

**Broadening the scope: Situation-specific personality assessment with behavior description
interviews**

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Abstract

Lievens highlights the opportunities of employing situational judgment tests and assessment centers for assessing personality-situation interplay. To broaden the range of possible approaches, we incorporate the patterned behavior description interview as an additional selection instrument and outline why it might be particularly useful for studying the expression of personality in specific situations. In addition, we anticipate that diversifying the methods for personality assessment will also open up new research questions such as which methods are most suitable for studying which aspects of personality.

Broadening the scope: Situation-specific personality assessment with behavior description interviews

Lievens' article (2017) puts forward how selection instruments such as situational judgments tests (SJTs) and assessment centers (ACs) can be adapted to study the interplay between personality and situations. While this target article provides a good foundation for integrating selection instruments into personality research, we urge researchers to consider a third promising selection instrument: the patterned behavior description interview (Janz, 1982). Below, we elaborate on why behavior description interviews are a valuable method for situation-specific personality assessment.

Similar to SJTs and ACs, behavior description interviews are popular selection instruments that can predict performance across different domains (Culbertson, Weyhrauch, & Huffcutt, 2017; Klehe & Latham, 2006). Within this interview format, target persons are asked about their behaviors in previously experienced situations. Thereby, interview questions can be “designed to measure the specific job-related behaviors that are presumed to underlie a particular personality trait.” (Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014, p. 265). In this case, each personality trait is measured with several interview questions and each interview question refers to a specific situation in which behaviors associated with the respective trait are expressed (for an example, see Van Iddekinge, Raymark, & Roth, 2005).

Behavior description interviews may be particularly useful for assessing personality-situation interplay for several reasons. First, behavior description interviews have an open-ended response format. In contrast to traditional SJTs, the interview does not provide any response options so that the target persons are required to generate descriptive responses to the presented situations (i.e., interview questions) themselves. While it has been questioned whether SJTs actually require a specific situation (Krumm et al., 2015), behavior description interviews cannot

work without one. In fact, they may be especially effective at reflecting situational manifestations of personality, given that the target persons' responses in the interview are tailored to the presented situations.

Second, both the target persons and trained interviewers serve as information sources in the behavior description interview. This is because target persons provide self-descriptions of their behaviors (and eventually thoughts and feelings) in given situations, which are then evaluated by interviewers using anchored ratings scales. In contrast to ACs, the interview allows interviewers to not only learn about the target persons' behaviors, but also to gather information regarding how they "approach a variety of settings, as well as [...] their motivations for choosing certain behaviors" (Raymark & Van Iddekinge, 2013, p. 428). Thus, the interview may also capture aspects of personality that reflect cognitions and emotions (i.e., that are less visible when observing only behavior from the outside, as typically done in ACs).

Third, each interview question refers to an actually experienced situation and all target persons are asked the same interview questions. Thus, behavior description interviews provide high levels of contextualization (i.e., referring to a concrete situation with actual tasks and characters), while also maintaining high levels of standardization in the way the stimuli (i.e., interview questions) are presented. Consequently, behavior description interviews combine advantages from both SJTs (i.e., high standardization) and ACs (i.e., high contextualization). In Table 1, we expand on Lievens' (2017) comparison of self-report personality inventories, SJTs, and ACs by summarizing features of the behavior description interview.

Lievens (2017) noted that adapting selection instruments for assessing personality creates a methodological diversity in personality assessment which could help address some of the key questions in personality research. Specifically, the target article outlines how SJTs may be useful to study trait-behavior links and person-situation variability, and how ACs may be useful to study

trait expression and trait perception, and their interplay. Extending the scope of employable methods, we point out that behavior description interviews offer further intriguing opportunities to address key areas of personality research. Concerning trait-behavior links, Lievens (2017) explains how implicit trait policies as assessed in SJTs may help trace situation-specific behaviors back to traits. We suggest that the behavioral description interview can be used to capture trait-behavior links by explicitly asking target persons why they behaved the way they did in specific situations. Since this is a more direct approach, it may add insights above the ones to be learned from SJTs. We also see the potential of behavior description interviews to address further research questions such as within-person variability (given that interviews ask about behaviors in a variety of different situations) and trait expression and perception (given that the interview is a social situation in which interviewers evaluate expressions of personality).

Notwithstanding our consent concerning the potential of methodological diversity, we also would like to highlight that this methodological diversity creates new research questions like whether these different methods of personality assessment measure different aspects of personality and relatedly, to what extent these methods can be used interchangeably. First and foremost, this requires a conceptual foundation that guides future research on different methods of personality assessment. For example, while traditional self-report measures capture how individuals perceive themselves (i.e., their identity), ACs may capture how an individual's personality is perceived by others (i.e., their reputation; see trait-identity-reputation model by McAbee & Connelly, 2016). On a related note, AC research showed that AC dimension ratings corresponded to highly observable traits (e.g., Extraversion) but hardly corresponded to less observable traits (e.g., Emotional Stability; Meriac, Hoffman, & Woehr, 2014). This is not surprising given that ACs, by definition, focus on the assessment of clearly observable behaviors.

Accordingly, we call for systematic research that elaborates on conceptual foundations to explore which methods can best assess different aspects of personality.

We conclude that adapting selection instruments to personality research, as suggested in the target article, appears to be a very promising opportunity to gain knowledge on the interplay between personality and situations. Its uptake relies on future personality and selection research (hopefully involving collaborations) to better understand what these methods capture and how to make best use of them in personality research across fields.

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Table 1

Comparison of Personality Self-Report Inventories, SJTs, ACs, and Behavior Description Interviews Based on Lievens (2017)

Building block (Lievens & Sackett, 2017)	Personality self-report inventories	SJTs	ACs	Patterned behavior description interview
Stimulus format	Generic	Verbal descriptions of situations	Actual simulated situations,	Verbal descriptions of situations' key characteristics
Stimulus presentation consistency	High levels of standardization	High levels of standardization	At best medium levels of standardization (predetermined cues are built in the exercises)	High levels of standardization
Contextualization	Low levels of contextualization	Medium levels of contextualization (brief, one-paragraph descriptions of task, characters, etc.)	High levels of contextualization (detailed descriptions of task, characters, etc.)	High levels of contextualization (referencing to tasks and characters in previously experienced situations)
Content targeted	Behavioral tendencies ("typical performance")	Procedural knowledge about effectiveness of traits in situations	Actual trait-related behavior in simulated situations ("maximal performance")	Trait-related behavior in actual (previously experienced) situations
Response format	Self-reports	Multiple-choice responses	Open-ended responses	Open-ended responses
Response evaluation consistency	Trait scoring	Subject matter experts determine scoring key a priori (trait or effectiveness scoring).	Trained assessors make behavioral observations and ratings on dimensions.	Trained interviewers evaluate the target person's responses and make ratings on dimensions.
Information source	Target person	Target person	Trained assessors	Target person and trained interviewers