most laboratory research, investigators focus on events that transpire in the first few seconds after the powerful manipulation while ignoring what happens before or later. This is limiting and potentially misleading because people's reactions to situations are best understood as sequences of behavioral, affective, and cognitive responses rather than as single responses (Clore & Robinson, 2011). As a result, investigators may obtain very different findings depending on when they collect participants' responses. In studies of the self, for example, researchers have discovered that people's initial reactions to evaluations favor self-enhancement theory but later reactions favor self-verification (e.g., Swann, 2012; Swann & Schroeder, 1995). Translated into the context of our discussion of agency, the question may be not so much *whether* people obey, conform, and so on but *for how long*. This requires researchers to observe people over a period of time in specific contexts rather than controlling and manipulating those contexts. This more expansive approach may provide insight into both the phenomenon of interest as well as its naturally occurring opposite.

A longer temporal frame may also allow researchers to examine how people work to shape situations and escape from situations that thwart their attempts to exert personal agency. For example, under what conditions will those that initially give in to the situational pressure rise up and avenge themselves? Similarly, when will those who initially refrain from helping redeem themselves by rushing to the assistance of those in need. After being subjected to powerful situations, under what conditions will people work to regain agency, choice, and control (e.g., Gamson et al., 1982)? And when will people who have been goaded into assuming an uncharacteristic identity actively repudiate that identity (e.g., Swann, 2012). New technologies that allow laboratory researchers to track naturally occurring behaviors after participants leave the experimental laboratory (e.g., mobile sensing techniques; Harari, Gosling, Wang, & Campbell, 2015; Harari et al., in press) may be particularly useful in expanding the temporal frame of research. Such technologies may allow researchers to track behaviors on a scale that was once unimaginable. In fact, through "Big Data" techniques researchers can collect billions of data points from vast numbers of participants. In these and related ways, researchers may capitalize on recent innovations designed to lay bare phenomena that are precisely the opposite of the ones that the investigator set out to examine.

Conclusion

These are tempestuous times for social psychology. Over the last decade and a half, a parade of critics from within the field has raised several seemingly disconnected concerns. Specifically, they have assailed social psychologists for crediting themselves with predicting unforeseen outcomes ("Harking"; Kerr, 1998), rushing to test elaborate theories before accurately characterizing the phenomenon under scrutiny (Rozin, 2001), focusing on problematic social behaviors while overlooking positive and functional ones (Krueger & Funder, 2004), devoting too much attention to specifying psychological mechanisms at the expense of observing naturally occurring overt behavior (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007), failing to demonstrate the relevance of experimental findings to naturally occurring phenomena (Cialdini, 2009), and suspending data collection prematurely in the service of theory confirmation ("*p*-hacking"; Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2012).

Although the foregoing concerns may seem unrelated to each other, we suggest that they are all symptoms of the same underlying phenomenon: a tendency for researchers to seek confirmation of a single theoretical or metatheoretical approach while relying almost exclusively on experimental approaches (see also Morton, Haslam, Postmes, & Ryan, 2006). Our review presents a case study of this propensity and its consequences. We show that researchers have sought and found "evidence" of lack of agency when in fact data from both within and outside the laboratory could equally well support the opposite conclusion.

Although we believe that this problem is a serious one, the good news is that relatively simple changes in the way researchers construct and test theories should remedy it. Moreover, these remedies can be put in place while theory-driven laboratory experimentation remains the field's mainstay; to name just one example, research on compensatory responses to control deprivation (for a review, see Bukowski & Kofta, 2017) shows how laboratory experiments can be used to restore agency to our theoretical models.

Let us close by noting that in encouraging researchers to acknowledge and study expressions of human agency, we are not endorsing regressive social policies that are based on blaming the victims of harsh or unhelpful cultural conditions. For example, just because people *can* exert agency to overcome negative social stereotypes or resist tempting-but-unhealthy foods, this does not mean that we as a society should assign responsibility to those who fall victim to such phenomena. Rather, our suggestion is that *in addition to* attempting to change social conditions that cause suffering, efforts should be made to enlist the feelings of agency of the would-be victims of deleterious social conditions to empower them to transcend their social conditions. This new focus will lead to a very different vision of human beings, one that better captures the way people experience themselves and each other. This vision will, in turn, increase both the veracity of social psychological theory as well as its relevance to the naturally occurring phenomenon it strives to illuminate. If psychologists loosen their embrace of situationism and broaden the lenses through which they study behavior, they will witness the numerous striking and ingenious ways that the human spirit asserts itself. And the human spirit should be a central concern for us. Indeed, as a reviewer of an earlier version of this paper noted, "if 'agency' is not the core of human nature (compared to our animal brethren), then what is?"

Notes

1. Arguably, Milgram only belatedly acknowledged this point. Although he ran about 30 variations of his experiment in the early 1960s, he only published a single variation in 1963 in which compliance was surprisingly strong (65%). He then waited over a decade before publishing most of the other variations in 1974. During that decade and ever since, knowledge of the 65% variation has contributed enormously to the power of the situation narrative.

2. Ross and Nisbett (1991) correctly note that their acknowledgement of the role of construal distinguishes their position from radical behaviorism. Nevertheless, their failure to consider agency and the processes that underlie it gives their formulation a decidedly behavioristic feel, which is why we have dubbed their formulation "behaviorism lite."

3. At first blush, it might be tempting to associate lack of agency with the lack of explicit, conscious control that theoretically occurs when implicit processes regulate behavior (e.g., Bargh, 1994). Nevertheless, conceptually lack of agency is orthogonal to the explicit-implicit distinction. That is, because lack of agency (and agency) can almost surely be automatized and thus implicit, the degree to which a given behavior is implicit has no direct bearing on the degree to which it is agentic.

4. The 95% confidence intervals of the difference from the midpoint of the scale were as follows—Alloy, Peterson, Abramson,

and Seligman: −.87 to −52, mean difference of .70; Asch's line judgment study: −1.44 to −1.04, mean difference of 1.24; Baumeister et al.: −.49 to −.16, mean difference of .32; Darley and Latane: −.74 to −.34, mean difference of .54; Haney et al.: −1.04 to −.61, mean difference of .83; Milgram: −1.67 to −1.25, mean difference of 1.46; and Steele and Aronson: −.48 to −.12, mean difference of .31. Also, the original agency scale included two additional items ("abandon vs. cling to their moral convictions" and "lack vs. possess free will"). We dropped these items because they diminished the internal consistency of the scale.

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