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A matter of context: A comparison of two types of contextualized personality measures

Djurje Holtrop^{a,b,*}, Marise Ph. Born^{a,c}, Anita de Vries^b, Reinout E. de Vries^a^a VU University, The Netherlands^b NOA, The Netherlands^c Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The present study compared the effect of two types of Frame-of-Reference modifications to each other and to a baseline generic measure. 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. To this end the HEXACO-PI-R ($n = 215$) and the MPT-BS ($n = 316$) were filled out by students in a within-subject design. Results showed a significant increase in criterion validity from generic, to tagged, to completely contextualized personality scales. Face validity and perceived predictive validity improved with increasing contextualization. The current study indicates that completely contextualizing personality items increases criterion validity more than just adding a tag to items.

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1. Introduction

Personality influences the way people perform in academic settings. To further improve the criterion validity of personality questionnaires, researchers have recently started to investigate contextualized questionnaires (e.g., Bing, Whanger, Davidson, & VanHook, 2004; Hunthausen, Truxillo, Bauer, & Hammer, 2003; Lievens, De Corte, & Schollaert, 2008; Robie, Schmit, Ryan, & Zickar, 2000; Schmit, Ryan, Stierwalt, & Powell, 1995; Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2012). Contextualization occurs when a relevant context is added to a personality questionnaire. There are three commonly applied methods: (1) Instructional contextualization, (2) Tagged contextualization and (3) Complete contextualization. Instructional contextualization asks a participant to think of a certain situation (e.g., school) when filling out questionnaire. Tagged contextualization modifies generic personality statements with an added tag, for example, by modifying statements such as 'I am a busy person' into 'I am a busy person *at school*'. Complete contextualization occurs when an item is completely redesigned to match a context. For example by changing 'People think I show a lot of effort' into 'People think I study hard'.

Regardless of the applied method, the added context is often called a Frame-of-Reference (FoR; Mount, Barrick, & Strauss, 1994; Schmit et al., 1995). The idea behind adding a FoR is that personality is more consistent within one meaningful situation than when it is aggregated across several situations. Measuring personality within a relevant situation is hypothesized to improve criterion validity of personality questionnaires for criteria relevant to that situation (e.g., personality at school predicts school performance), which is called the FoR-effect (Schmit et al., 1995). Shaffer and Postlethwaite (2012) investigated the FoR-effect in a recent meta-analysis and concluded that the criterion validity of contextualized measures is higher than that of generic measures. Lievens et al. concluded that the FoR-effect was mainly due to a reduction of within-person variability. We considered tagged scales likely to reduce within-person variability more than instructional contextualization, because a participant is constantly reminded which FoR to use. Also, tagged contextualization is the most common method to apply a FoR. Therefore, we believe that tagging, better than instructional contextualization, represents the current knowledge about the FoR-effect.

Several studies applied tagging to add a FoR to their personality questionnaire items (Bing et al., 2004; Lievens et al., 2008; Robie et al., 2000; Schmit et al., 1995). However, Lievens et al. (2008) suggested adding more content to each item, rather than solely adding a tag. So far, to our knowledge, only three studies have investigated complete contextualization (Butter & Born, 2012;

* Corresponding author at: VU University, Van der Boechorststraat 1, 1081BT Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 205983045.

E-mail addresses: d.j.holtrop@vu.nl (D. Holtrop), m.ph.born@fsw.eur.nl (M.Ph. Born), info@noa-vu.nl (A. de Vries), re.de.vries@vu.nl (R.E. de Vries).

Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman, 1996; Pace & Brannick, 2010). Butter and Born compared a tagged Conscientiousness scale and the narrow trait Achievement, to an ecological scale 'Time management in a research context'. They found that the narrow trait and the ecological scale both predicted more variance than the general Conscientiousness scale in research progress, meeting deadlines, and the estimated probability to finish the PhD in time. Murtha et al. (1996) changed Conscientiousness and Agreeableness items to reflect several situations (e.g., work, school), and found that complete contextualization improves the reliability of personality inventory scales. Pace and Brannick (2010) changed generic Openness to Experience scales to completely contextualized work scales and found that the latter scales predicted supervisory rated creative work performance better than did generic scales. However, to our knowledge, no research has directly compared the predictive validity of completely contextualized scales with tagged scales for actual performance. In this study, we will compare the FoR-effect of two types of contextualization, tagged and complete contextualization, on study outcomes.

So far, most FoR research has focused on performance prediction. However, it is likely that it applies to (other) behaviors as well. Therefore the present study includes counterproductive academic behavior (CAB) as well as Grade Point Average (GPA) as criteria. CAB consists of behaviors such as cheating, plagiarism, and tardiness (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007). Both Marcus et al. (2007) and De Vries, De Vries, and Born (2011) found a negative relation between CAB on the one hand and generic Conscientiousness and Honesty–Humility on the other.

In our study, a within-person comparison between three types of personality scales was made. The personality dimensions Conscientiousness (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Poropat, 2009), Integrity (De Vries et al., 2011; Van Iddekinge, Taylor, & Eidson, 2005), and Emotional stability (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003) were selected for the present study as they are the most predictive personality dimensions for academic performance and for other study-related behaviors. The present study uses two different personality inventories, the HEXACO-PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2004) and the MPT-BS (NOA, 2009), effectively repeating the experiment under the same conditions, therefore strengthening the findings.

Based on the above we hypothesize three differences in criterion validity between the personality inventories. We expect that more contextualized inventories outperform other inventories in terms of criterion validity. We used the two previously mentioned criteria to estimate the criterion validity of three types of personality inventories: Study performance and CAB. The first two hypotheses replicate previous research. First, we expect that tagged inventories outperform generic inventories (H1). Second, we expect completely contextualized inventories to outperform generic inventories (H2). Lastly, we expect completely contextualized inventories to outperform tagged inventories (H3).

Adding a FoR may also improve participant reactions, because relatedness of a test to a task, or situation, positively influences perception of overall fairness of an assessment process (Gilliland, 1993). To our knowledge, only Holtz, Ployhart, and Dominguez (2005) studied the effect of contextualization on participant reactions. They included perceived job-relatedness, process-fairness, organizational attractiveness, and recommending the organization to others. Contrary to their expectations, no effect of contextualization on these participant reactions was found. Because the current study is conducted in an academic setting we cannot use the same participant reactions as Holtz et al., and therefore somewhat different participant reactions were selected. Three participant reactions were measured in this study: (1) *liking* of the test (Wiechman & Ryan, 2003); (2) *face validity*, the extent to which a participant perceives the test relevant for their tasks (Smither, Reilly, Millsap,

Pearlman, & Stoffey, 1993); and (3) *perceived predictive validity*, the extent to which a participant perceives the test predictive for their performance (Smither et al., 1993). We expect more positive participant reactions for tagged personality inventories, and even more positive participant reactions for completely contextualized inventories (H4).

2. Method

2.1. Procedure and participants

Our design included scales from two different personality inventories, the HEXACO-PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2004) and the MPT-BS (NOA, 2009). Two FoR versions were created for both of these questionnaires, namely a tagged version and a completely contextualized version. Participants were asked to complete two survey sessions. During the first session they filled out the generic questionnaire and one (randomly determined) FoR version of this questionnaire. One week later, the remaining FoR questionnaire was filled out in the second session, to counteract possible carry-over of the FoR. This second session also included the CAB inventory. Immediately after filling out each personality questionnaire, participant reactions related to that questionnaire were measured. Analyses showed that there was only one, out of six, small significant mean difference between session one and session two, for the randomized FoR questionnaires.

All participants ($N = 531$) were second and third year students at an institute for higher vocational education in The Netherlands. Approximately 7000 students ($\approx 50\%$ women) were approached by email for voluntary participation. A total of 695 students completed the first session. 531 of these students completed both sessions (23.60% attrition). Of these 531 students, 316 students completed both MPT-BS sessions ($M(\text{age}) = 22.58$, $SD = 5.22$, 68.4% women) and 215 completed both HEXACO-PI-R sessions ($M(\text{age}) = 23.90$, $SD = 6.99$, 59.2% women). Participants came from a variety of educational programs (e.g., 17% social, 13% teacher, 11% management, 9% construction).

2.2. Predictor measures

2.2.1. HEXACO-PI-R

The Dutch HEXACO-PI-R (De Vries, Ashton, & Lee, 2009; Lee & Ashton, 2004) consists of 200 statements measuring six personality dimensions: Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience. Only the dimensions Conscientiousness, Emotionality and Honesty–Humility were measured. Alpha reliabilities in present study were .89 for Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, and Conscientiousness.

2.2.2. Multicultural personality test – big six (MPT-BS)

The MPT-BS (De Vries et al., 2011; NOA, 2009) is a personality inventory that consists of 200 short statements, measuring six personality dimensions: Emotional stability, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness, and Integrity. The factor-level structure of the MPT-BS is based on the HEXACO model, but contains different subscales and operationalizes these scales independent from the HEXACO (NOA, 2009). Participants respond on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly'. An example item is: 'I dislike rules'. Alpha reliabilities in the present study were .81 for Integrity, .92 for Emotional stability, and .90 for Conscientiousness.

2.2.3. Tagged contextualization

Behind all personality inventory items, an 'at school' tag was added. If the tag grammatically did not fit after the last word of

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