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THE IMPACT OF PERSON-SITUATION CONGRUENCE ON PEOPLE'S PREFERENCE FOR INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

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The present study aims to test the hypothesis that participants will prefer to interact with individuals in situations whose demands are congruent with the participant's personality traits. The study used both poles of the Big Five personality traits systematically and comprehensively paired with five of the eight situational characteristics from the DIAMONDS model. The study comprised 94 participants with a gender split of 70:20, favoring females. Of the participant population, 59% (59.14%) were between the ages of 18-21. 44% (44.09%) of participants were White and non-Hispanic. Results indicated the predicted congruence effects only for the Extraversion/Sociality pair, whereas Neuroticism/Adversity also showed congruence but in the unpredicted direction. For the other three pairings, the desirability of one pole of the trait dominated the preference judgment.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandpa, Robert S. Murray, who died before I lived. "For all those scientific conversations we missed out on and all those things you could never teach me, I hope I have still made you proud."

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I want to express my deep appreciation to my committee. I want to thank Dr. Wilson McDermut for agreeing to be my second reader and for his insight and guidance, as well as Dr. William F. Chaplin. For all his mentorship, wisdom, and kindness. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to work with you. I would also like to thank Gabriel Sanchez for all the inciteful conversations and help with the Eye-Tracker whenever it decided it did not like me. Above all, I wish to thank my parents. My father, Stephen G. Harkinish-Murray, has always supported me and my crippling lack of a license. Always willing to drive me so that I may achieve greatness. Thank you for putting up with me and loving me all these years. As well as my mother, Debra-Jean Harkinish-Murray, who would drive me when my father's health did not allow him to.

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INTRODUCTION

The present study aims to test the hypothesis that participants will prefer to interact with individuals in situations whose demands are congruent with the participant's personality traits. The study used both poles of the Big Five personality traits systematically and comprehensively paired with five of the eight situational characteristics from the DIAMONDS model (Duty, Intellect, Adversity, Mating, pOsitivity, Negativity, Deception, and Sociality). Our results are embedded in the continued discussion of the relative importance and impact of person characteristics and situational demands for understanding behavior, specifically, the choices people make about with whom they choose to interact.

THE PERSON-SITUATION DEBATE: CURRENT AND HISTORICAL REVIEW

The "Dark Age"

Personality and social psychologists have been embroiled in a war since the 1960s. Mutha et al. (1996), describes this conflict as "a theoretical deadlock, with neither situationists nor trait psychologists definitively demonstrating that their perspective is a better way to explain and predict observed responses, behaviors, and intentions." The kickoff was the publication of Walter Mishel's critique of personality trait theory in 1968. As Chaplin (2007) describes, Mishel's critique caused many otherwise thoughtful psychologists to reach "what is now recognized as the premature conclusion that individual differences were not useful at all for predicting and understanding behavior."

Which resulted in the almost immediate extinction of personality psychology. This period, roughly from the 1960s-80s, Chaplin (2007) further described it as "the 'Dark Ages' of personality." Or, more eloquently, attributed to Westen (1995) as "the Mischelian 'ice age.'"

Mischel's Faults

However, Mischel's claims were not entirely baseless. The publication did bring to light many faults in the methodology of the field at the time. As, perhaps, said best by Epstein and O'Brien (1985), "it is important to recognize that Mischel performed an important service in drawing attention to the widespread, inappropriate use of trait theory." It was common practice to infer traits from single signs/items from projective tests and behaviors (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985). As well as using trait measures to predict singular items of behavior (Epstein & O'Brien, 1985). In the end, despite some rightful critiques, Mischel went too far with his conclusions. Epstein and O'Brien (1985) note that throughout Mischel's work, he failed to account for "the limiting effect on reliability and generality of single items of behavior and, relatedly, of the value of aggregating observations over occasions and situations in establishing the existence of broad, stable response dispositions." Thus, when Mischel finally concluded that "traits are untenable" it was an overstatement.

The "Renaissance": What Has Been Learned

Thankfully, for the study of personality psychology, Mischel's publication and the following assault did not prove the end of the field. With time, the errors in Mischel's

critique weakened the argument against trait theory. In recent history, this has bloomed into what Chaplin (2007) calls a "renaissance." However, Chaplin further notes that "the field of personality also learned some hard lessons." Epstein and O'Brien (1985) state that reflection upon items of behavior and singular test items have "too narrow a range of generality and too great a degree of error of measurement to produce more than very modest correlations with other presumed measures of a trait." In the more modern period, some lessons of this renaissance can be summed up into five major lessons. From a developmental perspective, Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) summarize the points best in their developmental review. They break the lessons up into "age matters, time matters more, examine multiple types of change, sensitivity to levels of analysis, and attention to process."

Age Matters. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) summarized the first point: "Studying different age groups can lead to biases for and against traits and situations." This means that when we study certain age groups, we are inherently subject to the specific nuances of that age group. No one would argue that children process information differently from adolescents, adults, and seniors. Nor would one necessarily argue that adolescents think differently from adults. However, differences are not always considered when research is reported. It tends to be the case with children that such assumptions are automatic. However, all age groups differ to some extent. Because of this fact, we must consider that unless the dataset is widespread across various age groups, there are most likely some inherent biases in the data. Thus, there is always a need to be cautious when generalizing findings.

Time Matters More. If we know that age is such a critical point, then it should be a surprise that time matters even more. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) summarize that "longitudinal and within-participants designs demonstrate that traits and situations are reciprocally related." So, if we know that age brings changes and differences that can influence trait/situation findings, why wouldn't time itself? Developmental marks such as having children can be measured, but situational changes morph and evolve with time, which brings forth an ever-changing environment for the individual. As the environment changes, the individual within it should also be expected to change. Change must occur to adapt to the environment, and to be unable to adapt and have adverse outcomes; change must also occur. Therefore, research should be sensitive to how time influences person/situation analysis.

Examine Multiple Times of Change. Solitary levels of change should not be the sole basis for a conclusion. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) explain that "focusing on one type, such as mean-level change, can lead to inappropriate conclusions about the merits of persons or situations." If multiple levels are examined, then the results are more robust findings that, while not simple, should be more rewardingly complex in their findings.

Sensitivity to Levels of Analysis. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) describe the fourth lesson as "the relative breadth of persons and situations may determine the relative influence of the two." Sensitivity to the level of analysis can better highlight the impact or relation to the items and areas being examined. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) point out that "the two most extreme constituencies in the original person-situation debate were working diligently on different levels of analysis." This is true; opposition to personality

trait theory focused almost entirely on situational importance and vice versa. It was not the case that the interaction of the two was considered. Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) further state, "Their apparently contradictory findings across levels are better seen as complementary; a perspective gained only when the hierarchy is made explicit."

Attention to process. Finally, Roberts and Pomerantz (2004) state that paying attention to process "leads inextricably to transactional explanations-even when biological or genetic factors are considered." Therefore, rather than trying to separate person information from situation information or vice versa, it should consider how each affects the individuals within the environment both introspectively and introspectively. Alternatively, put far more simply, when looking at person and situation information, instead of trying to determine which is more important. Realize that "it depends" and look for the influences each is having.

Person With Situation

So, where do we stand currently? Although a form of the Person vs. Situation debate still exists in some form. Much of research has come to acknowledge that both sides share validity in the outcome of results. Again, "it depends"; some instances see more support for the meaningfulness of person information. At the same time, others show support for situation information. Rather than looking at these findings as competing, they should be combined to paint a more comprehensive picture of behavior and preference. As Rauthmann and Sherman (2020) state, "it has become a truism that an outcome variable (e.g., behavior) is a function of both person and situation variables

(encapsulated in Kurt Lewin's now iconic formula)." Therefore, how do we sort these results? This paper proposes considering the effects of interaction between the two when looking at information about people/situations. In this way, it can be demonstrated not only which (if only one) has a greater effect but also if there is an interaction between the two. The interplay of both is just as crucial to the comprehensive whole as the effect size of the individual variable when trying to understand the basis of behavior and preferences for individual traits.

Interaction Analysis/Congruence Analysis

Over time, several studies have examined the interaction between personality and situation information. Additionally, many approaches have been analyzed. Two relevant findings were reported in a study conducted by Diener et al. (1984). First, "Person-situation interactions are not necessarily overwhelmingly strong." Effect sizes can be small; the weight of the effect is dependent on context more than its numerical weight. Second, "the present study suggests that personality factors influence people's choice of situations." Diener et al. (1984), found that personality factors can influence an individual's situations. This result indicates that if the trait is related to the situation, we can empirically expect some interaction between the two, implying predictability between the two data types. Rauthmann et al. (2015), conducted a more recent study that equally supported this notion of situational influence based upon already existing personality traits. Rauthmann et al. (2015), state "Because people do not encounter situations at random, some aspects of encountered situations may be driven by and reflect people's personalities." However, the interaction is not the only important aspect. For

research to find interaction effects, we must also ensure congruence between the variables we wish to compare. In this area, less specific attention is paid to the congruence between variables used for person/situation analysis. However, it would not be this study's opinion that congruence is being ignored. Sherman et al. (2011), investigated the congruence between participant personality and their behavior during a given situation on a given day. Findings from the study indicated that "on average people demonstrated overall personality behavior congruence, as well distinctive personality-behavior." Sherman et al. (2011), also state that "these results have parallel implications for understanding situations congruence." Therefore, the most effective way to investigate the effects of person/situation interaction is to ensure congruence between chosen variables.

Situational Taxonomy

However, taxonomically encoding situational traits successfully has not been as successful as developing personality taxonomies as has been the case with the Big Five. There have been efforts to demonstrate its validity and success in doing so. Murtha et al. (1996), conducted a study that supported situation-focused taxonomies. Stating that "the results obtained in this study provide positive evidence for the feasibility of a hierarchical situational-dispositional perspective." Murtha et al. (1996), further state that "the currently dominant content taxonomies may not adequately represent specific responses and represent a first step toward the development of a taxonomy of situations based on their effect on trait-relevant behavior and responses." Moreover, Rauthmann et al. (2014), demonstrated their taxonomy for situational traits referred to as the situation

DIAMONDS. The study's purpose was to address three issues situation researchers faced at the time. Rauthmann et al. (2014), stated that these issues were "the definition, taxonomization, and measurement" of situations. The resulting proposed solution was the DIAMONDS taxonomy, which has gained support and usage, which is why it has been utilized in this study. However, it should also be stated that the DIAMONDS taxonomy is not the only successful one. Parrigon et al. (2017), demonstrated validity for their situational taxonomy CAPTION (Complexity, Adversity, Positive valence, Typicality, Importance, humOr, and Negative valence). The work comprises six studies and utilizes the "largest-to-date lexical analysis of psychological situation characteristics." Parrigon et al. (2017), concluded that they "uncovered seven major dimensions of psychological situation characteristics that have consistently emerged across a diverse array of methodologies."

The Present Study

In the present study, we test the hypothesis that the congruence between an individual's personality characteristics and the demands of the situation will predict preference ratings for interacting with that individual in the described situation. The personality descriptions are based on profiles across the Big Five, and the situation descriptions are based on profiles across five of the situational DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al., 2014). However, we expect that the congruence effect will be different as a function of the specific trait and that this moderating effect will be related to the desirability of the trait.

METHODS

Participants

The study comprised 94 participants with a gender split of 70:20 favoring females (2 reported gender as "other" and 2 did not report gender). Of the participant population, 59% (59.14%) were between the ages of 18-21, with 44% (44.09%) of participants being White, Non-Hispanic.

Stimuli

The stimuli comprised 12 personality profiles crossed with 3 situation profiles for 36 trials. Personality profiles were based on the higher-order Alpha (Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness) and Beta (Extraversion, Openness) factors of Big Five traits (Digman, 1997). All possible combinations of positive and negative dimensions were represented. Combinations that included all positive or all negative information were not included. Situational profiles were based on 5 of the 8 DIAMONDS (Dutifulness, Adversity, Mating, Intellect, Sociality) to maintain balance across person and situation. Situational profiles were arranged to reflect situations pertaining to partying/dating (social), work/school projects (task), or traveling/roommate (collaborative) circumstances.

Response Scale

Participants viewed each trial for 20 seconds and were then asked to rate their willingness to be with the described individual in the described situation on a scale of 1-

7, with 7 being a high willingness to work with the individual.

Procedures

The study was conducted as part of a study on personality and attention, so the information was shown using eye-tracking technology (EyeLink 1000 Plus), and the experiment was designed using SR Research Experiment Builder. However, the attention data was not used in the research reported here. The study consisted of 38 trials, with the first two being practice trials. Each trial would present the participant with a screen that was present for 20 seconds. The screen was split into two fields, Top and Bottom. With either the top or bottom field containing a set of person descriptors such as "this person is not at all neurotic, not at all agreeable, and not at all dependable. They are also very conventional and very outgoing." The other field would contain situation descriptors, such as "this situation is high stress and requires responsible behavior and intellectual thought. It involves little Intimacy or social behavior." Participants were allowed to take breaks as desired and were always offered a break at the halfway point of the study.

Statistical Analysis

The data was analyzed with JASP (Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program) Version 0.18.3, an open-source program for statistical analysis. The primary approach was a 5x2x2 repeated measures analysis of variance where the dependent variable was the preference ratings, and the independent variables were the two poles. The overall analysis was a Trait (5) by Person (2 poles) by Situation (2 poles) analysis of variance. This was followed by planned 2 (Person) x 2 (Situation) analyses on each of the (5) traits.

The analysis used a Bayesian inference approach based on the Bayes Factor (likelihood ratio), which indicates the relative probabilities of the data for the null and alternative models.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of Preference Ratings Across Conditions

The means and standard deviations of the (5) personality/situation pairings are shown in Table 1. It consists of the 5x2x2 design used in this study, where the (5) trait pairings are placed against the bidirectional range of the personality traits and against the bidirectional range of the situation traits.

Overall Bayesian Repeated Measures ANOVA

Table 2 shows the nine best-fitting models compared to the null model. The Bayes Factor showing the likelihood of the data for each of the nine models compared to the null model (BF_{10}) indicates that all nine models are more consistent with the data than the null model. However, the best-fitting model contains the three-way interaction and is superior to all the other models. This finding justifies conducting separate Person x Situation analyses for each trait.

2 (Person) x 2 (Situation) Bayesian Repeated Measures ANOVA's

Openness/Intellect Congruence

The Openness/Intelligence data reports a largely person-driven interaction, preferring conventional individuals over unconventional individuals (Table 3). The most

substantial effect is seen in situations requiring low Intelligence (Fig. 1).

Conscientiousness/Duty Congruence

Meanwhile, the Conscientiousness/Duty data indicates a preference for conscientious individuals that remains largely independent of the situation (Table 4 & Fig. 2).

Extraversion/Sociality Congruence

The Extraversion/Sociality data strongly supports an interaction effect size (Table 5). Where participants show a strong preference for individuals and the situation to match (Fig. 3).

Agreeableness/Intimacy Congruence

The Agreeableness/Intimacy data demonstrates an interaction effect (Table 6) for situations of high Intimacy where agreeable individuals are preferred over non-agreeable individuals. In contrast, low Intimacy situations do not show a strong preference either way (Fig. 4).

Neuroticism/Adversity Congruence

The Neuroticism/Adversity data also strongly supports an interaction effect size (Table 7). They prefer that the person and situation match, yet there is an opposing congruence effect. While neurotic individuals are preferred, the effect is driven by the situation's level of Adversity (Fig. 5).

DISCUSSION

Our primary hypothesis was that people would prefer interacting with individuals whose personalities were congruent with the demands of the situation. Our hypothesis was supported only for Extraversion, which is the most neutral trait concerning the relative desirability of introversion versus extraversion. Our hypothesis was not supported for Conscientiousness, where participants preferred being with dependable people regardless of the situational demands. In addition, for Neuroticism, the predicted congruence effect was reversed. People preferred more neurotic people in high-adversity situations and less neurotic people in low-adversity situations. What, then, are the implications of these findings?

Person Driven Attention

Overall, participants' preferences seemed to be driven more by personality traits than situational characteristics. There was no case where people preferred a situation (e.g., low Adversity) regardless of the person they would be with. Possible explanations of this finding regarding the pairings are further discussed in this study's "Limitations" section.

The Importance of Desirability

The data demonstrates expected congruence in Extraversion. The person-situation matching drove participants' preferences. Participants desired to be with extraverted individuals in situations of "high Sociality" but not when the situation did not call for it. In those situations, participants preferred to be with a more introverted individual. It

seems logically agreeable that those who find themselves in social situations expect to be with those considered more sociable. Additionally, although a desire for a more introverted individual is unexpected, in a situation that lacks high energy or sociability, one might not want to deal with a highly social individual who may wish to turn a non-social situation into a social one.

The Puzzle of Neuroticism

The results for Neuroticism are somewhat surprising. Participants demonstrated a trait x situation demand interaction, but it was in the incongruent direction. This means that, like extraversion, participants wanted the person and situation to match (I.E., Neurotic with high Adversity and vice versa). Initially, it seems paradoxical that one would want a neurotic person in a situation with high Adversity. In hindsight, we can speculate that people want someone more likely to be sensitive and anxious in stressful situations, as these people will not dismiss the stress but will instead seek to cope with it.

Limitations

This study's primary limitation is the words used to represent the two poles of the traits. Although the word “unconventional" is a common way to represent Openness to experience, it may have had a more negative connotation in the context of choosing a person to be with, particularly in work and collaborative situations. Indeed, overall, people preferred conventional people in situations characterized by high and low intellect, although this effect was much more substantial in low intellect situations.

Future Directions

Based on our findings, one crucial future direction is to use different words to represent the Big Five traits, particularly Openness and Neuroticism. If we find reversals to the results reported here, it suggests that research in this area needs to be carefully guided by the nuances in the meanings of different words. Otherwise, researchers may be able to control their results through their word choice. Therefore, it is crucial to be able to replicate findings in this area across different specific word choices to represent the Big Five constructs.

Conclusions

The view that people prefer to interact with individuals whose personality is consistent with the demands of the situation was supported, but only for the traits of Extraversion and Neuroticism. For Neuroticism, the effect was in the direction opposite to our prediction. The person's characteristics primarily drove the participants' preferences for the remaining three dimensions. Wherein the desirable pole of the dimension is generally preferred. However, this effect was more substantial when the desirable pole was consistent with the situational demands. As is typical in research, our results provide some answers to the question that motivated this research. It is just that the answers are not as simple as we would like.

Table 1

Means & Standard Deviations of the Preference Ratings Across 5x2x2 Design

Condition	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low Openness/Low Intellect	4.653	0.553
Low Openness/High Intellect	3.904	0.598
High Openness/Low Intellect	3.096	0.642
High Openness/High Intellect	3.563	0.633
Low Conscientiousness/Low Duty	3.551	0.731
Low Conscientiousness/High Duty	3.159	0.684
High Conscientiousness/Low Duty	4.379	0.766
High Conscientiousness/High Duty	4.327	0.546
Low Extraversion/Low Sociality	4.324	1.2
Low Extraversion/High Sociality	3.176	0.565
High Extraversion/Low Sociality	3.454	0.828

High Extraversion/High Sociality	4.443	0.502
Low Agreeableness/Low Intimacy	3.738	0.507
Low Agreeableness/High Intimacy	3.343	0.776
High Agreeableness/Low Intimacy	3.802	0.503
High Agreeableness/High Intimacy	4.252	0.568
Low Neuroticism/Low Adversity	4.003	0.769
Low Neuroticism/High Adversity	3.454	0.626
High Neuroticism/Low Adversity	3.777	0.798
High Neuroticism/High Adversity	4.051	0.51

Note. The 5x2x2 design consists of the 5 trait pairings by trait bidirectionality by situation bidirectionality.

Table 2

Summary of the Bayesian 5 x 2 x 2 Repeat Measures ANOVA

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	7.512×10^{-192}	1.000
P + S + T + P ✻ S + P ✻ T + S ✻ T + P ✻ S ✻ T	1.000	$1.331\times10^{+191}$
P + S + T + P ✻ T + S ✻ T	1.214×10^{-134}	$1.617\times10^{+57}$
P + S + T + P ✻ S + P ✻ T + S ✻ T	1.286×10^{-135}	$1.712\times10^{+56}$
S + T + S ✻ T	1.057×10^{-146}	$1.407\times10^{+45}$
P + S + T + S ✻ T	7.941×10^{-148}	$1.057\times10^{+44}$
P + S + T + P ✻ S + S ✻ T	6.732×10^{-149}	$8.962\times10^{+42}$
P + S + T + P ✻ T	6.087×10^{-156}	$8.104\times10^{+35}$
P + S + T + P ✻ S + P ✻ T	5.415×10^{-157}	$7.209\times10^{+34}$
P + T + P ✻ T	1.601×10^{-157}	$2.132\times10^{+34}$

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Note. We are showing the best 10 out of 19 models.

Note. Let P=Person, S=Situation, & T=Trait

Table 3

(Openness) Model Comparison

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	4.130×10^{-46}	1
Person + Situation + Person ✻ Situation	1	$2.422\times10^{+45}$
Person	1.017×10^{-27}	$2.463\times10^{+18}$
Person + Situation	9.720×10^{-28}	$2.354\times10^{+18}$
Situation	3.945×10^{-46}	0.955

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Table 4

(Conscientiousness) Model Comparison

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	1.547×10^{-22}	1
Person + Situation + Person ✻ Situation	0.936	$6.049\times10^{+21}$
Person + Situation	0.062	$4.004\times10^{+20}$
Person	0.002	$1.590\times10^{+19}$
Situation	3.720×10^{-21}	24.051

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Table 5

(Extraversion) Model Comparison

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	1.948×10^{-34}	1
Person + Situation + Person ✻ Situation	1	$5.134\times10^{+33}$
Person	1.208×10^{-34}	0.62
Situation	3.153×10^{-35}	0.162
Person + Situation	1.976×10^{-35}	0.101

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Table 6

(Agreeableness) Model Comparison

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	3.803×10^{-21}	1
Person + Situation + Person ✻ Situation	1	$2.630\times10^{+20}$
Person	3.353×10^{-12}	$8.817\times10^{+8}$
Person + Situation	5.119×10^{-13}	$1.346\times10^{+8}$
Situation	5.217×10^{-22}	0.137

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Table 7

(Neuroticism) Model Comparison

Models	P(M|data)	BF_{10}
Null model (incl. subject and random slopes)	4.316×10^{-12}	1
Person + Situation + Person ✻ Situation	1	$2.317\times10^{+11}$
Person	7.092×10^{-12}	1.643
Person + Situation	5.719×10^{-12}	1.325
Situation	3.685×10^{-12}	0.854

Note. All models include subject and random slopes for all repeated measures factors.

Figure 1

(Openness) Descriptives plots

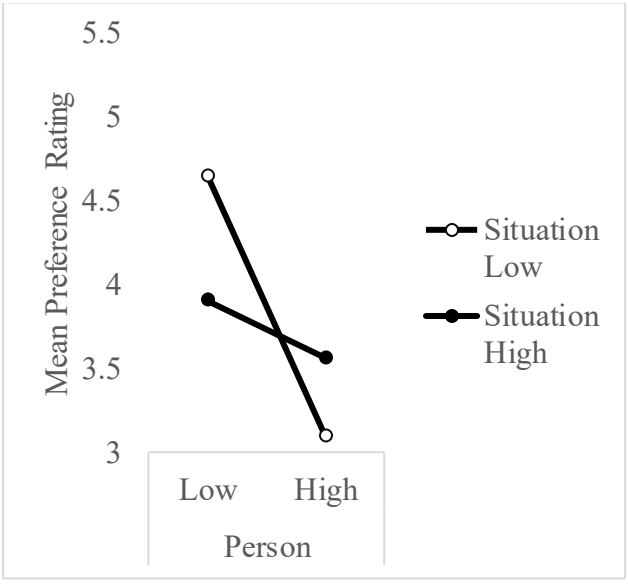


Figure 2

(Conscientiousness) Descriptives plots

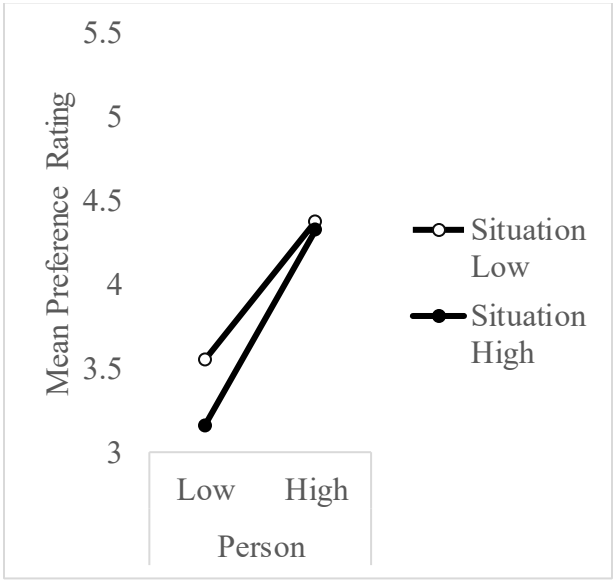


Figure 3

(Extraversion) Descriptives plots

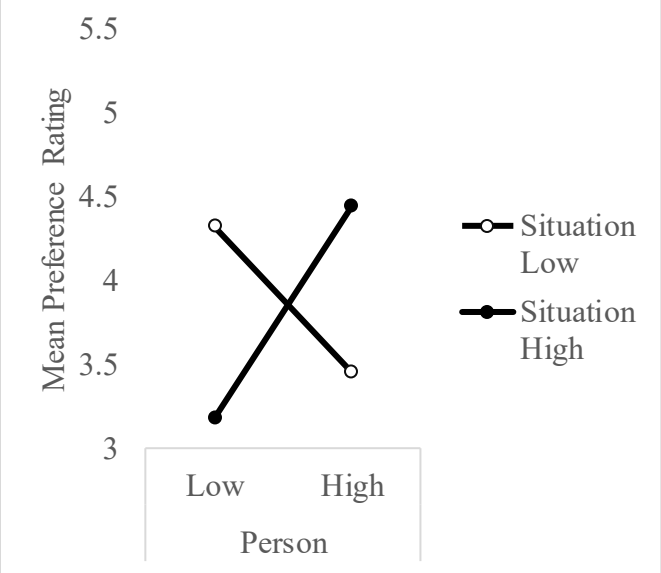


Figure 4

(Agreeableness) Descriptives plots

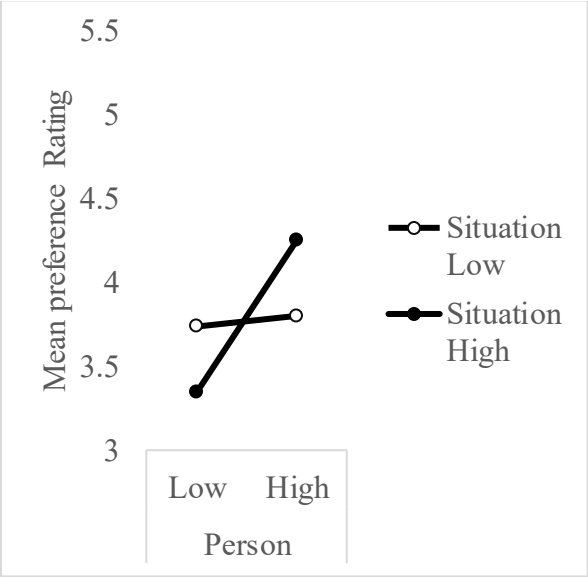
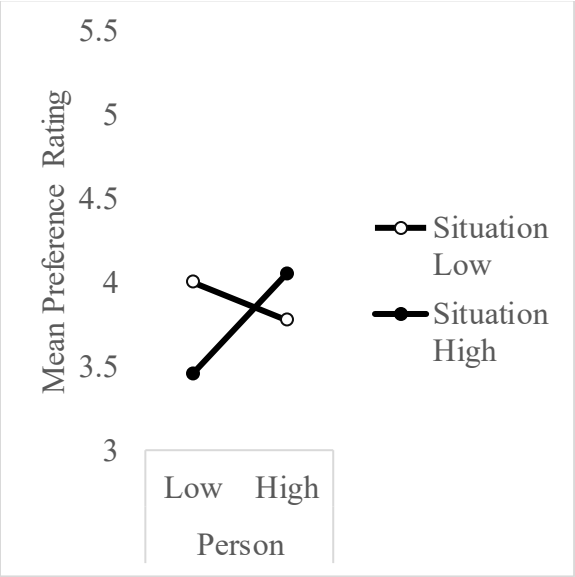


Figure 5

(Neuroticism) Descriptives plots



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