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Comment:

Applied Personality Assessment: A Cronbachian Perspective'

Lievens, F. (in press). Assessing Personality-Situation Interplay in Personnel Selection:
Towards More Integration into Personality Research.

European Personality Reviews (European Journal of Personality)

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Abstract

Lievens's proposal that personality psychology would benefit from using applied tools of assessment - situation judgement tests (SJT) and assessment centre (AC) exercises – is well made, especially as these tools focus on real-world criteria in high stakes situations. Their use would help to integrate (specific) situationally-influenced *intra*-individual differences (*variability*) and (general) *inter*-individual differences (*diversity*). Lievens's proposal raises a broader issue: Different assessment tools yield unique information which offers the potential to provide a truly comprehensive model of personality based on the Cronbachian perspective that has, so far, not been realised.

Body

Variability and diversity

The description and explanation of personality have a peculiarly difficult problem to tackle. We share much in common with one another, yet in some ways we are all unique – this is the well-known nomothetic and idiographic distinction. This distinction gets confused when we consider the complementary aspects of *variability* and *diversity*: Variability reflects situationally influenced (state) behaviour, and diversity the mean (trait) differences between people. But the attempt to provide a theoretically coherent integration of *intra*-individual variability and *inter*-individual diversity is fraught with problems. A major one is how the many different sources of variance are measured, modelled and, then, interpreted.

In assessing personality processes, self-report and other-report personality questionnaires are valuable. However, the measurement of actual behaviour has a special appeal (Furr, 2009), although it is not without its problems (Corr, 2009). Situational judgement tests (SJT) and assessment centre (AC) exercises acknowledge these facts and, in consequence, have much to offer the personality theorist as well as the applied psychologist. The fact that these assessment tools have been developed and tested at the coal face of practical life gives them added credibility.

Noteworthy, Lievens's perspective affords the opportunity to integrate specific situationally-influenced expressions of personality, potentially covering a wide range of domains (occupational, family, social, leisure, relationships) with personality description and explanation at the broader trait level. Whilst it is true that we are reactive to situational affordances and constraints, each of us possesses stable traits that characterise us. There is nothing contradictory about such a statement – indeed, for many decades, such an approach was the bedrock of Hans Eysenck's personality theory that postulated an *interaction* of traits (e.g., Extraversion) and situations (e.g., low vs. high arousal), with neither in isolation sufficient to explain behaviour at any one time (Eysenck, 1997). The exciting aspect of Lievens's proposal is that it suggests a viable way to examine these joint effects in a manner that recognises the importance of both transient states and stable traits: variability and diversity.

Complexity and perplexity

But, on their own, SJT and AC tools of assessment do not offer any immediate solution to the many important issues facing the personality psychologist; and, indeed, they come with their own limitations: SJT must assume that what people say in reaction to a

specific (hypothetical) situation reflects how they would behave *in situ* – but, as we know, self-proclaimed virtue often manifests as behavioural vice - and AC must assume that the *ability* to perform well on various simulations is tied closely to the motivation to do so in the real situation (e.g., workplace). The difference between ‘can do’ and ‘will do’, as well as deliberate faking and such like. However, it might be in such differences in behaviour that insights may be gained into the true, multifaceted, nature of personality.

The complexity of personality psychology forces us to make choices that simplify the world. This has the consequence of leading to fragmented theory. In the hustle and bustle of scientific life, we trade-off theoretical comprehensiveness for professional specialism. In particular, the forms of assessment we prefer are not unrelated to the theoretical issues at hand: They constrain the nature of the information obtained and thus explanation. For this reason, if for no other, insights into personality processes from related, especially applied, fields are to be welcomed. These are badly needed to provide an adequate account of the complexity, as well as perplexity, of personality psychology.

Along these lines, Poropat and Corr (2015) noted that the development of any integrative model is hindered by the theoretical-epistemological starting point (Popple & Levi, 2000). We search for universals, as seen in personality traits, yet we know that both as a phenomenon (Andersen & Chen, 2002) and in assessment (Kenny & West, 2008) traits are socially contextualised. Certainly, this social assumption adds further credibility to Lievens’s proposal. What this social aspect highlights is that, not only are we interested in the expression of personality in different situations, but often another important source of information comes from raters: this source is central to SJT and AC assessment tools.

A Cronbachian perspective

The above discussion may be seen in the context of Cronbach’s (1957; Cronbach, Gleser, Nanda, & Rajaratnam, 1972; Cronbach, Rajaratnam, & Gleser, 1963) *generalisability theory*, which offers the promise of a truly integrative framework for personality assessment and, thus, theory. As detailed by Poropat and Corr (2015), generalisability theory allows modelling of the full range of influences in personality assessment, which must include: traits, targets, raters, contexts, measurement tools, and temporal factors. As noted by Reynolds et al. (2010) in their detailed discussion of this approach, this goes beyond mere interactionism. It highlights the role played by personality *judgement* as much as the expression of personality in the target. There are reasons for supposing that this approach is empirically valuable. For example, such ratings have substantial validity in their own right (Connelly & Ones, 2010). Although the variance attributed to judges is sometimes denigrated

as mere method ‘error’ or ‘bias’ (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), it is known to predict criterion-related behaviours of a sufficiently large magnitude, as compared to personality traits alone (Lance, Dawson, Birkelbach, & Hoffman, 2010).

Lievens’s proposal for the inclusion of SJT and AC assessment methods in personality psychology is to be welcomed, and it is rather overdue. However, it can only be part of a broader picture which encompasses a Cronbachian perspective: Where it is assumed that *both* psychological phenomena and measurement types contain unique causal variance that is not mere method noise – such ‘bias’ may well provide unique information on the target (Hoffman & Woehr, 2009; Lance et al., 2010), reflecting “valid differences in perception” (Borman, 1974, p. 107). According to this Cronbachian perspective, these assessment factors need to be modelled if we are to provide a truly comprehensive model of personality. Lievens’s proposal takes us a little closer to realising this goal.

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