Contextual Specificity in Personality Measurement: Improving the Prediction of Work Criteria

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Introduction

- **Contextual specificity**: specificity of the situational context to which test takers refer, such as the home, school or work context (e.g., Lievens, De Corte, & Schollaert, 2008).
- Predictive strength of personality ↑ when people are given a specific context, a so-called frame-of-reference (FOR).
- For example, the item “I strive for excellence in everything I do” can be changed into “I strive for excellence in everything I do at work”.
Contextual specificity

- The notion of a FOR effect is grounded in the theory of conditional dispositions (Wright & Mischel, 1987), which claims that

  “individuals may behave consistently and predictably within similar situations, but do not necessarily behave consistently across different situations”
Contextual specificity

Adding a FOR to personality items results in:

- **Reduction in between-person variability**: FOR helps to avoid irrelevant score differences *between* respondents (e.g., Schmit, Ryan, Stierwalt, & Powell, 1995).

- **Reduction in within-person inconsistency**: respondent is more likely to answer the personality items consistently *within* him or herself (Lievens et al., 2008).
Personality → work criteria

- Employees show all kinds of productive and less productive behaviors at work.
- Three work behaviors have been widely studied in personnel psychology (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000):
  - (1) overall job performance
  - (2) organizational citizenship behavior (OCB)
  - (3) counterproductive work behavior (CWB)
Personality → job performance

- Conscientiousness was positively and consistently related to all performance criteria for all occupational groups (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Salgado, 1997).

- At the same time, it has been found that Integrity is a positive predictor of job performance as well (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998).

- In recent years, development of a separate personality dimension for Integrity: Honesty-Humility = additional sixth dimension of the HEXACO personality model (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton et al., 2004; Lee & Ashton, 2008).
Personality → OCB

- OCB refers to behavior that, while not part of an employees’ formal job description, is nevertheless beneficial to the organization (Organ, 1988).
- Especially Conscientiousness has been shown to be important for OCB (e.g., Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009; Lapierre & Hackett, 2007).
- To our knowledge, the relation between the Honesty-Humility/Integrity dimension and OCB has not been investigated previously.
Personality → CWB

- CWB refers to intentional or unintentional actions which harm an organization or members of an organization (Spector, 1997; Sackett & DeVore, 2001) and which may violate significant organizational norms (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

- CWB includes behaviors such as absenteeism, alcohol abuse, theft, aggression against coworkers, poor-quality work, and vandalism.

- Moreover, Conscientiousness but also Honesty-Humility: negative predictors of overall CWB (e.g., Fallon, Avis, Kudisch, Gornet, & Frost, 2000; Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005).
Present study

- Hypothesis 1: Work-specific Conscientiousness and Integrity scales have stronger relations with job performance, OCB, and CWB than non-contextualized and (conceptually irrelevant) home-specific scales.

- Hypothesis 2: Home-specific Conscientiousness and Integrity scales have weaker relations with job performance, OCB, and CWB than their corresponding non-contextualized personality scales.
Method

- T1: Conscientiousness and Integrity personality scales of the Multicultural Personality Test - Big Six (MPT-BS; NOA, 2009).
- T2: Background variables and self-reported job performance, OCB, and CWB.
- 289 employees voluntarily filled out all questionnaires on the Internet (M_{age} = 37.9, SD = 14.1, 77.9% female, variety of work sectors).
Method

- Within-subject design: All participants completed 168 personality items: 56 noncontextualized items, 56 work-specific items, and 56 home-specific items.
  - Non-contextualized items: participants received the standard instructions.
  - Work-specific personality scales: adding the tag “at work” to each item. For example, the item “I keep things tidy” was altered to “I keep things tidy at work”.
  - The home-specific personality scales were designed in the exact same way as the work-specific scales.
## Results

*Correlations of the personality scales in relation to job performance (N = 289)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>work-specific</th>
<th>non-contextualized</th>
<th>home-specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r_1$</td>
<td>$r_2$</td>
<td>$r_3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
<td>47.51**</td>
<td>4.73**</td>
<td>6.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$z_{1-2}$</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$z_{2-3}$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** *p < .05, **p < .01*
## Results

Correlations of the personality scales in relation to OCB (N = 289)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>home-specific</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$z_{1-2}$</th>
<th>$z_{1-3}$</th>
<th>$z_{2-3}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>27.01**</td>
<td>4.15**</td>
<td>5.12**</td>
<td>2.72**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>4.94†</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.07**</td>
<td>4.08**</td>
<td>5.06**</td>
<td>2.76**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results

**Correlations of the personality scales in relation to CWB (N = 289)**

<table>
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<th>home-specific</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r_1$</td>
<td>$r_2$</td>
<td>$r_3$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conscientiousness</strong></td>
<td>-.45**</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Integrity</strong></td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>$R^2$</strong></td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.09**</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Conclusions

- The current study finds considerable support for the hypothesis that adding a relevant context to personality items improves the predictive validity of three important work criteria (i.e., job performance, OCB, and CWB).
- Non-contextualized (or inappropriately contextualized) personality scales yield less information about the kinds of behavior employees are likely to show in real-life work situations than appropriately contextualized personality scales.
Thank you!

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