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Fully contextualized, frequency-based personality measurement: A replication and extension

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ABSTRACT

We compared the predictive validity of two types of Frame-of-Reference personality measures to each other and to a baseline generic measure. Each version of the measures used a unique response-format referred to as frequency-based estimation that allowed the behavioral consistency of responses to be gauged. Generic personality scales, tagged scales with “at school”, and completely modified scales were compared in their prediction of academic performance, counterproductive academic behavior, and participant reactions. Results showed that completely contextualized measures were the most predictively valid and, contrary to our expectations, behavioral consistency did not moderate the relationships. Face validity and to a lesser extent perceived predictive validity improved with increasing contextualization. We discuss the implications of our results for personality assessment in applied settings.

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1. Introduction

The use of personality assessments to predict real-world behavioral outcomes has been a goal of personality and applied psychologists for decades. Extant research has established the usefulness of personality measures in relation to the prediction of important real-world outcomes, such as job performance (e.g., [Barrick & Mount, 1991](#); [Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991](#)) and school success (e.g., grade point average [GPA]; [McAbee & Oswald, 2013](#)). Subsequently, two major developments have been advocated with regards to increasing the validity of personality measures. First, the investigation of whether adding a situation specification to personality items would increase criterion-related validity, known as a Frame-of-Reference (FoR) modification, was conducted (e.g., [Schmit, Ryan, Stierwalt, & Powell, 1995](#)). Adding a FoR to personality items is most commonly achieved by adding a situational tag to the end of a personality item, such as “at work” or “at school”, and is often referred to as contextualization. Second, the investigation of whether personality constructs are more predictive for individuals who express a more consistent personality, known as the Frequency-Based Estimation (FBE) method for responding to personality assessment items, was conducted (e.g., [Edwards &](#)

[Woehr, 2007](#); [Fleisher, Woehr, Edwards, & Cullen, 2011](#)). The FBE method requires respondents to indicate the percentage of time that their behavior is consistent with each personality item.

Despite the fact that personality tests can include both a situation-based (i.e., FoR) modification to items as well as a behavioral consistency-based response option format (i.e., FBE), only one study has thus far assessed the combined effects of these two concepts ([Robie & Risavy, 2016](#)). Moreover, the study by [Robie and Risavy \(2016\)](#) found results counter to what the extant FBE literature has found. Thus, further research is needed in order to develop a better understanding of personality item modification and response option format combinations that may increase the predictive validity of personality tests for predicting real-world outcomes.

The current paper continues the quest to better understand the optimal way to design personality assessment items and response option formats by answering the call from [Robie and Risavy \(2016\)](#) to compare different levels of FoR contextualization (see below for an explanation of levels of contextualization) using the FBE response option format. Thus, the primary contribution of the current paper is to further our understanding of FoR modifications using the FBE response option format by assessing their interaction. This is achieved by using the FBE response option format with a generic as well as two FoR (i.e. tagged and completely contextualized; [Holtrop, Born, de Vries, & de Vries, 2014](#)) personality measures. In order to situate the current paper, first, the prior FoR and

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FBE research that is relevant to the current investigation is discussed. Next, the rationale for the current investigation as well as the resulting hypotheses are presented. Subsequently, a three-wave study designed to assess the focal hypotheses as well as respondent reactions to the different personality assessment combinations is described.

1.1. Previous research

1.1.1. Frame-of-Reference (FoR) research

The FoR modification of personality assessment items (e.g., adding “at work” to the end of a personality item stem) was initially investigated by Schmit et al. (1995); their research as well as the research of many others since then has provided empirical evidence that adding a specified context to personality measures increases their ability to predict real-world outcomes (cf. a meta-analysis by Shaffer and Postlethwaite [2012]). More recently, different levels of contextualization have begun to appear in the FoR research literature (e.g., Holtrop et al., 2014; Pace & Brannick, 2010). The theoretical rationale underlying this line of research is that contextualizing personality assessment items beyond simply adding an “at work” or an “at school” tag to the end of a personality item may yield additional increments in criterion-related validity.

Holtrop et al. (2014) were the first to compare the effect of two types of contextualized personality measures (i.e., a measure tagged with “at school” and a completely modified measure) with a baseline, generic (i.e., noncontextualized) measure for the traits of Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Integrity. The completely modified scale went beyond the typical FoR modification of adding an “at work” or an “at school” tag to each item (e.g., “I keep my promises at school”) by completely revising each item (e.g., “I keep my promises when I agree to complete a section of a team project”). Using an undergraduate student sample in The Netherlands ($N = 531$) and a within-participants design, their results generally showed evidence of statistically significant increases in the prediction of outcome variables (i.e., objective GPA and counterproductive academic behavior) with increasing levels of contextualization. For example, the completely modified Conscientiousness scale of the Multicultural Personality Test – Big Six (MPT-BS; De Vries, De Vries, & Born, 2011; NOA, 2009) explained the most variance in GPA compared with the tagged and generic measures (similar conclusions could be derived for the pattern of results that emerged for the counterproductive academic behavior criterion). Moreover, regarding participant reactions, perceived predictive validity and face validity (i.e., the relevance of the questionnaire) also improved with increasing levels of contextualization; however, the students liked the contextualized measures less than the generic measure. This investigation by Holtrop et al. (2014) utilized the standard, Likert-type response option format for personality assessment; however, other response option formats are available, such as the FBE response option format (e.g., Edwards & Woehr, 2007; Fleisher et al., 2011).

1.1.2. Frequency-Based Estimation (FBE) research

The FBE response option format was first proposed by Edwards and Woehr (2007) as a format that could be a viable alternative to the traditional, Likert-type response format for responding to personality assessment items. In the FBE format, respondents distribute 100 percentage points per item across three categories (i.e., very inaccurate, neither accurate nor inaccurate, and very accurate) to indicate how that personality item is reflective of their behavior over the past six months. The FBE format can provide important information (i.e., within-item variability) that is not available through the Likert-type format. Specifically, FBE is a method of estimating behavioral consistency with a single

administration; put differently, FBE allows an assessment of consistency over time within personality items. Behavioral consistency, in this case, refers to the variance in behavior across time that is associated with each personality item. Because personality measures are purported to be more predictive for individuals who consistently display the same type and level of behavior (referred to as *traitedness* by Baumeister and Tice [1988]), measuring behavioral consistency should theoretically improve the prediction of behavioral outcomes.

Edwards and Woehr's (2007) Study 1, which used an undergraduate student sample ($N = 143$), provided empirical evidence that the psychometric properties (i.e., reliability estimates and convergent validity coefficients) of the FBE response option format were, for the most part, similar to the Likert-type response option format when the respondents were completing the 50-item International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) Scale (Goldberg, 1999). Edwards and Woehr's (2007) Study 2 also used an undergraduate student sample ($N = 120$) as well as one-two personal acquaintances (i.e., friends and/or family members; $N = 210$) who had known the participant for at least six months. The results of this second study provided empirical evidence that the measure of behavioral consistency obtained through using the FBE response option format (i.e., low within-item variability/high within-item consistency, meaning that respondents are more consistent over time) moderated self/other agreement for the personality traits of Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, and Extraversion, such that respondents who rated themselves as more consistent over time were more predictable (i.e., had higher levels of agreement with the ratings provided by their acquaintance[s]). Consistent with Kane (1986), the within-item variability term (i.e., the measure of behavioral stability) was calculated by computing the standard deviation of the three percentage responses for each item and then obtaining the mean within-item standard deviation across all of the items for each personality dimension.

A more recent study by Fleisher et al. (2011) continued this line of research on the FBE format by providing further evidence for the validity of the FBE approach for assessing personality. Consistent with the earlier work of Edwards and Woehr (2007), Fleisher et al.'s (2011) Study 1 provided additional evidence for the statistical equivalence of the reliability coefficients (i.e., alphas) across both the FBE and Likert-type response option formats as well as convergent validity evidence (i.e., the correlation between scores on both response option formats). Extending the work of Edwards and Woehr (2007), Fleisher et al.'s (2011) Study 1 also found statistically significant correlations between the Big Five dimensions and motivational variables (e.g., communion striving, achievement striving, learning goal orientation, performance-avoid goal orientation), which were consistent across response option formats (i.e., FBE and Likert-type). Fleisher et al.'s (2011) Study 2 found significant interactions for Agreeableness and Conscientiousness in predicting peer ratings of task performance, such that participants who rated themselves as being more behaviorally consistent (i.e., had lower within-item variability), exhibited stronger personality–performance relationships. An important extension to the work of Edwards and Woehr (2007) was the third study by Fleisher et al. (2011), which provided empirical evidence that the less transparent FBE format is less susceptible to conscious response distortion than the traditional, more transparent Likert-type format for the personality dimensions of Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness to Experience when respondents were instructed to fake (i.e., provide socially desirable responses). Fleisher et al. (2011) echoed the conclusion from Edwards and Woehr (2007) that the FBE response option format has favorable empirical support and that future research using this response option format would be a fruitful endeavor. In fact, one future research direction noted by Fleisher et al. (2011) was to

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