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Investigation of situational strength at work

Abstract

The situational strength theory explains how situational variables guide behavior by contrasting strong situations, which homogenize behavior in a given situation by constraining the expression of individuals' traits, with weak situations in which personal characteristics have a more accentuated influence. The only instrument specially designed to examine situational strength is the situational strength at work (SSW) questionnaire by Meyer et al. (2014), which includes four facets: Constraints, clarity, consistency, and consequences. Previous research showed that the main assumptions of the theory (i.e., guiding behavior via environmental cues and thus reducing variance between individuals) were not universally supported by empirical observations. This study investigates possible effects between the four facets (Meyer et al., 2014) and assesses the extent to which they correlate with the compliance scale. It further identifies possible explanations for observed inconsistencies between studies. It is hypothesized that a positive effect of constraints on compliance is mediated by clarity, while the effect of constraints on clarity is mediated by consistency. It is also hypothesized that consequences interacts with clarity and increases the positive effect of clarity on compliance. Results indicated an indirect negative effect of constraints on compliance mediated by clarity, while the effect of constraints on clarity was mediated negatively by consistency. The effect of clarity on compliance showed no interaction with the consequences facet, while both showed main effects: Clarity had a positive effect, and consequences had a negative effect on compliance. Possible explanations of the observed interrelations are discussed.

Keywords: Situational strength, constraints, consistency, clarity, consequences, compliance

Theoretical background

Situational strength—commonly defined as "implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors" (Meyer et al., 2010, p.122)—has been described as one of the most important factors in explaining human behavior at work (Alaybek et al., 2017). Different descriptions (and consequently different assumptions about the actual nature of situational strength) exist regarding the effects of situational strength on behavior (Cooper & Withey, 2009; Dalal et al., 2019; Judge & Zapata, 2015; Keeler et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2020). Situational strength often refers to the restriction of courses of action (Keeler et al., 2019). Restricting possible behaviors leaves a relatively small scope of action corresponding to the desired behavior (Meyer et al., 2020). However, behavior is not steered in one

direction by just restricting undesirable behavior; it is also affected by environmental cues that indicate expected behaviors (Bowling et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2010; Sitzmann et al., 2019). Therefore, situational strength is based on the understanding that behavior is regulated by signaling to the individual what they should and should not do. Prominently strong situations are contrasted with weak ones using the example of a traffic light (e.g., Cooper & Withey, 2009; Meyer et al., 2020; Mischel, 1977, as cited in Dalal et al., 2019). Whereas a green or red light represents a strong situation because it pressures individuals to act according to the cues, a yellow traffic light exemplifies a weak situation where behavior is more dependent on personal characteristics (e.g., daring compared to cautious individuals; Meyer et al., 2014). Thus, while the range of behavioral responses considered appropriate at a red light is limited to stopping before the intersection, the range of proper behavioral responses is broader when the light is yellow because both stopping and continuing could be regarded as acceptable. The proclivities of the individual become increasingly crucial in behavioral responses in a weak situation, and the individual is given a broader scope of action. Situational characteristics that restrict behaviors or provide space for individual preferences and tendencies can be applied to different domains of everyday life (e.g., in the work context, consider the contrast between authoritarian supervisors with laissez-faire leadership; Bowling et al., 2015), as well as to "situational units" (Dalal et al., 2015) or in other words sub-situations (e.g., laws of a nation, company policies, work role, tasks, and events; Dalal et al., 2015; Meyer et al., 2010).

Assumptions about the impact of situational strength are not limited to the level of individual behavior; they also concern collective behavior (Meyer et al., 2020). Multiple individuals can perceive cues in a situation. Thus, situations can provide shared experiences and (shared) affordances between individuals (Bond, 2013; Mischel, 1977, as cited in Meyer et al., 2020). To the extent that cues are perceived and interpreted similarly by different recipients, they would (according to one of the main assumptions of the situational strength literature) result in homogeneous behavior between individuals participating in the same situation and exposed to the same stimuli (Dalal et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2009; Mischel, 1977, as cited in Meyer et al., 2020). From a statistically-oriented perspective, Meyer et al. (2020) argue that homogenization effects of strong situations can be observed via differences in variance patterns. While strong situations should lead to low variance in behavior between subjects because individual differences are attenuated, weak situations should result

in higher variance of behavior between subjects because individual differences may be expressed (Meyer et al., 2010). This framework also applies to the example of the traffic light. The red and green lights can be seen by all traffic participants at an intersection and interpreted in the same way by each at different points in time. This common perception and interpretation is intended to homogenize behavior, ensuring the smooth coordination of all participants in the situation regardless of personal characteristics (Gelfand & Lun, 2013) and resulting in shared knowledge by all road users about what to do and what to prevent. Transferred to the work context, commonly perceived cues should result in standardized work processes by attenuating the influence of individual differences on outcomes like performance.

Derived from the theoretical implications of situational strength, many studies have predicted and investigated the variance-reducing influence of situational strength for various samples in recent years (Keeler et al., 2019). Meta-analyses have examined the extent to which this assumption is tenable. In doing so, Meyer et al. (2014), Bowling et al. (2015), and Keeler et al. (2019) have encountered inconsistencies between predictions and observations. In a meta-analysis, Keeler et al. (2019) even detected that differences in variance between strong and weak situations—if found—are often observed in the contrary direction than postulated, so variance is higher in strong situations. Keeler et al. (2019) suggest that a nuanced examination of situational strength theory itself is necessary before applying the concept in interaction with other variables. One of the main problems is the theoretical conceptualization of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2020; Keeler et al., 2019). Therefore, to develop a well-founded conceptualization, it is necessary to investigate situational strength's operationalization and theoretical design (Meyer et al., 2020; Keeler et al., 2019), which will be realized in this study.

The four facets of situational strength

Meyer et al. (2014) propose four facets to survey the phenomenon of the strength of a situation relatively comprehensively based on the assumption that situational strength is a "function of the unique effects of each facet" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 128). Meyer et al.'s (2014) situational strength at work (SSW) questionnaire has been applied frequently in recent studies (García-Arroyo et al., 2021) testing for the effects of situational strength. It is—according to Meyer et al. (2020)—“the only instrument designed specifically to assess situational strength” (Meyer et al., 2020, p.

89). This conceptualization of situational strength includes clarity, the extent of unambiguously conceivable work-related cues, consistency, the extent to which work-related cues match and do not contradict each other, constraints, the extent to which external cues restrict decisions and behavior, and consequences, the extent to which decision and behavior are related to relevant implications for any significant individual or entity (Meyer et al., 2010). Accordingly, situational strength is a combined function of these four facets of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2020).

The current study follows the recommendations of Meyer et al. (2020) and Keeler et al. (2019), which call for an examination of Meyer et al.'s (2014) conceptualization of situational strength to acquire a theoretical understanding of its operationalization and its effects on behavior. Past studies have used different operationalizations of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2009). In most studies, the construct constraints was used representatively for situational strength (Keeler et al., 2019). Authors often state that traits (if they do not show variance in an outcome) must be suppressed, especially by constraints (Bowling et al., 2015; Keeler et al., 2019). However, other factors that Meyer et al. (2010) defined as crucial to assess situational strength, such as clarity, are neglected in the theoretical derivation (Meyer et al., 2020). Meyer et al. (2014) do not agree with the premise that situational strength can be reduced solely to constraints and they take the view that more facets compose situational strength. This is where the need for a clearer understanding of situational strength conceptualizations becomes apparent. Situational strength is not only about limiting options for action but also about steering behavior in a specific direction (Meyer et al., 2010). The facet constraints alone does not seem to be sufficient to ensure this second aspect. For example, if a novice in a professional field (e.g., nurse or pilot) is only told what not to do, it does not mean that the person has clarity about how to accomplish the task and, therefore, cannot act according to external expectancies. Constraints helps identify what to refrain from, but clarity seems to be essential for understanding how to achieve goals. Meyer et al. (2010) also describe the contribution of each facet to general situational strength through their discussion of clarity and consequences. An individual threatened with consequences if the desired behavior is not performed demonstrates the behavior for different reasons than the person who acts based only on clarified expectations. In both cases, the behavior is nevertheless guided in the desired direction. Additionally, unfulfilled but clear task expectations might increase the probability of consequences (Meyer et al., 2010). The facet

consistency also performs a critical function among the other facets. For situational strength, on the one hand, cues should be compatible with each other; on the other hand, they should be valid across different times and situations (Meyer et al., 2010). However, when cues contradict each other, the discrepancy can lead to uncertainty or ambivalence about responsibilities and expectations (Meyer et al., 2014). Consistency is therefore relevant to unambiguously communicate the required responsibilities (García-Arroyo et al., 2021), a function related to clarity. According to Meyer et al. (2010), because each facet has a unique contribution to overall situational strength, the facets are neither interchangeable nor exclusive but complementary. Meyer et al. (2020) expect that the facets have an additive effect on overall situational strength. Hence, situational strength increases when several facets are highly pronounced (e.g., when expectations are clear and when the implementation of these expectations is linked to consequences).

Still, Meyer et al.'s (2014) SSW scale upholds demanding uncertainties (Meyer et al., 2020; Bowling et al., 2015). The operationalization of situational strength lacks an established procedure. Therefore, variance in the application of the concept can be observed. In addition to differences in the facets that were used (Keeler et al., 2019), the content of the facets was also adjusted to customize them for the current setting and outcome (Dalal et al., 2019). Furthermore, results indicated that divergent effects and antecedents from different facets of situational strength could be derived (Alaybek et al., 2017; Dalal et al., 2019; García-Arroyo et al., 2021). Therefore, Meyer et al. (2020) consider results in the literature that could not confirm the assumptions of the situational strength theory and propose the investigation of various types of interplay between the facets. The current study aims to investigate possible interactions between facets. Clearness about the interaction and operationalization might explain the contradictory results regarding the assumptions in studies (Meyer et al., 2020) and offer new avenues of inquiry for future research. Meyer et al. (2014) tested the extent to which certain constructs show overlaps with their conceptualized four facets of situational strength. This can support the derivation of a model and offer more profound insight into the conceptualization of the facets. The data Meyer et al. (2014) collected suggests that the constraints facet shows an overlap with Hackman and Oldham's (1976) autonomy, the clarity facet has an overlap with the feedback concept of Kluger and DeNisi, (1996), the consistency facet has an overlap with Rizzo, House, and

Lirtzman's (1970) role conflict, and the consequences facet has an overlap with Jackson, Wall, Martin, and Davids' (1993) production responsibility.

Additionally, to the facets proposed by Meyer et al. (2014), the compliance scale will be considered for the present investigation, which tests the extent to which individuals report whether they fulfill perceived expectations. The developed compliance scale will examine the extent of guidance of behavior by the facets of situational strength. Compliance is also literally described as an effect of situational strength in several studies (García-Arroyo et al., 2021; Lee & Dalal, 2016; Smithikrai, 2008). While no literature could be found that empirically tests a conceptualization of compliance in relation to situational strength, authors reference the literature on compliance to describe the effects of situational strength. According to Cialdini and Goldstein (2004), compliance includes the aspect of a "response—acquiescence—to a particular kind of communication—a request" (p. 592), while Neal and Griffin (2006) describe the concept of safety compliance as "core activities that individuals need to carry out to maintain workplace safety," which includes "adhering to standard work procedures" (p. 947). In this context, compliance is defined as the execution of expected behavior derived from the cues of the environment. Compliance is the extent to which individuals align themselves with the guidelines and affordances of the situation when performing their actions. Based on the relationship between participants' compliance scores and constraints, consistency, and consequences, a central assumption of the situational strength theory can be tested, specifically whether strong situations steer the behavior of individuals in the desired direction (Meyer et al., 2010). The current study aims to examine the extent to which the compliance scale shows correlations with the four facets of Meyer et al.'s (2014) SSW operationalization, and it offers a contributing function of this variable in interaction with the facets. The validity of operationalizing outcomes to test the homogenization assumption has been debated in recent years because homogeneity could not consistently serve as an indicator of strong situations (Alaybek et al., 2017; Keeler et al., 2019). In the case of the current study, the compliance scale does not investigate variance between individuals but directly asks participants whether they complied with cues they have been confronted with, allowing a universally applicable questionnaire. It can be surmised that this scale could promote new avenues of inquiry.

As described above, the current study investigates the issue concerning the operationalization and conceptualization of situational strength (Meyer et al., 2020) by

applying the four-facet structure designed by Meyer et al. (2010). The study seeks to offer possible explanations and suggestions for these phenomena, so a model is designed and tested to examine the potential interplay between the four facets of situational strength. Thus, this study contributes to a better understanding of situational strength through empirical work, as recommended by Keeler et al. (2019) and Meyer et al. (2020). Moreover, to examine whether a behavior is in accordance with perceived cues, the impact of strong situations will be investigated on an individual level by considering individuals' compliance as an outcome of situational strength.

Hypotheses and present model

The model proposed below explored the interaction of the four facets and was tested utilizing a cross-sectional survey. Due to the gap in the research regarding the interplay of Meyer et al.'s (2014) four facets of situational strength, no study was found that demonstrated a relationship between the facets of Meyer et al.'s (2014) situational strength. Instead, hypotheses regarding the interrelationships of these facets were derived from findings of similar constructs from previous studies. Even though these constructs have similarities with Meyer et al.'s (2014) facets mentioned above, there are a few relevant differences. For example, the facet consistency, like the variable role conflict, seeks to survey the extent of similarity between relevant sources of information for behavior. However, the two differ in the scope of cues being inquired, such that role conflict asks for role-relevant behavior while consistency refers to more general sources (Meyer et al., 2014).

Constraints – Clarity – Compliance

The first assumption of the theoretical framework of this study is that clarity mediates the relationship between constraints and compliance. Recent studies have already shown that constraints do not necessarily lead to homogeneity in the surveyed outcome (Meyer et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2020). In this study, it is thus assumed that constraints will have no direct effect on compliance because other factors may influence the relationship between constraints and the outcome. Instead, an indirect effect mediated by clarity is assumed. The constraints facet is expected to lead indirectly to compliance by limiting courses of action.

The connection between constraints and clarity might be derived from the relationships between formalization and role ambiguity that have been observed in previous studies. Although the relationship between formalization and constraints has not been explicitly investigated, the two seem to be overlapping concepts based on their conceptualizations. For example, Meyer et al. (2010) consider formal policies, procedures, and external regulations as sources of constraints. Formalization is defined various but is mainly related to the extent of (written) rules concerning processes, policies, and job designs that guide the behavior of employees, and evoke predictability, simplify structures, and reduce the effect of informal influences in the work context (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Baum & Wally, 2003; Bodewes, 2002; Dahlstrom et al., 1996; Pugh et al., 1968). Andrews and Kacmar (2001), for example, define formalization as "the amount of formal rules, policies, and procedures in the organization" (p. 353). Another effect of formalization that illustrates the construct's proximity to constraints is the restriction of individual work processes (Weick, 1979, as cited in Jansen et al., 2006). Thus, the construct of formalization in the work context is highly similar to the facet constraints. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that although the concepts overlap, they inquire partially different contents. Meyers et al.'s (2010) constraints refers to any factor that restricts an individual's actions according to their preferences, whereas formalization investigates guidance by clearly defined rules. Thus, formalization does not evaluate constraints imposed by informal norms but determines the degree of reduction of informal rules.

Furthermore, Rizzo et al.'s (1970) role ambiguity and role clarity, which have been described as similar constructs to Meyer et al.'s (2010) clarity (Alaybek et al., 2017; García-Arroyo et al., 2021), can also be used to infer possible relationships. Rizzo et al. (1970) define role ambiguity as "(1) the predictability of the outcome or reactions to one's behavior and (2) the presence or clarity of behavioral demands, often in the form of inputs from the environment, that serve to guide behavior and provide knowledge that the behavior is appropriate" (pp.155-156). Rizzo et al.'s (1970) definition of role ambiguity thus encompasses, on the one hand, the predictability of consequences of behavior and, on the other hand, clarity about the behavioral requirements conveyed by the environment, steering behavior in one direction. Role ambiguity, therefore, overlaps with Meyer et al.'s (2010) clarity which assesses the extent of availability and comprehensibility of cues regarding work-relevant responsibilities and requirements. Thus, previously explored relationships between

formalization and role ambiguity can be used to investigate interactions between constraints and clarity. Past studies found that a high degree of formalization of work also leads to higher role clarity and reduced role ambiguity, respectively clarity (Podsakoff et al., 1996; Rai, 2016; Rizzo et al., 1970; Wetzels et al., 2000). Further, the appropriation of role clarity has been examined in a processual manner. The literature on employee socialization shows that formalized and structured processes associated with constraints lead to high role clarity (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Jones, 1986; Saks, Uggerslev & Fassina, 2007). Consequently, it is hypothesized that a high degree of constraints in a work situation will increase clarity.

It is assumed that clarity, in turn, positively affects compliance. If someone understands how to act and proceed in their tasks, they will show increased compliance, evidenced by following external expectations derived from environmental cues. Vinodkumar and Bhasi (2010) used similar constructs to show that safety knowledge (in addition to safety motivation) positively predicts safety compliance. Thus, it is hypothesized that the reason individuals show compliance is not because they are constrained in their work environment but because constraints would help them understand what behaviors are necessary to meet expectations and succeed. This aspect is also suggested by constructs similar to compliance. It is assumed that compliance, especially in the work context, overlaps with the construct performance. As described above, the compliance scale is intended to inquire the extent to which individuals align their behavior with the cues that convey expectations. In the occupational context, these will probably be primarily performance expectations. However, they may also include expectations about how to perform, how a task should be executed, or how to communicate with colleagues (i.e., the choice of work processes, steps to proceed, and whom to consult). Performance is differentiated in occupational and organizational psychology literature into role-related performance and performance beyond the role, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) or voluntary behavior (Hoffman et al., 2007). The distinction between task performance and contextual performance frequently differentiates types of performance (Borman & Motowidlo 1993, as cited in Meyer et al. 2009; Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Motowidlo & van Scotter, 1994). Compliance, however, encompasses all possible work-related expectations of an individual and includes both task performance and contextual performance. Previous research has demonstrated that role clarity, or low role ambiguity, is related to improved performance (Caillier, 2016; Gilboa et al., 2008;

Mañas et al., 2018; Srikanth & Jomon, 2013; Zhou et al., 2016). The literature on the socialization of newcomers to a field of work also suggests this procedural link. According to Bauer et al. (2007), structured socialization in the work context according to predefined rules first leads to role clarity and, consequently, higher performance during the socialization process. Also, Saks et al. (2007) report similar results in which institutionalized socialization tactics (or formalized socialization processes) first negatively affect role ambiguity and consequently favor job performance. If the above-described overlaps between formalized work processes and constraints, between role clarity/role ambiguity and clarity, and between performance and compliance can be assumed, this would also suggest the proposed mediation in which constraints lead to clarity and clarity leads to compliance. Accordingly, high compliance is not produced because an individual is constrained but because the constraints lead to clarity about one's role and work processes, which in turn evoke increased compliance. Thus, it is assumed that the effect of constraints on compliance is not a direct one but is mediated via clarity.

H1: The positive effect of constraints on compliance is mediated by increased clarity.

Constraints – Consistency – Clarity

Further, it is hypothesized that the effect of constraints on clarity is not direct either; rather, the relationship is mediated via consistency. The sheer amount and extent of guidelines, respectively constraints, do not lead directly to clarity but to consistency by regulating conditions, enabling similarity of responsibilities and requirements over time and situations, and ensuring their compatibility. As Meyer et al. (2010) point out, multiple cues, if inconsistent, need not result in clarity (e.g., if two managers formulate different priorities). However, if, for example, it is explicitly defined which individuals are authorized to give instructions and if it is formally specified how to execute tasks, there will be less inconsistency between various cues concerning the task. According to Meyer et al. (2010), consistency is decreased when information from relevant individuals, policies, and external guidelines contradicts each other. Rather than leaving decisions to the individual and broadening sources and quantity of cues to consider, a formally defined rule system will increase the compatibility between requirements (e.g., company policy, industry norms, and government regulations; Meyer et al., 2010). Consistency indicates that cues should offer predictability over

time and not contradict each other (Meyer et al., 2010). Consistency results from an organization being highly structured, respectively constrained (Perrow 1986, as cited in Bresman & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2013, p. 1125). Accordingly, a system of rules in an organization or concerning one's job is more consistent the more comprehensive it is. Therefore, cues change only when written rules, procedures, and objectives change, thus staying consistent over time and situations. This could be especially valid for rules and constraints that affect not just the individual but also other employees, which results in a shared perception that may prevent inconsistent cues. If different individuals are aware of the rules, they are less likely to convey cues inconsistent with formally conveyed cues (Meyer et al., 2010). Bond (2013) also indicates that guidelines and regulations become relevant when people need a consistent understanding of processes to coordinate work. Accordingly, the consistency of cues is expected to be affected by regulating situations to create a shared perception between individuals; thus, the purpose of constraints is to standardize work processes to produce consistency across different situations. Consequently, it is assumed that a high degree of constraints is associated with higher consistency. The existing literature on relationships between similar constructs also suggests an effect of constraints on consistency. Meyer et al. (2014) showed that Rizzo et al.'s (1970) role conflict overlaps with the consistency facet, while the concept of formalization seems to overlap with constraints. Minnick (2013), Podsakoff et al. (1996), and Rai (2016) found that formalization negatively relates to role conflict. Additionally, the literature on the occupational socialization of newcomers shows that structured and formalized working conditions—associated with constraints—reduce role conflict, respectively consistency (Saks et al., 2007). Transferred to the facets of constraints and consistency, it is hypothesized that the facet constraints positively relate to consistency.

Increased consistency, in turn, is expected to lead to higher clarity by reducing the ambiguity of conflicting cues. Meyer et al. (2010) emphasize that cues conveyed regarding responsibilities and requirements should be conveyed unambiguously to lead to high clarity. This would mean that the consistency of cues contributes to increased clarity. In a weak, unconstrained work environment allowing for inconsistency, a person may be confronted with incompatible demands (e.g., two urgent tasks but only one of which may be completed in the allotted time) and therefore be uncertain about how to behave. It is left to individual discretion to assess priorities. The individual in this situation has less clarity about the environment's expectations,

and it could be expected that different individuals would show variable behavior. In the occupational context, for example, consistency would lead to clarity when responsibilities are regulated by explicit rules, increasing the probability that cues contradicting these rules will not pose a conflict for the individual. If people are instructed to stop operating a machine in any case when a warning light flashes, they will likely follow this instruction even if the supervisor has previously noted that the task is urgent. The individual has clarity about the behavior that should be performed or avoided. Similarly, this pattern holds when explicit regulations prevent people from performing a task, for example, because they lack a necessary training certificate. Even if asked by a co-worker, in the presence of such regulation, the individual is less likely to perform the task compared to a weak situation, where readiness to complete the task may be based on individual discretion and the autonomous assessment of one's ability. Therefore, the lack of constraints lowers the consistency of influences in different situations, making a convincing and indisputable decision difficult. At the same time, regulations help the individual to assess the importance and relevance of different cues and derive clear expectations from them. According to Meyer et al. (2014), consistency and clarity have a very high correlation. Rizzo et al. (1970) also found correlations between similar constructs (Meyer et al., 2014), namely role ambiguity and role conflict (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role conflict and role ambiguity are often assessed parallel as job demands, and no literature could be found in which a causal effect of role conflict on role ambiguity was tested. In this study, it is assumed that a high degree of consistency leads to a high degree of clarity. The effect described above suggests that the positive effect of constraints on clarity is not a direct one; instead, it is mediated via consistency. Thus, extensive constraints do not directly lead to more clarity, but because constraints first increase consistency, consequently leading to more clarity. It is assumed that the connection between constraints and clarity is dissolved by considering the facet consistency.

H2: The positive effect of constraints on clarity is mediated by increased consistency.

Clarity – Consequences – Compliance

As formulated in the first hypothesis, it is assumed that high clarity leads to high compliance. However, this effect is suspected to be influenced by a third variable. It is assumed that the existence of high consequences, or “the extent to which decisions or

actions have important positive or negative implications for any relevant person or entity" (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1013), strengthen clarity's effect on compliance. Thus, the facet consequences is expected to interact as a moderator with clarity to have a joint effect on compliance. If an individual has clarity about the environment's expectations, increased compliance will be shown if the situation also fosters a high expectation of consequences. It is expected that the positive effect of clarity on compliance is enhanced by a high degree of consequences, while the positive effect of clarity on compliance is reduced by a low degree of consequences.

The main effect of consequences on compliance has been suggested in several studies in the past. As Bowling et al. (2015) suggest, the existence of an incentive system favors the likelihood that an individual who can expect these rewards will also exhibit the expected behavior. Accordingly, this can be applied to the relationship between consequences and compliance, as compliance is defined as aligning behavior to perceived expectations. Consequences (important positive or negative implications; Meyer et al., 2010) thus promote behavior alignment. This relationship is also suggested by studies that survey the effects of rewards and punishment on compliance. For example, Liang et al. (2013) observed positive effects of punishment expectancy and reward expectancy on compliance, although they identified moderators related to the effect. The study showed that the effect of punishment expectancy on compliance is significant even with different degrees of the moderator "prevention focus" (of the employee). At the same time, reward expectancy only influenced compliance for employees with a high promotion focus (i.e., who report a high need for growth and development). Another study focusing on reward and punishment expectancy showed that punishment positively influences compliance (Liu, Liang, Wang & Xue, 2022). However, as Liang et al. (2013) note, the expectation of rewards elicits compliance only under certain conditions, specifically when individuals reported lower commitment. Even if studies on the effects of reward-punishment systems provide differentiated results, there is a tendency for a reward-punishment system to influence the behavior of individuals. The effects of consequences on behavior have also been reported outside the literature in occupational and organizational psychology. For example, learning theories, such as operant conditioning by Skinner or Bandura, assume behaviors are influenced by experiencing or observing consequences. These forms of behavioral influence result in extrinsically motivated behavior (Heckhausen, 1989, as cited in Kirchler, 2011, p. 321).

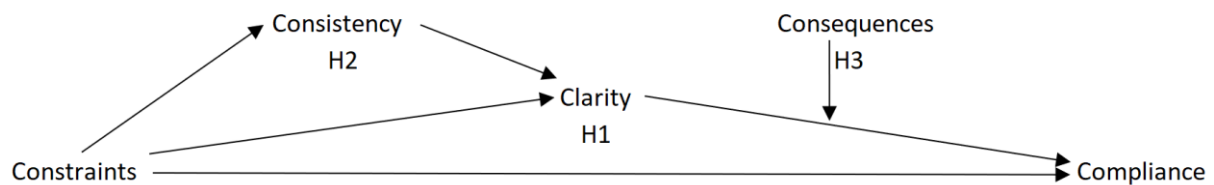
Consequently, it is assumed that high consequences is associated with increased compliance. As described above, it is assumed that consequences will interact with clarity to affect compliance. It is assumed that a situation in which a behavior is associated with high consequences will amplify the effect of clarity on compliance and that the effect of clarity on compliance will not be constant.

H3: Consequences will moderate the relationship between clarity and compliance such that the relationship will be stronger under high consequences than under low consequences.

Taken together, the hypotheses contain two assumptions about mediation and one about moderation, with embedded facets from Meyer et al. (2010) and compliance as an outcome of the process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Overall model of the interplay between the four facets of Meyer et al. (2014) and compliance



Method

Design

A cross-sectional design was used to test the hypotheses. A questionnaire containing the operationalizations in interest was distributed through an online panel provider (Respondi AG; see, e.g., Daniel & Sonnentag, 2014) to participants who were at least 18 years old and working at least 30 hours a week. Initially, a factor analysis was conducted using principal axis factoring as an extraction method with 25 maximum iterations for convergence. Varimax rotation method was selected, and the Anderson-Rubin method was used to calculate factor scores. The PROCESS macro version v4.0 (Hayes) for SPSS version 26 was used to evaluate the relationship between the concepts. Mediation analyses were performed to test the proposed mediations—that is, the mediation of the effects of constraints on compliance by clarity and of constraints

on clarity by consistency. In Heyes' PROCESS macro, model 4 was chosen for mediation analyses. The number of bootstrap samples was set to 5,000, the confidence intervals to 95%, and the Davidson-MacKinnon method was selected for heteroscedasticity-consistent inferences. Also, the options “standardized effects” and centering for “all variables that define products” were chosen together with a significance level of $p < .05$. With the same macro and default settings (except for the selection of model 1 for moderations) the moderation analysis was carried out to check whether the facets clarity and consequences have an interactive effect on the outcome compliance.

Sample

The sample consisted of 77 women and 134 men ($N = 211$ total), with a mean age of $M = 43.09$ —ranging between 19 and 66 years—and $SD = 12.14$. All were working in Germany. Regarding education levels, four participants reported that their highest completed education was mandatory school, 65 participants reported apprenticeship completion, 23 reported technical school or business school graduation, 41 reported high school graduation, 28 reported academic bachelor's degree completion, and 50 participants reported academic diploma or master's degree completion. Regarding organization sizes, 31 participants reported that they worked for an organization with between 11 to 50 employees, 57 participants reported working in an organization with 51 to 250 employees, and 123 participants reported that their organization consisted of more than 250 employees. Participants reported an average of $M = 69.8$ employees in their department with $SD = 300.15$. Reported tenure ranged between 0 to 45 years, with $M = 12.62$ and $SD = 10.38$. Concerning leadership responsibility, 59 participants reported leadership responsibility, and 152 participants reported no leadership responsibility. Regarding the organization's business sector, two participants reported working in the agricultural sector or primary production, 54 participants reported working in the industrial or manufacturing industries, 129 reported working in the service sector, and 26 participants reported working in the information sector. Furthermore, average weekly hours have been reported with $M = 38.78$ and $SD = 2.70$. Participants were screened out if they reported that they were not employed, worked less than 30 hours per week, or were younger than 18. Also, participants were screened out when the response behavior indicated unconscientious processing. This habit was evaluated by the questionnaire platform Unipark through the variable

“quality,” ranging between .00 to 1. The “quality” variable indicates the time spent responding to the items on the questionnaire per page relative to the sample. While a score of .50 indicates average processing time, a score of .25 indicates that the participant spent half the time responding to the items relative to the sample average. Participants who scored below .20 were screened out to consider conscientious responses. Participation in the study was voluntary. They could complete the questionnaire via mobile devices or a computer with access to web browsers (e.g., smartphones, desktop computers, tablets). An online panel provider distributed a web link to registered individuals that led to the digital questionnaire. The online panel provider charged €2.52 per participant.

Measurement

Facets of situational strength at work

As the only instrument for the survey of situational strength, the SSW scale proposed by Meyer et al. (2014) has been applied. Since the sample consists of individuals living in German-speaking countries, the items were translated into German. Consequently, the facets constraints, clarity, consistency, and consequences were surveyed together with compliance. Participants in the study indicated the extent to which the statements of the items applied to their situation on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “not at all” to “completely”. Constraints ($\alpha = .915$) was inquired, for example, with the item “on this job, an employee’s freedom to make decisions is limited by other people” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020). One example of an item that measured the facet clarity ($\alpha = .923$) was “on this job, precise information is provided about how to properly do one’s job” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020). The item “on this job, different sources of work information are always consistent with each other” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020) is an example from the consistency subscale ($\alpha = .888$), while the item “on this job, very serious consequences occur when an employee makes an error” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020) is an item from the consequences scale ($\alpha = .830$).

Compliance

In order to measure compliance, a compliance scale was developed comprising seven items. The new scale is based partly on the safety compliance scale by Vinodkumar and Bhasi (2010), from which two items were adapted. A Likert-type scale was used with responses between 1 ([almost] never) and 5 ([almost] always) to indicate the level of agreement with each item: (1) I follow rules and guidelines in performing my work;

(2) I deviate from prescribed work processes based on my years of work experience (R¹); (3) I process tasks in ways that do not conform to rules (R); (4) I follow established guidelines in my work; (5) I try to perform my tasks using methods other than those expected of me (R); (6) I act as my colleagues would like me to act; (7) I act as my superiors would like me to act. The scale has acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .747$ (Blanz 2015). A complete list of items used can be found in the appendix.

Results

Two mediation analyses and one moderation analysis were conducted to test the proposed model. Table 1 displays the intercorrelations of the facets of situational strength and compliance. In the context of the presented model, it is important that the facets constraints ($r = -.21, p = .002$), consistency ($r = .30, p < .001$), and clarity ($r = .34, p < .001$) demonstrated significant correlations with the construct compliance, while consequences ($r = .10, p = .136$) did not show a significant correlation with compliance. It is also noteworthy that the constraints facet had a negative correlation with the facet consistency ($r = -.38, p < .001$) and clarity ($r = -.30, p < .001$), and it was not correlated with consequences ($r = .10, p = .148$).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Constraints	2.695	.851	(.915)				
2. Consistency	3.482	.747	-.381***	(.888)			
3. Clarity	3.619	.857	-.302***	.817***	(.923)		
4. Consequences	2.875	.743	.100	.227**	.203**	(.838)	
5. Compliance	3.851	.607	-.209**	.297***	.339***	-.103	(.847)

Note: Each variable is measured on a 1–5 Likert-type scale. All significance tests are two-tailed.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

¹ "R" stands for a reversed item of which the score on the Likert scale runs in the opposite direction and whose scores are recoded accordingly for the evaluation.

Factor analysis

The seven items were subjected to principal axis factor analysis with oblique rotation (direct oblim). According to the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure, the sample is suitable for the analysis ($KMO = .769$). All KMO values of the items were higher than .65. From the eigenvalues of the factors, two factors were extracted that exceeded the Kaiser's criterion of 1, and together, they explained 51.53% of the variance. The scree plot (Figure 2) also confirmed the suitability of two factors.

Figure 2

Scree plot of factor analysis for the compliance scale

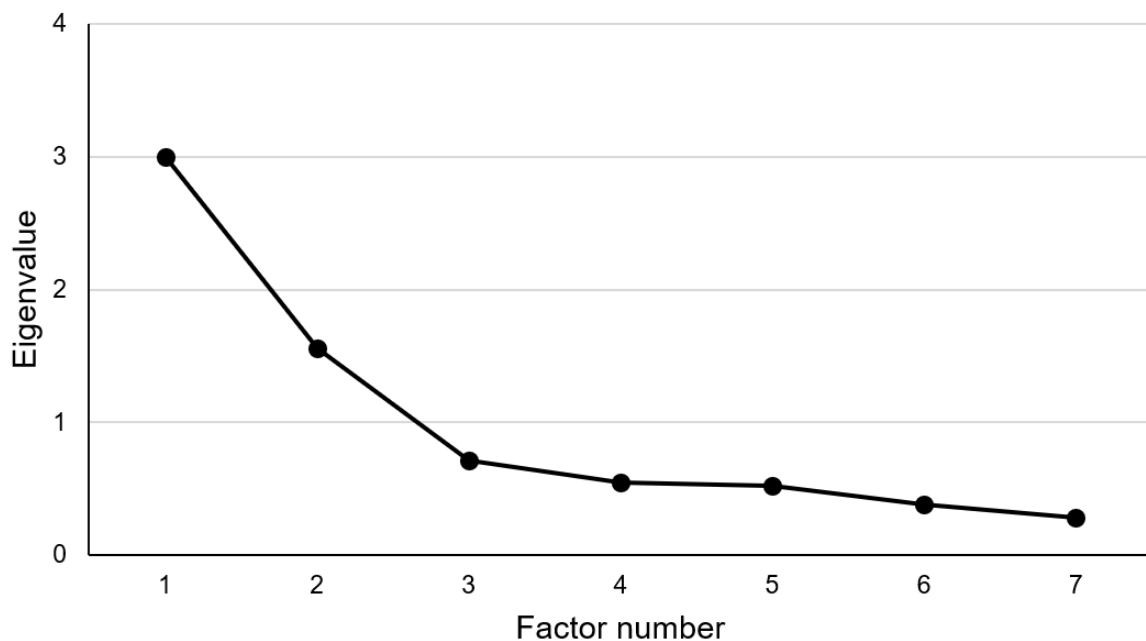


Table 2 shows the factor loadings after rotation. Based on the items clustered on the same factor, the first factor was labeled compliance to expectations, and the second was noncompliance to expectations.

Table 2*Factor analysis for the compliance scale*

Item	Rotated factor loadings	
	Compliance to expectations	Noncompliance to expectations
I follow established guidelines in my work	.821	-.169
I follow rules and guidelines in performing my work	.795	-.212
I act as my superiors would like me to act	.748	-.074
I act as my colleagues would like me to act	.574	-.023
I deviate from prescribed work processes based on my years of work experience	-.044	.713
I try to perform my tasks using methods other than those expected of me	-.034	.672
I process tasks in ways that do not conform to rules	-.306	.525

Because the factor “noncompliance to expectations” represented the reversed items of the factor “compliance to expectations,” the items will compose the overall compliance scale; however, the items of the second factor will be recoded.

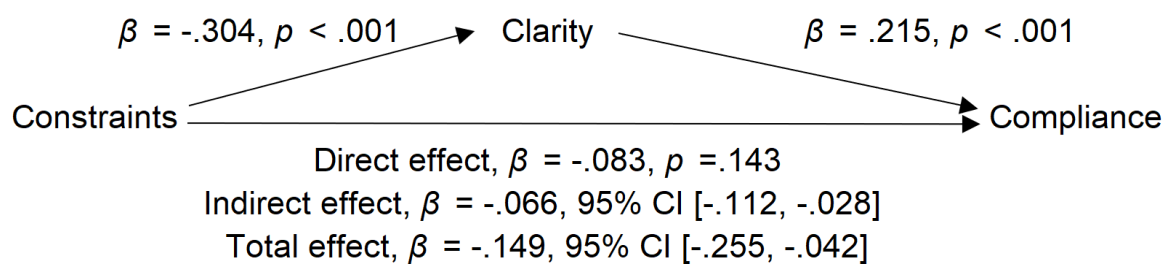
Mediation analyses

Hypothesis 1: The positive effect of constraints on compliance is mediated by increased clarity

A mediation analysis was performed to test whether constraints acted as a predictor of compliance and whether the (indirect) effect was mediated by clarity (H1). There was a significant indirect negative effect of constraints on compliance through clarity, $\beta = -.066$, 95% CI $[-.112; -.028]$ (see Figure 3). When Clarity was included as a mediator, the model explained 13% of the variance in the outcome; however, the total effect path with constraints on compliance as the predictor explained 5% of the variance in compliance ($p < .01$).

Figure 3

Effects of Constraints on Compliance via Clarity



The data supported the assumption of a complete mediation of the effect of constraints on compliance via clarity. Contrary to expectations, however, constraints had a negative effect on clarity. In the total effect model, without considering clarity, constraints had a negative effect on compliance, whereas clarity had a positive effect on compliance, as expected. Thus, the data confirmed mediation, but partly in the opposite direction predicted in hypothesis 1. Therefore, the data did not support the hypothesis that a positive effect of constraints on compliance would be mediated by increased clarity.

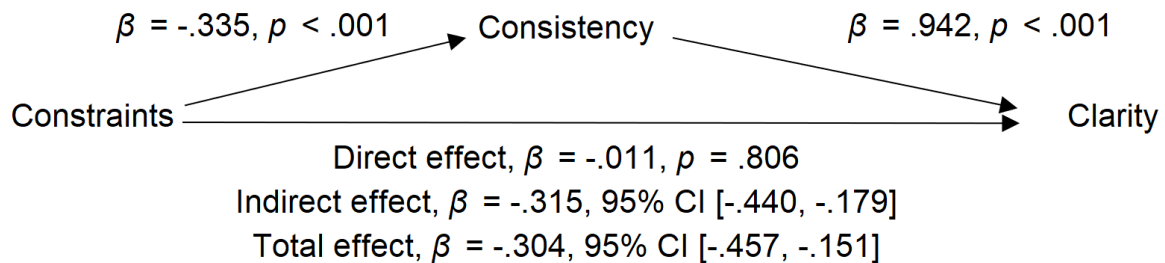
Hypothesis 2: The positive effect of constraints on clarity is mediated by increased consistency

A mediation analysis was performed to test whether constraints acted as a predictor for clarity and whether the direct path was mediated by consistency (H2). There was a

significant indirect effect of constraints on clarity through consistency, $\beta = -.315$, 95% CI [-0.440, -0.179] (see Figure 4). The model in which consistency was included as a mediator explained 67% of the variance in the outcome clarity. Meanwhile, the direct path with constraints on clarity as the predictor explained 9% of the variance in the outcome compliance ($p < .001$).

Figure 4

Effects of constraints on clarity via consistency



There was support for the assumption that consistency fully mediated the effect of constraints on clarity. However, contrary to expectations, constraints had a negative effect on clarity in the total effect model when not considering consistency and an indirect negative effect via consistency in the indirect effect model. As expected, consistency has a positive effect on clarity. Thus, the data confirm mediation, but in the opposite direction than predicted in hypothesis 2. There was no support for the hypothesis that a positive effect of constraints on clarity is mediated by increased consistency.

Moderation analysis

Hypothesis 3: Consequences will moderate the relationship between clarity and compliance such that the relationship will be stronger under high consequences than under low consequences.

A moderation analysis was used to test whether a potential interaction between clarity and consequences significantly predicted compliance. The analysis did not show that

consequences significantly moderated the effect between clarity and compliance ($p = .098$) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Moderation analysis of the interaction of clarity and consequences for predicting compliance

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
Constant	3.86	.040	3.79	3.94	< .001
Clarity (centered)	.26	.044	.22	.87	< .001
Consequences (centered)	-.14	.059	-.25	-.02	.022
Clarity x Consequences	-.10	.058	-.21	.02	.098

While the interaction between clarity and consequences was not significant in their effect on compliance, two main effects of the predictors on the compliance outcome can be inferred. Unlike the bivariate correlation, the data demonstrated that consequences was marginally significant as a predictor of compliance ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .05$). Still, contrary to expectation, consequences had a negative effect on compliance. The data did not support the hypothesis that consequences moderates the relationship between clarity and compliance such that the relationship will be stronger under high consequences than under low consequences.

Figure 5

Overall results of the mediation and moderation analyses

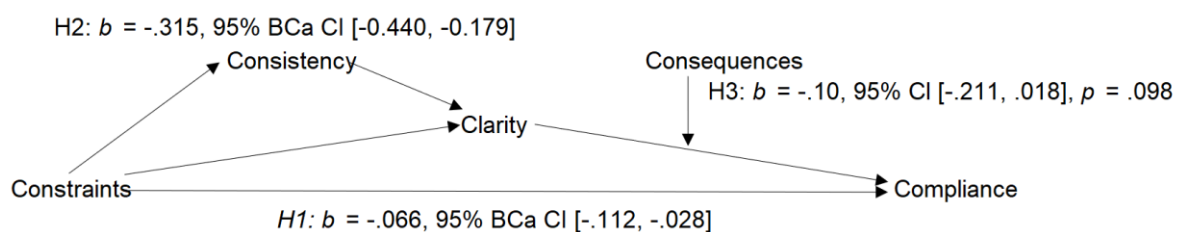


Figure 5 shows all the main results. While only the mediation in hypotheses H1 and H2 could be supported but in the opposite direction, hypothesis H3 could not be supported by the data.

Discussion

In the current study, a model of the interplay between situational strength facets and the outcome compliance was hypothesized and tested with mediation and moderation analyses. The construct compliance was implemented as an outcome that can provide information about the extent to which individuals report a behavioral orientation in alignment with external cues without relying on homogenization effects to prove the guiding effect of situational strength. The analyses showed that the proposed model was only partially supported by the data (Figure 5).

The mediation analysis results did not support hypothesis 1, which posited the extent to which a positive effect of constraints on compliance is mediated via clarity. Constraints was predicted to affect compliance positively in the total effect model. When clarity was included, the effect was expected to be mediated via this facet. Although the data supported a total effect of constraints on compliance, which was also mediated with the inclusion of clarity, contrary to expectations, constraints had a negative effect on clarity. As a result, it had a negative indirect effect on compliance. Clarity had a positive effect on compliance, as expected. The analysis demonstrated that a high degree of constraints was counterproductive when it comes to eliciting compliance in the work context. Constraints cause this effect by reducing clarity (i.e., the understanding of work-related responsibilities or requirements), which in turn counteracts the positive effect of this clarity on compliance.

The investigation of the second hypothesis showed a more differentiated picture of how this negative effect of constraints on clarity occurs. This hypothesis explored the extent to which an assumed positive effect of constraints on clarity was mediated by consistency. The mediation analysis results only partially supported the assumptions in hypothesis 2. While the effect of constraints on clarity was mediated by consistency, the total effect and the indirect effect of constraints on clarity were negative, contrary to expectations. It was predicted that a high degree of constraints would lead to a higher consistency of cues with which an individual is confronted within the work context; however, the mediation analysis showed that a high degree of constraints reduced the consistency of cues regarding work-related responsibilities or requirements. Constraints counteracted the positive effect of consistency on clarity by having a negative effect on consistency, as indicated by the data.

The models tested for hypotheses 1 and 2 also offer explanations for observations of inconsistent results on the assumptions of situational strength theory.

As Keeler et al. (2019) described, constraints were often used as a proxy for situational strength. However, constraints do not seem to affect the outcome compliance directly. In summary, the data indicates that constraints reduce compliance behavior by decreasing consistency (and thus also clarity about the tasks and the own role). The interplay identified in the mediation analyses supported Meyer et al.'s (2020) call to survey situational strength considering all facets.

Furthermore, the present study tested whether a positive effect from clarity on outcome compliance operates via an interaction with consequences as a moderator. It was predicted that a high degree of consequences, the extent to which decisions have important implications for individuals, would enhance the effect of clarity on compliance. The moderation analysis showed that the facets clarity and consequences did not interact in their effect on outcome compliance. Still, while the analysis showed that both facets had a main effect on compliance, consequences had a negative effect and not the expected positive effect on compliance. Conversely, clarity had a positive effect on compliance, as expected. The result indicates that a high degree of consequences associated with an individual's actions in the work context reduces compliance but does not regulate the effect of clarity on compliance. Thus, if an individual knows what to do and has clear consciousness about their role (i.e., a high degree of clarity), the effect of this clarity on executing this role is not dependent on a threat of negative consequences or expectations of positive consequences.

The results indicated that constraints and consequences might be misjudged in their role of guiding behavior. Contrary to expectations, they counteracted the individual's execution of perceived expectations, respectively compliance. The study's results contradicted one of the main assumptions of situational strength theory, according to which individuals are guided by being confronted with cues that indicate the desirability of behavior.

The literature offers possible explanations for the results of the analyses. Meyer et al. (2014) and Collins et al. (2019) have already attempted to relate observations contrary to the theory of situational strength to the self-determination theory (SDT) in recent studies. According to SDT, controlled motivation, in contrast to autonomous motivation, is evoked by the experience of being pushed to behave in a certain way, which negatively affects performance because the locus of causality is perceived as external (Cerasoli et al., 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2008, 2011; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kanat-Maymon & Reizer, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Since cues in strong situations indicate

how an individual should behave and can restrict freedom of choice, strong situations may produce the effect described in the SDT literature. According to Meyer et al. (2014), strong situations could be perceived by individuals depending on individual differences partly as a "threat to self-determination" (p.1036), and individuals could respond with reactance caused by "stress and negative affective reactions stemming from hostility toward the idea of being manipulated" (Meyer et al., 2020, p. 88-89). Meyer et al. (2014) also examined whether situational strength could be represented by a two-factor model instead of a four-facet structure. In this alternative model, they assigned constraints and consequences to one factor because they would correspond to a "controlled" behavioral influence, according to Deci and Ryan (1987). Meanwhile, clarity and consistency would correspond to an "autonomous" influence. While their data confirmed the four-facet structure, the data from the current study also indicated that the individual facets might have different impacts on outcomes, and a more nuanced investigation is needed. While constraints limit behavioral expression and threaten the need for autonomy, consequences may be linked to the so-called corrupting effect of intrinsic motivation. In a meta-analysis, Deci, Ryan, and Koestner (1999) demonstrated that extrinsic rewards could undermine intrinsic motivation. This could mean that a high degree of consequences, which can be understood as external control, could negatively affect individuals' motivation by decreasing their experience of autonomy. Collins et al. (2019) also refer to SDT in their study on situational strength. They examined a possible negative influence of strong situations on performance. The study argued that a strong situation reduces the positive effect of organizational identification on performance and job satisfaction. While on the one hand, they argued in line with the situational strength theory with the reduction of the variance of the variables; on the other hand, they referred to the SDT. Accordingly, strong situations would reduce the possibilities that enable the experience of intrinsic pleasure. Referring to Gagné and Deci (2005), Collins et al. (2019) also argue that strong situations reduce motivation, leading to lower performance.

Further, the positive effects of clarity on compliance and consistency on clarity supported the expectations derived from pertinent literature. The strong negative correlation between role ambiguity and performance (respectively, the positive relationship between clarity and compliance), which Gilboa et al. (2008) found in a meta-analysis, was also supported in the present study. Likewise, the data supported the effect of consistency on clarity, which could be derived from the relationship

between the constructs of role conflict and role ambiguity (Rizzo et al., 1970). In the occupational context, this would mean that knowledge and awareness of one's tasks favor the implementation of behavioral expectations. In order to promote this clarity about one's own tasks, it is important to convey the information with which the individual is confronted without contradictions. For example, communicating priorities regarding the tasks to be processed should align with the communicated corporate policy.

An important point regarding the results contradicting expectations (see Figure 5) may concern the theory about the nature of the facets and their conceptualization. In particular, the facets constraints and consequences seem to need to be more consistent concerning the general conception of situational strength or the definitions of the facets themselves. In particular, constraints seem to be an outstanding feature within the situational strength literature and theory—according to Keeler et al. (2019), constraints is often used as a proxy for situational strength—which seems to demand a deeper theoretical review of the construct. While situational strength is defined as "implicit or explicit cues provided by external entities regarding the desirability of potential behaviors" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 122), constraints is defined as "the extent to which an individual's freedom of decision and action is limited by forces outside his or her control" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 126) and is considered the opposite of autonomy (Meyer et al. 2014). Within the concept of situational strength, constraints thus determines the existence of forces that limit an individual's freedom to make decisions and act freely, thus clarifying the extent to which particular behaviors might be desirable. Therefore, the definition only includes the inquiry about the existence of constraints an employee is confronted with, but—and this seems to be very important—the definition does not specify if a person would like to show behaviors beyond the limiting constraints. In other words, according to the definition, constraints ask to what extent a system of rules (formal or informal) exists that defines a framework for acceptable behavior. The definition does not specify whether the person agrees with this framework or whether this framework corresponds to one's preferences. However, this second aspect (i.e., to what extent a person would like to engage in behaviors that go beyond the limits of the framework and whether these frameworks contradict one's preferences) seems to be partially asked in Meyer et al.'s (2014) items. For example, with the item "on this job, constraints prevent an employee from doing things in his/her own way" (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020). People who respond to this

item thus provide two different information contents. First, whether there are constraints, and second, whether these constraints prevent "the own way" for the work processes. However, it may happen that the "own way" corresponds to the conditions set by the rules so that the preferences can be executed within defined constraints. People for whom this is the case could indicate that they would not agree with this item because their "way" is not restricted by the rules, although they would affirm the existence of constraints. In contrast, another person confronted with the same conditions might prefer other ways of task execution and may agree that their preferred way is constrained. Therefore, it might be that this item asks not only for an assessment of the objective working conditions but also for individual differences regarding one's preferences concerning these conditions. People who agree with this item would consequently not only state that the job is constrained but also that they perceive these constraints negatively because they do not fit with their preferences. This would lead to the fact that individuals who agree with this item would rather have negative associations with the perceived constraints. In contrast, individuals who do not have negative associations with the constraints would not agree with this item. The traffic light example again might offer an illustration of this circumstance. If an individual is asked whether, at an intersection, "a [driver] is prevented from making his or her own decisions," it might be unclear how to interpret the response. Would one assume that the behavior of stopping at an intersection with a red light would be perceived as prevention of "own decision"? Would one assume that a driver would answer this item differently depending on whether they are currently confronted with a green light compared to a red light? Would one assume that the individual would prefer unregulated traffic if responding with an agreement to this item? While it seems at least ambiguous in the traffic light example whether a person perceives guidance as something genuinely negative, the items in the work context have more negative connotations.

In this regard, Meyer et al. (2010) explain that constraints are conceptualized in such a way that they assess the inhibition of "the expression of ability and motivation" (Peters et al., 1982, p. 9, as cited in Meyer et al., 2010, p. 126) and assume that constraints prevent "employees from exercising their own discretion" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 126). This shows that a conceptualization of constraints as a stressor with negative associations might be intended. García-Arroyo et al. (2021) reviewed associations of individual facets of the SSW with burnout. They found that constraint

was positively related to burnout, whereas clarity and consequences were negatively related to burnout. This shows not only that facets can have opposite effects on outcomes, as in the current study, but also that constraints are associated with adverse health outcomes. This view of constraints seems to reiterate past conceptualizations in which the concept was seen as inhibiting circumstances, particularly for performance (Peters & O'Connor, 1980; Gilboa et al., 2008), and accordingly showed a negative relationship with performance. According to Meyer et al. (2020), this negative perspective of constraints in the work context in past studies should be resolved within the SSW conceptualization, where constraints should also cover positive situational conditions for performance (Meyer et al., 2020). The current study indicates that a revision of the conceptualization of constraints could be helpful, especially due to the (indirect) negative effects of constraints on consistency, clarity, and compliance (see Figures 3 and 4). This revision may consider the desired possible positive effects of the variable and give more attention to the aspect of guiding behavior according to external expectations.

The literature on formalization could be helpful in this regard. While Juillerat (2010) and Nahm et al. (2003) emphasize that the traditional notion of formalization may be seen as an outdated concept for the modern occupational context, which is increasingly characterized by flexibility and complexity, they also underline the need to look at formalization in a differentiated way. Adler and Borys (1996) offer a helpful distinction of formalization for this perspective. They differentiate between enabling and coercive formalization. Juillerat (2010) and Nahm et al. (2003) describe possible positive aspects of formalization when implemented as supportive guidance. The implementation of rules and procedures with a supporting type of formalization may help to "encourage creativity, autonomous work, and learning" (Nahm et al., 2003, p.286) and can help to "capture, organize, and share knowledge" (Nahm et al., 2003, p.297). The items formulated by Nahm et al. (2003) illustrate this type of formalization, for example, the statement "we have written rules and procedures that guide quality improvement efforts" (p. 302) asks for rules guiding and standardizing improvement efforts rather than inquiring whether someone is constrained in performing their own way when trying to improve processes. This approach to item revision could provide a more nuanced picture of constraints. In this context, it is questionable whether constraints can be understood as the opposite of autonomy or whether, in a work context characterized by autonomy, the type of guidance has changed. If autonomy

means the absence of guidance, a high overlap with *laissez-faire* leadership could probably be expected, but this does not seem to be the case, according to Trépanier et al. (2019). However, what speaks for autonomy as the opposite of constraints is the positive effect of autonomy on clarity—or the negative effect on role ambiguity (Kalbers & Cenker, 2008; Sawyer, 1992), which the data of the current study would also support, provided autonomy corresponds to this conceptualization as the opposite of constraints. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether constraints as the opposite of autonomy would correspond to the actual conceptualization within a guiding situational strength. Juillerat (2010) suggests that based on the literature on SDT, an enabling type of formalization coupled with autonomy might encourage employees without undermining their intrinsic motivation. Accordingly, autonomy could also be embedded within a guiding formalized structure. The recent literature on the function of formalization for innovations also offers insightful connections in which the benefits of structured and formalized work environments characterized by autonomy are discussed (e.g., in Mattes, 2014; Segarra-Ciprés et al., 2019). From the described circumstances above (i.e., the congruence of the conceptualization of constraints within the definition of general situational strength and the interrelations of constraints with different constructs), it could be deduced that a reconceptualization of the facet could provide precision about the nature of the facet. This conceptualization of constraints in terms of structuring the work context in which the enabling aspects of formalization are considered seems to be more in line with the main assumption of situational strength, respectively guiding individuals to desired behaviors. If the main reason for integrating constraints is to cover guidance through boundaries by rules, an adaptation and a renaming of the facet could be helpful. It should also be noted that the items in the current study contained wording that was thought to be more self-referential. Instead of "on this job," the questionnaire used the wording "on my job."

The negative effect of consequences on compliance also indicates that the facet consequences may need a reconceptualization. Consequences is defined as "the extent to which decisions or actions have important positive or negative implications for any relevant person or entity" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 127). It is conceptualized to determine the extent of influence on behavior "by encouraging courses of action that increase the probability of positive outcomes and/or decrease the probability of negative outcomes" (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1013). Again, whether the facets' items represent the facet's definition precisely is questionable. It seems like the items inquire

whether their failure to execute the tasks may have severe consequences for the company, other people, or unspecified entities but do not emphasize consequences for the individual. It may be expected that consequences should instead relate to proximal experiences for the individual to guide behavior instead of broadly formulated consequences. Two items that address this include, “on this job, very serious consequences occur when an employee makes an error” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1020) and, “on this job, tasks are more important than those in almost all other jobs” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1021). Items like “on this job, there are consequences if an employee deviates from what is expected” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 1021) seem more suited to ask for circumstances guiding the individual. It could be investigated whether the guidance of behavior is affected if consequences for other people or entities do not imply consequences (or only to a limited extent) for the individual, compared to consequences experienced more proximal, as suggested by Thornton and Knox (2002) and in the literature about vested interests (Johnson et al., 2014). Meyer et al. (2009, 2020) suggest that the proximity of consequences might be relevant and that proximal consequences are expected to be more influential than distal ones because they would result in more concrete cognitive processes. For example, this could be the case when individuals pollute the environment and do not personally experience the negative consequences compared to individuals who pollute the environment and have to pay fines as punishment. Furthermore, Meyer et al. (2014) validated the operationalization of consequences by comparing it to Jackson et al.’s (1993) production responsibility, which inquires whether attention and alertness could prevent costly and expensive consequences. The authors emphasize that the mistakes are “unlikely to be a matter of personal concern unless the worker is aware of the fact” (Jackson et al., 1993, p. 754). It could be questioned whether the operationalization of the facet consequences would not be more relatable to its definition if the facet were compared to constructs inquiring about contingent consequences experienced by the individual. It could be helpful to investigate whether adapting the operationalization of the facet consequences to consider the existence of a coherent reward-punishment system for the “own actions” may pave new avenues in assessing situational strength. Besides “performance-contingent rewards/punishments” (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 127), Meyer et al. (2010) also consider that the “nature of the task itself” (p. 127) could serve as a consequence, which could be related to the postulates of SDT, which, according to Meyer et al. (2014), could help understand the phenomenon of situational strength.

Practical implications

The study's findings point to several relationships that should be considered to guide individuals toward compliance. The results suggest that increasing the strength of a situation, depending on the facets, may be associated with compliance costs rather than promoting them. Findings point to the counterproductive role of constraints. The more a person's freedom of action and decision at work is constrained, the more incompatible responsibilities and requirements become. Employers should provide their employees with more flexibility and autonomy so that they can respond appropriately to the challenges of everyday work. According to Morgeson and Humphrey's (2006) conceptualization of autonomy, this could be enabled by empowering employees to schedule their work, make decisions, and choose their work methods. Also, constraints do not contribute to a person's understanding of their work responsibilities and do not contribute to their likelihood of meeting expectations; however, constraints undermine them. Thus, by reducing limitations, employees would indirectly be able to clarify their tasks and be enabled to implement them. Instead, as suggested in the literature about leader autonomy support (Slemp et al., 2018), employers should be aware of employees' perspectives, encourage them to work self-directedly, and avoid controlling behaviors and communications.

The positive relationship between clarity and compliance indicates that employees should not be steered in a desired direction through coercion but by other means by which responsibilities and requirements can be clarified. Factors limiting the employee should be investigated and considered. If they do not interfere with the coordination of other employees, these limitations should be removed if possible. Instead, clarifying sources of information for the employee's work could be provided, which the employee can consult when necessary. It would also benefit compliance by helping employees interpret and reconcile information. In particular, a feedback environment can help clarify work processes. A feedback environment increases both the feedback-seeking behavior of the employee and the role clarity of the individual (Whitaker et al., 2007). In a feedback environment, the sources of feedback are credible (e.g., expertise and trustworthiness), the feedback is of high quality (e.g., consistent and useful), and appropriate to performance. It is also expressed in a considered manner and supports the employee's feedback-seeking behavior (Steelman et al., 2004). Supporting an individual's ability to show expected behaviors

by clarifying tasks and supporting discretion through the consistency of work-relevant information would thus be helpful in the performance of work-related tasks. A person with a high level of clarity concerning their responsibilities does not need to be persuaded by external threats of negative consequences or promises of positive consequences to make use of high clarity for high compliance. On the contrary, external consequences, as with constraints, are counterproductive in getting the person to fulfill expectations.

Limitations

The most important limitation is the application of a cross-sectional design instead of a longitudinal one, which is not appropriate to reveal causal relations between the facets of SSW and compliance. However, the design does offer insight into correlational relationships about the interplay of the constructs. The design is not suited for suggesting that the facets interact in the described way to force a desirable behavior, which is why this study hypothesized a model which should pave the way for prolific follow-up studies.

Another limitation concerns the statistical testing of the model, which was conducted with a series of three analyses instead of one comprehensive analysis. The absence of statistical control analyses, such as the determination of covariances, may have led to imprecision in the results.

Another limitation of the study concerns the lack of literature supporting the theoretical derivation of the model's relationships. In the absence of studies testing the interplay of facets of Meyer et al.'s (2014) situational strength, hypotheses were partially derived from relationships suggested by correlations of seemingly related concepts. However, the extent of statistical overlap between these concepts, the facets, or the outcome compliance was partially not tested in recent studies. Meanwhile, the overlap of definitions and operationalizations has been considered in the case of formalization and constraints. In the absence of research on the interplay of facets of situational strength, the model was logically derived based in part on overlapping concepts. It should be noted that other cause-effect relationships would also be plausible in some cases. For example, consistency could also affect constraints in that a lower level of consistency may have a constraining effect due to contradictory information.

Also, the small sample might limit the informative value derived from the results. Mediation analyses, in particular, benefit from a larger sample.

A final limitation is a reliance on self-reported data via an online panel provider, which offered little control over the setting in which the questionnaires were completed. Potential bias may have resulted from a sample that only included participants who deliberately registered to answer questionnaires distributed by the online panel provider. According to Podsakoff et al. (2003), the mere survey of self-reported data can lead to other biases. Of the common method biases that Podsakoff et al. (2003) described, three circumstances apply. First, the rating results from a common source may be a source of bias. It could be that participants try to respond consistently to predictors and the outcome. Second, the item context may have influenced the response. The placement of the items could have produced a priming effect, such that the outcome variable gained salience in the first place because of the prior response to the predictor variable. Third, the measurement context may have created an artificial covariance between the variables. The variables were collected at the same time, at the same place, and with the same medium.

Future research

Like other studies on situational strength theory, the present study revealed that the individual facets of situational strength and their interrelationships require a differentiated investigation. Based on the previously described considerations for the operationalization of the facets constraints and consequences and the interrelationships between clarity and consistency, the reconceptualization of the facets could contribute to an emphasis on the guiding function of situational strength and noncoercive aspects of that guidance. The relationships of the facets with other constructs such as autonomy, laissez-faire leadership, or formalization may also be examined to understand their characteristics and conceptualizations. This could also clarify if the individual facets only show opposite relationships with some outcomes (as with compliance) or if this pattern holds across different outcomes.

Furthermore, future research should also explore the extent to which alternative models with varying relationships of the facets could explain the variance of the examined variables. These models may also explore whether the results of relationships contradicting the assumptions may be confirmed. Additionally, it could be examined to what extent an additive model of the facets, as suggested by Meyer et al.

(2020), is better suited to survey situational strength and explain variance in an outcome than a process-based model, as examined in this study.

The current study additionally offers a proposal for a compliance scale. With a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = .747$, it is apparent that improvement of the scale is necessary. Not only could the scale's reliability benefit from revision, but a validation of the scale is also pending. The compliance scale is an instrument to inquire individual compliance behavior and does not need a comparison between individuals to indicate whether individuals have been guided. Therefore, the scale does not test homogenization effects, respectively reduced variance in an outcome. The compliance scale needs to be investigated theoretically and statistically. On the one hand, it could be examined to what extent different correlations can be established if the factors "compliance to expectations" and "noncompliance to expectations" are used in a differentiated approach. On the other hand, validity concerning extremely weak situations could be investigated. As the scale asks if an individual acted in conformity with expectations perceived as desired behavior, the non-existence of indicators for expected behavior may lead to confusion when asked whether they acted according to expectations. However, it is questionable whether such absolute weak situations exist in the everyday environment, representing a theoretical "zero-point" of situational guidance in behavior, or a conflict between equally strong guiding cues resulting in maximum ambiguity. It should also be noted that an individual's perceived expectations are subjectively interpreted. If informal cues, very generally conveyed cues, or contradictory cues are formulated, the derived expectation contents can produce a greater deviation between individuals concerning the behavioral consequences. Thus, different individuals may claim to fulfill the expectations (i.e., to show compliance), although they perform different behaviors.

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Appendix

Items in German language as used in questionnaire

Situational Strength at work (Meyer et al. 2014)
Constraints
Bei meinem Job...
... werden MitarbeiterInnen davon abgehalten, eigene Entscheidungen zu treffen.
... verhindern Vorschriften, dass MitarbeiterInnen Dinge auf ihre eigene Art und Weise tun können.
... wird man daran gehindert, selbst zu entscheiden, wie man bei der Arbeit vorgehen möchte.
... wird die Entscheidungsfreiheit der MitarbeiterInnen durch andere Personen eingeschränkt.
... schränken externe Faktoren die Entscheidungsfreiheit eines Mitarbeiters ein.
... verhindern vorgegebene Abläufe, dass ein Mitarbeiter / eine Mitarbeiterin auf seine eigene Art und Weise arbeiten kann.
... wird das, was ein Mitarbeiter / eine Mitarbeiterin tun kann, von anderen eingeschränkt.
Consistency
Bei meinem Job...
... stimmen Informationen aus verschiedenen Quellen immer miteinander überein.
... sind die verschiedenen Verantwortlichkeiten einer Person miteinander vereinbar.
... sind alle Arbeitsanforderungen hochgradig kompatibel miteinander.
... bleiben Arbeitsabläufe über die Zeit hinweg konstant gleich.
... entsprechen Anweisungen der Vorgesetzten den offiziellen Richtlinien der Organisation.
... entsprechen informelle Ratschläge von Kolleginnen und Kollegen normalerweise auch der offiziellen Firmenpolitik.
... erhält man unabhängig davon, wer sie gibt, die gleichen Informationen.
Clarity
Bei meinem Job...
...erhält man konkrete Informationen über seine beruflichen Verantwortlichkeiten.
...erhält man gut verständliche Informationen über die Arbeitsanforderungen.

...erhält man klare Informationen darüber, was man tun muss, um erfolgreich zu sein.
...wird einem genau gesagt, was auf einen zukommt.
...bekommt man genaue Informationen darüber, wie man seine Arbeit richtig macht.
...werden konkrete Angaben dazu gemacht, welche Aufgaben zu erledigen sind.
...wird dem Mitarbeiter / der Mitarbeiterin genau gesagt, was von ihm/ihr erwartet wird.
Consequences
Bei meinem Job...
... ergeben sich sehr ernste Konsequenzen, wenn jemand einen Fehler macht.
... werden andere einem Risiko ausgesetzt, wenn ein Mitarbeiter / eine Mitarbeiterin schlechte Leistungen erbringt.
... sind Fehler schädlicher als in fast allen anderen Berufen.
... hat es Konsequenzen, wenn jemand nicht das zu, was von ihm/ihr erwartet wird.
... haben die Entscheidungen der MitarbeiterInnen extrem bedeutende Auswirkungen auf andere Menschen.
... werden wichtige organisationale Ergebnisse von den Handlungen eines Mitarbeiters / einer Mitarbeiterin beeinflusst.
... sind die Aufgaben wichtiger als in fast allen anderen Berufen.
Compliance
Adapted Items of Safety Compliance Scale (Vinodkumar & Bhasi, 2010)
Ich befolge bei der Ausführung meiner Arbeit die Regeln und Vorgaben.
Ich weiche aufgrund meiner langjährigen Arbeitserfahrung von vorgegebenen Arbeitsprozessen ab. (R)
Self-developed Items
Ich bearbeite Aufgaben auf eine Weise, die nicht regelkonform ist. (R)
Ich halte mich bei meiner Arbeit an geltende Richtlinien.
Ich versuche meine Aufgaben mit anderen Methoden auszuführen, als es von mir erwartet wird. (R)
Ich handle so, wie es sich meine KollegInnen von mir wünschen.
Ich handle so, wie es sich meine Vorgesetzten von mir erwarten.

Zusammenfassung

Die Theorie der Situationsstärke (*engl.* Situational Strength) erklärt, wie Situationsvariablen das Verhalten lenken. Die Theorie unterscheidet zwischen starken Situation, in denen das Verhalten von Individuen durch die Abschwächung von Effekten persönlicher Eigenschaften homogenisiert wird, und schwachen Situationen, in denen persönliche Eigenschaften einen stärkeren Einfluss haben. Das einzige Instrument, das speziell zur Untersuchung der Situationsstärke entwickelt wurde, ist der Fragebogen zur Situationsstärke am Arbeitsplatz (SSW; *engl.* Situational Strength at Work) von Meyer et al. (2014), der vier Facetten umfasst: Einschränkungen, Klarheit, Konsistenz und Konsequenzen (*engl.*: Constraints, Clarity, Consistency, Consequences). Vorausgehende Untersuchungen haben gezeigt, dass die Hauptannahmen der Theorie, also die Lenkung des Verhaltens durch Hinweisreize aus der Umgebung und damit die Verringerung der Varianz zwischen Individuen, nicht durchgängig durch empirische Beobachtungen gestützt wird. Diese Studie untersucht mögliche Effekte zwischen den vier Facetten und bewertet, inwieweit sie mit der Compliance-Skala korrelieren. Darüber hinaus werden mögliche Erklärungen für die beobachteten Inkonsistenzen zwischen den Studien ermittelt. Es wird die Hypothese aufgestellt, dass ein positiver Effekt von Einschränkungen auf die Compliance durch Klarheit vermittelt wird, während der Effekt von Einschränkungen auf Klarheit wiederum durch Konsistenz vermittelt wird. Außerdem wird angenommen, dass die Konsequenzen mit der Klarheit interagieren und den positiven Effekt der Klarheit auf die Compliance verstärken. Die Ergebnisse deuten auf eine indirekte negative Wirkung von Einschränkungen auf die Compliance hin, die durch Klarheit vermittelt wird, während die Auswirkung von Einschränkungen auf Klarheit negativ durch Konsistenz vermittelt wird. Die Auswirkung von Klarheit auf Compliance zeigte keine Interaktion mit der Facette Konsequenzen, während beide Haupteffekte zeigten: Klarheit hatte einen positiven Effekt und Konsequenzen einen negativen Effekt auf die Compliance. Mögliche Erklärungen für die beobachteten Zusammenhänge werden diskutiert.