

# BEHAVIOR SETTING

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 13, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *BEHAVIOR SETTING*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=43990>

## BEHAVIOR SETTING

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Environmental Psychology, Ecological Psychology

### 1. Core Definition

The concept of the **Behavior Setting** refers to a fundamental unit of analysis in environmental and ecological psychology, positing that the environment is not a passive backdrop but an active, structured system that exerts control over human actions. It is defined as a naturally occurring, time-and-space specific environment combined with a standing pattern of behavior (SPB) that occurs within it. This setting inherently includes the physical, geographical, and social situation working synergistically. Unlike traditional psychological studies which isolate individual stimuli or personality traits, the behavior setting acknowledges the crucial, inseparable relationship between an individual and the environment, focusing on the context where behavior naturally unfolds.

A behavior setting is characterized by its self-regulation and its ability to recruit and shape the behavior of its inhabitants, often irrespective of the specific individuals occupying the roles. For example, the behavior setting of a "school classroom" dictates certain expected behaviors--sitting, listening, note-taking--regardless of whether the specific occupants are high-achieving or struggling students. The setting itself, complete with desks, blackboards, and schedules, maintains its structure and function. This perspective emphasizes that the environment possesses a coercive quality, often leading to a high degree of uniformity in behavior patterns across different individuals participating in the same setting.

The core realization derived from studying behavior settings is that behavior is highly context-dependent. The environment serves as the setting for observing behavior, thereby confirming that a measurable and impactful relationship exists between the physical world and the individual's actions, emotions, and decisions. This conceptualization moves beyond simplistic stimulus-response models to embrace a molar, holistic view of human-environment interaction, treating the setting as a comprehensive, integrated entity.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of the Behavior Setting was developed primarily by American psychologist Roger Barker and his colleagues, notably Herbert Wright, beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1960s. Barker, dissatisfied with laboratory-based psychology that abstracted behavior from its real-world context, sought a methodology capable of describing and analyzing human life as it naturally occurred. His work led to the establishment of the field of Ecological Psychology, which uses the behavior setting as its primary analytical tool.

Barker's seminal research involved intensive, long-term observation of the inhabitants of a small

Midwestern town he dubbed "Midwest" (later revealed to be Oskaloosa, Kansas). He and his researchers meticulously cataloged every behavior setting present in the town--ranging from specific church services and school classes to basketball games and local committee meetings. This groundbreaking empirical work resulted in landmark publications such as *Midwest and Its Children* (1955) and *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and Methods for Studying the Environment of Human Behavior* (1968), which systematically laid out the theory and methodology for identifying, delineating, and measuring these settings.

The historical development of this concept represents a significant paradigm shift within psychology, moving away from the internal mechanisms of the mind (e.g., personality traits, cognition) as the sole determinants of behavior, toward an emphasis on external, environmental forces. Barker argued that the physical world is segmented into defined, non-random units--the behavior settings--which serve as natural experiments revealing the powerful influence of context on human action. This ecological approach provided the framework necessary for the later expansion of environmental psychology as an independent discipline.

### 3. The Theory of Behavior Settings (Roger Barker)

Barker's theory posits that behavior settings are homeostatic, self-maintaining units designed to ensure the continuation of the standing pattern of behavior. This homeostatic mechanism operates through various ecological controls, including physical barriers, social norms, and formal rules. The setting selects for, and molds, the behaviors of its participants to fit the required pattern. This is a crucial distinction: while individuals may possess unique psychological traits, the demands of the setting often override these differences, leading to predictable behavioral outcomes.

A key aspect of Barker's theory is the concept of **manning theory**, or the ratio of people available to fill the roles required by a specific setting. In "undermanned" settings (where there are fewer people than roles, common in smaller towns or volunteer organizations), individuals often experience higher levels of involvement, responsibility, and challenge, leading to diversified skill development and greater loyalty to the setting. Conversely, "overmanned" settings (common in large urban schools or organizations) typically result in less participation, reduced sense of responsibility, and easier replaceability of individuals, fostering less intense psychological investment.

Furthermore, Barker delineated specific criteria for identifying the boundary of a behavior setting. The boundary is not merely physical; it is determined by the synchronicity of the standing pattern of behavior and the physical environment, and its ability to resist external forces. The theory specifies that behavior settings are inherently objective and observable--they can be identified and cataloged by independent observers, making them reliable units for empirical research across diverse environments.

## 4. Key Structural Components

Behavior settings are complex systems composed of several interdependent parts that must function together to sustain the standing pattern of behavior. These components include:

**The Standing Pattern of Behavior (SPB):** This is the characteristic behavior that reliably occurs within the setting. It is objective and supra-individual, meaning it is defined by the activities typical of the setting (e.g., "lecturing and note-taking" in a lecture hall) rather than the transient mood or personality of the participants.

**The Physical Milieu:** This comprises the non-human elements of the environment that are essential for the SPB to occur. This includes fixed objects (buildings, furniture, equipment), as well as geographical boundaries and ambient conditions (light, noise). The physical milieu is structured to be congruent with and supportive of the SPB.

**Time and Space Locus:** Each setting exists only at specific times and places. A "Sunday Service" behavior setting ceases to exist when the time is Monday morning, even if the physical church building remains. The precise spatio-temporal definition is necessary for delineation.

**The Occupants:** These are the people who participate in the setting, including both the functionaries (those who maintain and regulate the setting, like teachers or priests) and the members (those who participate in the SPB, like students or the congregation).

The coherence of a behavior setting relies on the principle of **synomorphy**, which describes the high degree of functional and structural congruence between the physical milieu and the standing pattern of behavior. For instance, a basketball court, with its specific markings, hoops, and associated rules (SPB), is synomorphic. If the physical court structure were removed, the behavior setting would collapse. This symbiotic relationship ensures the stability and predictability of the setting's functions.

## 5. Significance and Impact

The behavior setting concept has had a profound impact on environmental and ecological psychology by providing a powerful, quantifiable methodology for studying the environment's direct influence on behavior. It validated the idea that context is not merely a moderator but a primary determinant of social and individual actions. Its significance lies in shifting scientific focus from the internal person to the external environmental system.

Its primary impact is methodological, offering a robust unit of analysis that is larger than the individual act but smaller than an entire community or institution. This "molar" unit allows researchers to measure environmental complexity and demands systematically. By cataloging and comparing the distribution and characteristics of behavior settings across different communities (e.g., comparing a large city to a small town), researchers can explain variations in social behavior, individual participation, and development.

Furthermore, the theory provided a necessary theoretical foundation for understanding phenomena like community size effects and resource allocation. The insights derived from studying behavior settings--particularly the manning theory--have been crucial for fields ranging from urban planning and architectural design to youth development and organizational management, demonstrating that behavioral problems can often be solved by altering the environmental structure rather than attempting to change individual psychological deficits.

## 6. Applications and Examples

The practical applications of behavior setting theory are extensive, particularly in contexts where the goal is to optimize participation, engagement, or resource utilization. In **educational psychology**, understanding the complexity and number of behavior settings available in a school (e.g., clubs, sports, academic classes) helps predict student involvement and satisfaction. A school with fewer, but undermanned, settings may foster greater student responsibility.

In **urban planning and architecture**, the concept guides the design of functional spaces. Planners utilize the idea of synomorphy to ensure that physical structures (e.g., public squares, transit hubs) are highly congruent with their intended standing patterns of behavior, thereby reducing ambiguity and facilitating appropriate actions. If a public space is designed poorly (lacking appropriate seating or boundaries), the desired behavior setting (e.g., "leisurely communal gathering") may fail to materialize, replaced by an unintended SPB.

Within **organizational behavior and management**, the manning principle is particularly relevant. Businesses often deliberately create slightly undermanned teams to boost morale, increase skill diversity, and enhance individual investment and productivity. Conversely, identifying settings that are perpetually overmanned can pinpoint structural causes of alienation, low motivation, and high turnover, suggesting that adjusting the setting's scope or dividing it into smaller units might resolve behavioral issues more effectively than traditional HR interventions.

## 7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its theoretical power, the behavior setting concept faces several debates and criticisms, primarily concerning its operationalization and generalizability. One major challenge is the difficulty in reliably defining and delineating the **boundaries** of a setting, particularly in dense, complex urban environments where settings often overlap (e.g., is a café counter a separate setting from the café seating area?). Critics argue that the strict criteria for synomorphy can be difficult to apply consistently outside of the small, stable communities originally studied by Barker.

Another significant criticism revolves around the **complexity of measurement**. Cataloging all behavior settings in a large area requires immense time and resources, making large-scale, comparative research projects challenging. Furthermore, while the theory excels at describing the

environment's influence on the "average" participant's behavior, some critics suggest it sometimes minimizes the role of individual personality differences, cognitive processes, and intentionality--factors central to other psychological theories.

Finally, there is an ongoing debate regarding the concept's ability to handle societal and cultural change. As technological advancements rapidly alter physical and social environments (e.g., the introduction of remote work or virtual social spaces), defining the "physical milieu" and "standing pattern of behavior" for settings that exist largely in digital space becomes increasingly abstract and complex, testing the original constraints developed in the mid-20th century.

### Further Reading

[Roger Barker \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Ecological Psychology \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Barker, R. G. \(1968\). Ecological psychology: Concepts and methods for studying the environment of human behavior. Stanford University Press.](#)

[Wicker, A. W. \(1979\). An introduction to ecological psychology. In Ecological Psychology.](#)