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Forced-Choice Personality Assessment in Organizational Human Resource Selection

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According to the Society of Industrial & Organizational Psychology (SIOP), in 2001, 13% of employers use personality tests to screen job applicants for hiring purposes [1]. In 2005, that figure increased to 30% according to a national survey reported in the Washington Post [2]. In a 2011 poll conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 90 out of 495 surveyed HR professionals said that their organizations used personality tests when hiring or promoting employees [3]. This indicates a decline in the trend of employer's use of personality tests for selection purposes.

Personality tests are designed to measure job candidates' five personality traits (a.k.a. the Big Five) such as conscientiousness (e.g., I get chores done right away), extraversion (e.g., I am the life of the party), emotional stability (e.g., I change my mood a lot), agreeableness (e.g., I feel little concern for others), and openness to experience (e.g., I have a rich vocabulary). The overall purpose of administering such tests is to predict the potential candidate's likelihood to be productive on the job, improve retention, and customer satisfaction while reducing absenteeism and theft. Research has documented that conscientiousness is the most valid predictor of work outcomes with corrected validity across all jobs to be .29 [4]. One reason the validity of personality tests is lower than that of other predictors of job performance such as cognitive ability or job knowledge is because of the potential fakability of such tests in which Likert-typed format is prevalent [5]. Because of individual differences in faking (i.e., smarter people are better fakers), the rank order of candidates on any personality trait will be distorted when applicants fake, thus reducing true validity [6]. In this editorial, I would like to introduce the readers to an alternative personality test format, called forced-choice that may be more resistant to applicant faking.

A popular forced-choice measure of personality that has been widely used in organizational settings is the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ). The OPQ is a multidimensional personality measure, tapping 32 personality traits that may be grouped under the Big Five personality model. The test items are organized in blocks of four statements with equal positive or negative valance. An example of a forced-choice block is the following:"Please choose one statement out of four statements that is MOST like your behavior in work situations and one statement that is LEAST like your behavior in work situations."I am the sort of person who…." (a) has a wide circle of friends; (b) enjoys organizing people; (c) relaxes easily; or (d) seeks variety". Test items are scored using a multi-dimensional item response theory (IRT) scoring model to obtain normative scale data from forced-choice item formats [7].

The reliability and validity of the OPQ32 have been established across countries and participant groups within countries [8]. Whereas the criterion-related validity of Likert-typed personality measures remains low as discussed in previous paragraphs, the criterion related validity of the forced-choice measure, the OPQ32r for predicting overall job performance was found to be substantially higher when mapping with specific criterion measures (r = .53)[9].

In a recent study in which the validity in predicting academic performance of the commonly available Likert-typed Conscientiousness scale scores from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) available to the public domain at www.ipip.ori.org were compared with that of the OPQ32r forced-choice measure, we found that adding a bifactor to the Confirmatory Factor Analytic (CFA) model of the OPQ32r data improved model fit. A bifactor is a general factor orthogonal to and in addition to the substantive factors and which influences all personality items in a personality test. The bifactor thus captures variance that is due to applicant faking. In that study, the improvement in model fit was larger in the CFA model of IPIP data than the same of the OPQ32r data. This finding means that the forced-choice measure of conscientiousness is more resistant to applicant faking. We also found that the OPQ32r Conscientiousness scale did not predict academic performance significantly better than did the traditional Likert-typed conscientiousness scale when used as a single predictor. However, when entered together in the same regression equation, the OPQ32r added incremental validity over and above the Likert-typed conscientiousness scale scores [10]. This finding is practically significant because it means that the forced-choice measure of conscientiousness is more valid in predicting academic performance than the traditional Likert-type conscientiousness scale. Because academic performance can be used as a proxy for training performance and/or job performance, I am sanguine that pending replication of our study, the use of forced-choice personality measures in hiring and promotion will be viewed as more valid and applicant faking resistant.

One downside of forced-choice personality measures such as the OPQ32r is that they are mostly proprietary, thus, it can be cost prohibitive for smaller organizations wishing to screen their applicants using forced-choice personality measures. However, the benefit of having a faking resistant measure might justify the cost. If cost is an issue, an alternative measure is the IPIP as it is available free of charge. As a final word of caution, organizations should not use personality test scores as the sole basis for rejecting applicants. They should use those scores in combination with other selection measures such as structured interviews to avoid litigation alleging discrimination due to personality test items revealing applicant's disabilities (e.g., speech and hearing impairment) or invasion of privacy [11].

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