An overview of contemporary personality assessment

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While many personality instruments have been constructed, questions remain as to their predictive validity (Boyle & Saklofske, 2004). According to Meyer et al. (2001, p. 128), “(a) Psychological test validity is strong and compelling, (b) psychological test validity is comparable to medical test validity, (c) distinct assessment methods provide unique sources of information, and (d) clinicians who rely exclusively on interviews are prone to incomplete understandings.” Claims (a) and (b) have been seriously criticised (e.g., see critiques by Fernandez-Ballesteros, 2002; Garb et al., 2002; Smith, 2002). Likewise, the often claimed incremental value of multimethod assessment may be overzealous (Hunsley, 2002), in spite of the utility of integrative personality assessment with adults (e.g., Beutler & Groth-Marnat, 2003) and children (e.g., Flanagan, 2007; Riccio & Rodriguez, 2007). Indeed, RTI (response to intervention) proponents challenge the view that multiple assessment methods can facilitate diagnosis and subsequent intervention strategies (e.g., see Boyle, Matthews, & Saklofske, in press).

Various strategies have been employed in constructing personality instruments (e.g., see Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2005). While, deductive strategies employ both face valid (logical content strategy) and theory driven views of personality, these approaches to constructing items may facilitate inaccuracy and response bias. Criterion-keyed instruments rely on item discrimination (e.g., between previously defined clinical groups). Personality
instruments constructed using criterion keying, include for example, Hathaway and McKinley’s MMPI (and its revised version, the MMPI-2; see Helmes & Reddon, 1993 for a critique), the *Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory* (e.g., Millon, 2006), as well as the *California Psychological Inventory* (Gough, 1987). Exploratory factor analysis (see Gorsuch, 1983) has been used extensively in elucidating the major personality trait dimensions. For example, Cattell’s *Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire* (16PF) was derived from over 4000 trait descriptors that were reduced down to 36 lists of synonyms and then factor-analytically reduced further down to 16 primary source trait dimensions (see Boyle, 1989, 2006). Some other factor-analytically derived trait instruments include Eysenck’s EPQ-R; Costa and McCrae’s (1992) NEO-PI-R, Cattell and Krug’s Clinical Analysis Questionnaire (CAQ) – see Krug (in press), and Morey’s (2007)Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI).

The NEO-PI-R, in spite of varying criticisms remains a popular instrument for assessing putative trait dimensions labeled: Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience. However, the NEO-PI-R accounts for less than 2/3 of the known trait variance within the normal personality sphere alone (Boyle et al., 1995, p. 432).

As genetic, biological, and neurological markers for specific personality traits are discovered, the almost exclusive reliance on subjective self-report questionnaires and rating scales is showing some signs of change. Contemporary personality assessment emphasises case history, interview, observation, behavioural as well as informal assessment strategies,
in combination with use of standardized questionnaires. However, standardized, norm referenced questionnaires are used predominantly for personality assessment (Meyer et al., 2001).

In contrast to performance measures used in the assessment of cognitive abilities (intelligence tests), personality assessment has largely employed subjective self-report techniques or reports of others using questionnaires, checklists and rating scales. The development of standardized questionnaires was prompted by the need for scales that would minimize administration, scoring and interpretation errors (see Matthews et al., 2003).

In recent years, behavioural genetics and neuropsychological research have enhanced the study of personality. While some personality theories are grounded in brain-behaviour and genetic explanations (e.g., Eysenck’s E & N factors), objective tests of these hypothetical links are now possible via use of MRI and fMRI, along with metabolic, neurotransmitter, and/or genetic indicators.

Personality questionnaires may be evaluated against agreed standards for determining the efficacy of a given psychological measure (cf. AERA/APA/NCME Test Standards, 1999). These standards provide a basis for interpreting reliability and validity, as follows:

1. To provide evidence for reliability and information on the standard error of measurement.
2. To demonstrate that a meaningful relationship exists between item content and the construct being measured.
(3) To provide analyses of the relationships between a construct and the responses provided (e.g., ruling out biases and response sets).

(4) To demonstrate that the internal structure of a construct is unidimensional or multidimensional; hierarchical in structure, etc.

(5) To localize a construct within a nomological net (involving construct validity, which includes convergent, discriminant and predictive validity).

Footnote

Parenthetically, virtually all present personality instruments are self-report scales or rating scales which attempt to quantify subjective introspections, or subjective impressions of others. One may legitimately question the validity of subjective introspections and the apparent ease with which responses may be faked or distorted, either consciously or unconsciously (see Cattell & Johnson, 1986). There are very few multidimensional “personality tests” as such—the Objective-Analytic Battery (Schuerger, in press) being a notable exception (cf. Cattell & Warburton’s, 1967, compendium). Given the issues surrounding item transparency and motivational distortion (Boyle, 1985), there is clearly a need to move beyond introspective questionnaires and subjective rating scales, to objective tests of personality structure. Construction of computer-interactive objective personality tests remains a challenge for psychometric researchers in the 21st century.
References


