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A Call for Cross-Fertilization Among Personality and Personnel Selection Researchers

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Abstract

Lievens (2017) makes a case for SJTs in personnel selection, a recommendation with which we agree. In particular, we like the emphasis on branching out from current methodologies and using new techniques such as SJTs not only in I/O or personnel selection research but also in basic personality research. Despite our enthusiasm, we point out some flaws, most notably lack a time dimension to SJTs.

Lievens has provided an important contribution by laying out the case for more cross-disciplinary research collaboration among personality and personnel selection researchers. In order for any research discipline to make significant strides, it must branch out from the methodologies and findings within its own discipline to learn from and share with other disciplines. This also applies to the sub-disciplines of personality psychology and industrial/organizational psychology, both of which can learn from each other through the cross-fertilization of ideas and methods. Lievens makes a compelling case that this will likely extend the utility of findings in both areas.

Selection researchers and practitioners rely heavily on personality trait theories and established methods for assessing these traits. However, as Lievens points out, in personnel selection cognitive ability tests have consistently demonstrated higher levels of validity (prediction of job performance) than personality tests. Meta-analyses on the validity of Situational Judgment Tests (SJTs) have shown them to have lower predictive validity in selection contexts than cognitive ability tests, but higher validity than personality tests (Schmidt, et al., 2016). Assessment centers are similarly situated between cognitive ability and personality tests, although their validity is generally higher than that of SJTs. This is likely a result of assessment centers incorporating multiple methods, e.g., in-baskets, role-plays, leaderless group discussions, and more traditional written assessments. At best, personality tests can be said to have modest validities, probably due their breadth (facets, sub-traits or even specific items may have higher validities than broad macro traits like the Big 5; Mottus, 2016). This suggests that there is considerable need for additional research on the ways that personality traits can be more effectively deployed in personnel selection. A focal point for this research should be the development of more predictive personality

measures. Lievens suggests that SJTs are a viable option for such development. Though SJTs are considered distinct from personality tests in practice, this is primarily because they do not usually measure one familiar personality trait (e.g. Conscientiousness). Instead, they often tap multi-dimensional constructs like interpersonal skills; the highest validities have been found with SJT measures of teamwork and leadership (Christian, et al., 2010). However, it seems clear that personality traits underlie these broader measures.

In assessing personality, selection practitioners have been searching for alternative methods to the self-report questionnaire for many of the reasons cited by Lievens, i.e., susceptibility to faking, applicant perceptions, and lack of contextual specificity. This has resulted in a greater focus on video-based simulations that present realistic job scenarios, as well as gamification and game-based assessments, which are akin to generic, non-job related simulations. While Lievens suggests SJTs may be one alternative, they would need to be tailored for this purpose, as the majority of SJT's used for selection tend to assess broader characteristics than what would be useful for personality research. However, it does seem plausible that personality researchers could benefit from the SJT methodology, and its implicit belief that personality expression is fundamentally situational.

Lievens also argues that assessment center exercises could benefit personality research. Certainly, personality research could likewise benefit the practice of assessment center development and implementation. He points out that personality researchers can tailor the assessment center approach to their own needs (e.g., school, health, relationships, sports), and identifies several intersections of research that could be further explored by both selection and personality researchers. Assessment centers are unique in that they use the observations of raters to assess personality traits of others, based on actual behaviors rather than self-reports or identification of actions "one would take" under different scenarios. Further research in both directions would benefit current trends in assessment centers, and personnel selection in general, and would be timely as many virtual (computer-based) assessment centers are being developed to capture the benefits of a live assessment center while making the process shorter, less time and resource intensive, and less expensive.

Even though Lievens makes solid and interesting arguments for the use of SJTs in personnel selection, some extensions of his points seem warranted. Presenting candidates with relevant job-related situational descriptions and assessing reactions to them can potentially illuminate competencies and capabilities that are crucial for high performance. Yet this approach is not without flaws. A critical part of the SJT technique is to obtain a sense of the range of situation- and trait-relevant behaviors expressed by an individual. Developmental quantitative psychologists refer to this as intraindividual variability (Nesselroade & Boker, 1994). It is the extent to which someone expresses a wide range of behavior over some period of time. For example, some extraverts display extraverted behavior over 90% of the time, while other extraverts display lesser amounts, say 60% to 70%. Of course, this can be construed as the former having higher absolute level of extraversion, but it also implies more intraindividual variability in the latter. Lievens acknowledges this, but leaves out a critical component: time. In a contrived SJT that takes place over an hour or maybe a half-day at the most, the temporal dimension is lost. Yet behavioral variability unfolds over time, over periods of days and weeks. Characteristic situational reactions, too, unfold over periods of

days and weeks. Of course, it is difficult to carry out a personnel selection assessment over periods of days or weeks! A practical barrier exists. However, the concept of time is critical, and could be studied more in depth among current employees to allow some predictive linkage between pre-hire assessments and post-hire time-based variability in behavior and performance.

Another issue is one alluded to above when we used the word “contrived.” SJTs, like social psychology lab experiments, may not bear much resemblance to real life situations. Lab situations are often wanting in ecological validity. Many phenomena that occur in the lab do not generalize to the real world, and this constrains the predictive utility of lab tasks. SJTs may be enhanced by using situations that are as close to real life as possible. However, these criticisms are minor and we generally like the approach Lievens articulates in his target article.

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