



## Assessing interpersonal functioning: Views from within and without

Daniel Leising<sup>a,\*</sup>, Sabrina Krause<sup>a</sup>, Doreen Köhler<sup>a</sup>, Kai Hinsén<sup>a</sup>, Allan Clifton<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, Vassar College, NY, USA

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### ABSTRACT

In order to better integrate research on personality pathology, interpersonal problems, and social skills, we applied the traditional methods of these three research strands (questionnaires, interviews, and interpersonal role-plays) to the same sample. Participants who attributed higher levels of interpersonal problems to themselves in general were also more critical of their own role-play performances, but these impressions were not mirrored by observer-ratings. Self-observer agreement in judging overall role-play performance was essentially zero. Interviewer-ratings of personality pathology had incremental validity over self-ratings in predicting observer-rated role-play performance. Self-reports of interpersonal functioning leave relevant behavioral variance untapped and thus should be complemented by other sources of information.

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### 1. Introduction

One of the most important ways in which people differ from each other is their ability “to act wisely in human relations” (Thorndike, 1920, p. 228). Although several research communities investigate this domain of psychological functioning, the connections between them have remained loose. In the present paper we attempt to integrate some of these strands of research with each other, by applying their preferred assessment methods to the same sample of research participants. By comparing the preferred assessment methods of the different research traditions, we also hope to shed some light on their respective advantages and limitations.

Two major strands of research have addressed individual differences in the domain of interpersonal functioning in particular. First, there are researchers who focus on “social skills” and “social competence.” These researchers primarily study children and adolescents (e.g., Rantanen et al., 2009; Rhoades, Greenberg, & Dmitrovich, 2009; Stacks & Oshio, 2009), or adults with severe psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia (e.g., Sayers & Bellack, 1995). Interestingly, this research tends to utilize social competence ratings by people other than the target persons (e.g., the children’s parents or teachers, or the patients’ therapists or nurses), as well as observer-ratings of people’s behavior in interpersonal role-plays. The use of such techniques seems to be based on the (tacit) assumption that members of these specific populations may be unable to provide accurate self-assessments of their own interper-

sonal functioning. Second, there are researchers who focus on “personality disorders” (cf. APA, 2000). These researchers rarely use terms like “social skills”, although interpersonal impairment (that is, a lack of social skills) is certainly a core element of most personality disorders (Widiger & Frances, 1985). A related research tradition focuses on “interpersonal problems” (e.g., Conroy, Elliot, & Pincus, 2009; Horowitz, 1979).

Research on personality disorders and interpersonal problems only rarely utilizes behavior observation techniques, instead relying primarily on retrospective self-report measures (Bornstein, 2003; Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2006). The present study is intended to demonstrate that all of the above-named research traditions investigate similar phenomena: They all address people’s dispositions to behave in certain ways when interacting with others, including evaluations of those behaviors as being more or less competent.

The predominant use of self-report measures in research on personality disorders and interpersonal problems presupposes that individuals should be accurate reporters of their own interpersonal functioning. There are, however, a number of problems associated with this assumption. First, most self-assessments are retrospective, and therefore depend on the accuracy of people’s memories. Second, self-assessments necessarily rely on a single source of information (Klonsky, Oltmanns, & Turkheimer, 2002), which usually leads to rather modest reliability. Third, self-assessments may be subject to response biases, both formal (e.g., a tendency to endorse extreme statements) and content-related (e.g., socially desirable responding). These potential biases are particularly problematic because (unlike peer-ratings) self-ratings may not be averaged across sources of information in order to cancel out idiosyncratic response styles (cf. Hofstee, 1994). In addition to these

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, 06099 Halle (Saale), Germany.

E-mail address: [Daniel.Leising@psych.uni-halle.de](mailto:Daniel.Leising@psych.uni-halle.de) (D. Leising).

general problems, which are associated with *all* kinds of self-report measures, there is reason to believe that self-reports of interpersonal functioning may have some more specific problems associated with them: For example, judgments of interpersonal competence have to be *evaluative*, because judging a person as “competent” requires comparing a person’s actual behavior with some imagined behavior that would be ideal, or at least sufficient. Because of this evaluativeness, judgments of competence are likely to be affected by people’s (overly) positive or negative views of themselves, or by people’s attempts to present themselves in a positive or negative light (John & Robins, 1993; Leising, Erbs, & Fritz, 2010; Paulhus, 1984; Vazire, 2010). Moreover, self-reports of interpersonal functioning may have reduced validity due to the phenomenon of “ego-syntonicity” (i.e., people may interpret their own interpersonal problems as adaptive), and some interpersonal problems may even be *defined* in terms of a *lack of awareness* regarding one’s own interpersonal behavior (e.g., a man who keeps driving people away by being boastful and condescending, but is not aware of this, because nobody cares enough to honestly tell him how he comes across). For these reasons, comparing the typical retrospective self-reports of interpersonal functioning to other sources of information seems desirable (cf. Clifton, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2004).

Studies that have actually compared different perspectives have yielded mixed results: On the one hand, self-other agreement in judging personality pathology and interpersonal functioning is generally modest to weak (e.g., Clifton, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2005; Klonsky et al., 2002; Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2006). According to Clifton et al. (2004), some of these divergences may be due to systematic discrepancies in how the targets and other people describe the same personality traits of the targets. In the present study, we therefore expected to find modest to weak self-other agreement for judgments of interpersonal functioning. On the other hand, studies have shown that pathological personality features may be recognized by strangers who watch the respective persons for very limited amounts of time only. For example, Friedman, Oltmanns, and Turkheimer (2007) found that various personality disorder characteristics (which had been assessed by peer-report and self-report) could be accurately assessed by strangers who watched the targets describe themselves for 30 s on video. Likewise, Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, and Turkheimer (2004) found that research participants with elevated levels of various forms of personality pathology were accurately judged (mainly in terms of higher or lower extraversion) by strangers who watched brief (30 s) excerpts from diagnostic interviews. In a study by Fowler, Lilienfeld, and Patrick (2009), elevated psychopathy levels in prison inmates could be judged with some accuracy based on even shorter excerpts from diagnostic interviews. Finally, Leising and Müller-Plath (2009) found that participants with avoidant personality features (as assessed by clinical interviews) who gave brief self-presentations in front of a camera were judged as being more insecure by unacquainted judges.

A shortcoming of all of these latter studies is that the assessment of the targets’ self-images and the assessment of their actual interpersonal behavior were confounded. This is because in all of these studies the video material for the “thin slice” ratings depicted targets who were talking about themselves. The strangers’ ratings were therefore based on a combination of what the targets said about themselves and how they said it. In the present study, we tried to disentangle these two kinds of information by having unacquainted raters judge the actual behavior of research participants in interpersonal role-plays that did *not* require them to report their views of their own personalities. We only know of two previous studies that investigated the predictive validity of personality pathology assessments with regard to such ratings of overt interpersonal behavior: First, Leising, Sporberg, and Rehbein

(2006) found that avoidant and dependent participants (as assessed by clinical interviews) had difficulties being assertive in brief dyadic role-plays. Second, Leising, Rehbein, and Sporberg (2007) found that the predictive validity of self-assessed submissiveness (using the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems; Horowitz, Strauß, & Kordy, 2000) with regard to behavior in these role-plays was rather limited ( $r < .30$ ). The present study builds directly on these previous ones. However, in the present study, we broaden the scope considerably, by assessing more of the DSM-IV personality disorders, and using a much broader range of interpersonal interaction situations.

Assessing different perspectives on the interpersonal functioning of the same persons also enables a test of *incremental validity*. Studies in basic personality psychology have shown that other-ratings of personality may make independent contributions in predicting various outcome variables, beyond the predictions that are possible based on self-reports alone (Connelly & Ones, 2010). We are only aware of one such study that explicitly addressed personality pathology: Oltmanns and Turkheimer (2006) showed that peer-ratings of (antisocial) personality pathology had incremental validity over self-ratings in predicting early discharge from the military. In the present study, we investigated whether *interviewer-ratings* of personality pathology have incremental validity over self-ratings in predicting people’s performances in interpersonal role-plays. This question is relevant because interviewers have to rely heavily on the information that interviewees are willing to share with them. As a consequence, interviewer-ratings may be highly redundant with what the interviewed persons would also report in self-report questionnaires, and thus ultimately expendable. To the best of our knowledge, this issue has not been empirically investigated before.

A wealth of observational measures of social skills and social competence is already in existence (e.g., Curran, 1982; Donahoe, Carter, Bloem, & Leff, 1990; Eisler, Hersen, Miller, & Blanchard, 1975; Goldsmith & McFall, 1975; McFall & Marston, 1970; Patterson, Moscona, McKibbin, Davidson, & Jeste, 2001; Sayers, Bellack, Wade, Bennett, & Fong, 1995; Tsang & Pearson, 2000). Without exception, these measures were developed within the first research tradition that we referred to above. When we inspected the various measures and compared them with one another, it became obvious that none of them were suited for our purposes: Most measures only comprise a relatively small number (e.g., two, six, eight) of interpersonal situations, which we considered insufficient for covering the domain of interpersonal (dys-)function comprehensively (e.g., the various interpersonal deficits described in the DSM-IV personality disorder criteria may not be assessed by means of such a small range of situations). On the other hand, measures that comprise a larger number of situations tend to focus on only one kind of interpersonally competent behavior. For example, the Behavioral Role Playing Test (McFall & Marston, 1970) comprises sixteen, and the Behavioral Assertiveness Test (Eisler et al., 1975) comprises 32 different interpersonal situations, but all of them are supposed to assess a person’s level of *assertiveness*. The one exception in which a large number (25) of relatively diverse interpersonal situations is employed, the Interpersonal Behavior Role-Playing Test (Goldsmith & McFall, 1975) presents the situations on audio-tape and only a single response from each participant is recorded, with no real interaction between people taking place. As we intended to observe participants’ behavior in actual interactions, with several behavioral interchanges taking place, while at the same time standardizing the responses of the participants’ interaction partners as much as possible, we decided to design our own set of interpersonal role-plays. This set of role-plays should enable direct observations of those interpersonal competencies that feature prominently in the social skills and personality disorders literature.

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