

SHORT NOTE

A VALIDITY STUDY OF A FREE-RESPONSE
SELF-DESCRIPTION METHOD FOR
PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

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In this study the discriminant validity of a free-response self-description method for personality assessment is examined. From the self-descriptions of subjects belonging to seven different groups scores are derived on eight personality trait dimensions. Multivariate analyses of variance and subsequent univariate analyses indicate that the groups differ with respect to the trait dimensions for which inter-group differences are theoretically plausible. It is concluded that the free-response self-description method does successfully discriminate between subjects on account of their personality structure.

Arguments supporting the use of free-response self-description methods for personality assessment instead of or in addition to the more traditional inventory-type assessment methods have been amply adduced. First of all, because the instruction to describe oneself using words of one's own choice is very comprehensible and because the procedure itself does not take a lot of time, this method is to both the investigator and the subject more appealing than the questionnaires requiring often very elaborate and confusing instructions.

Secondly, the immediateness of free-response self-description and the absence of mediating terms imposed by the investigator may stimulate the subjects to focus their attention towards themselves, enhancing the chances to retrieve relevant information about their own behavior (Claeys, 1980; De Boeck, 1981; Wicklund, 1982).

Finally, since the subjects can use their own words to describe their personality, they are not obliged to answer questions which they find irrelevant or too difficult. Advocates of ideographic trends in personality assessment tend to attribute the low predictive validity of most

personality questionnaires partly to the fact that not all the items are relevant to all subjects (Bem & Allen, 1974; Turner & Gilliland, 1979).

Apart from a few initial attempts (Pervin, 1976; Turner & Gilliland, 1979), free-response self-description personality assessment methods have not been used very often, mainly because of the problem of scoring an open-ended self-description task in an objective and reliable way. A first endeavor to solve this difficulty was undertaken by Claeys and his associates (Claeys, De Boeck, Van Den Bosch, Biesmans & Böhler, *in press*) who called in the help of expert judges to rate self-description adjectives on five personality traits. In an attempt to further elaborate this approach, a method has been developed in the Belgian Armed Forces Psychological Research Section in collaboration with the Laboratory for Personality Research of the University of Louvain, to derive scores on eight trait dimensions from the adjectives a subject uses to describe his or her personality. These trait dimensions are: social desirability, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, general culture, leadership, and creativity. For a detailed account of the technique, as well as for information regarding its reliability and validity, the interested reader is referred to Böhler (1984).

The present report presents an additional validity study of this free-response self-description personality assessment method. The purpose of the study was to investigate to what extent the procedure discriminates among groups of subjects that can be assumed to differ with respect to the trait dimensions being measured.

METHOD

Seven groups, each consisting of 38 subjects, participated in the study:

- Applicant regular officers of the Belgian Army upon their selection at the Belgian Armed Forces Center for Recruitment and Selection in Brussels;
- Applicant regular officers of the Belgian Army in their first year of training at the Royal Military School in Brussels;
- Applicant reserve officers of the Belgian Army upon their selection;
- Applicant warrant officers upon their entrance examination for the Nautical College in Antwerp;
- Male applicants for an overseas cultural exchange program;

- Female applicants for an overseas cultural exchange program;
- High School students in their senior year.

Ages ranged from 15 to 25.

Each subject was asked to write down ten adjectives describing his or her personality on a special answer sheet. There was no time limit.

RESULTS

The adjectives reported by the subjects were scored according to the method developed in the Belgian Armed Forces Psychological Research Section (cf. Böhler, 1984), yielding per subject scores on the eight trait dimensions mentioned before. These subject scores were not normalized. The mean scores for each group on the eight trait dimensions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. — Mean scores of seven groups of subjects on eight trait dimensions

	social desirability	extra- version	agree- ableness	conscien- tiousness	neuro- ticism	general culture	leader- ship	creativity
applicant regular off. (selection)	88.6	23.7	36.1	39.0	-16.5	27.8	48.1	19.8
applicant regular off. (Mil. School)	91.9	24.1	41.1	29.7	-20.7	25.4	49.2	23.0
applicant reserve officers	81.2	14.8	35.9	29.8	-14.6	24.3	37.5	21.7
applicants Nautical College	80.5	28.9	41.8	23.8	-22.4	27.0	43.7	26.4
male applicants exchange program	81.3	28.5	45.0	13.9	-21.9	23.3	29.1	28.3
female applicants exchange program	77.3	25.8	43.9	18.4	-13.2	20.1	22.6	21.7
high school students	44.4	10.1	24.5	12.8	-0.8	13.0	16.1	13.3

A MANOVA on these data revealed significant inter-group differences ($F(48,1244) = 3.72, p < 0.001$). Univariate ANOVAs demonstrated a significant effect on each trait dimension separately.

A MANOVA on the scores of both groups of applicant regular officers and of the reserve officers shows no significant differences among these three groups ($F(16,208) = 1.09, n.s.$). Applicants to the Nautical College differ from these groups only with respect to conscientiousness ($F(3,148) = 3.13, p < 0.05$).

Tab. 2. — Discriminant analysis classification matrix

	applicant regular & reserve officers	applicants Nautical College	male applicants exchange program	female applicants exchange program	high school students
applicant regular & reserve officers	43*	19	12	11	15
applicants Nautical College	16	39	18	11	16
male applicants exchange program	13	11	47	24	5
female applicants exchange program	11	11	24	39	16
high school students	16	11	5	8	60

* Percentage of subjects belonging to the row group that is classified on the basis of the discriminant functions in the column group

The two groups of applicants for the cultural exchange program are significantly different from the other groups and from each other. As compared to the applicants to the Nautical College, the applicant exchange students score lower on conscientiousness ($F(1,74)=4.80$, $p < 0.05$) and on leadership ($F(1,74)=8.58$, $p < 0.01$). Male and female applicants for the exchange program differ significantly with respect to neuroticism ($F(1,74)=10.60$, $p < 0.01$) and creativity ($F(1,74)=4.69$, $p < 0.05$). The male applicants describe their own personality as less neurotic and more creative.

Compared to the group of applicants to the Nautical College the high school students have lower scores on social desirability ($F(1,74)=19.18$, $p < 0.001$), extraversion ($F(1,74)=10.21$, $p < 0.01$), agreeableness ($F(1,74)=9.12$, $p < 0.001$), general culture ($F(1,74)=14.78$, $p < 0.001$), leadership ($F(1,74)=25.17$, $p < 0.001$), creativity ($F(1,74)=16.76$, $p < 0.001$), and conscientiousness ($F(1,74)=4.53$, $p < 0.05$). Their scores on the neuroticism scale are significantly higher ($F(1,74)=20.31$, $p < 0.001$).

Finally, a multiple group discriminant analysis was performed on the data. Groups that had been found not to be significantly different were pooled. Table 2 presents the classification matrix constructed on the basis of the discriminant functions.

Cell entries indicate the percentage of subjects belonging to the row group that were classified into the column group.

The highest percentage of correct assignments is reached for the group of high school students (60%), the lowest percentage for the applicants to the Nautical College and for the female applicants for the exchange program (39% for both groups). The highest percentage of incorrect allocations can be observed for male applicants for the exchange program who are assigned to the female applicant group, and for female applicants for the exchange program who are assigned to the male group (24% in both cases).

DISCUSSION

Personality tests are known to have very limited predictive power. In spite of numerous efforts to increase these values, for most inventories a predictive validity coefficient exceeding 0.20 to 0.30 cannot be obtained (Mischel, 1968). The same applies for the free-response self-description method. Previous studies have confirmed that the procedure discussed above reaches a predictive validity which is not higher nor lower than

that of most other personality assessment methods (Claeys et al., in press; Böhler, 1984).

However, an other important aspect of the validity of an assessment procedure is the ability to discriminate between subjects or groups of subjects who can be presumed to differ with respect to the variables being measured. The free-response self-description method studied here indeed produces significantly different scores for distinct groups of subjects. These differences only occur on the trait dimensions for which group distinctions are plausible.

When applied to regular officers once upon selection and once during the first year of training and to applicant reserve officers, no significant differences are obtained on any of the trait dimensions. It is known that important personality changes are not likely to occur between the moment of selection for an officer career and the first year of training. Also, the same basic personality can be assumed to account for a regular or a reserve officer career choice. The fact that applicants to the Nautical College can only be distinguished from the three preceding groups by their lower scores on conscientiousness is in agreement with the many similarities that exist between the career of a military officer and a warrant officer.

Candidates for an overseas cultural exchange program, however, are directed towards another type of career, for which extraversion, agreeableness and general culture are probably as important as for a military career, whereas conscientiousness and leadership are less emphasized. Consequently, male applicants for the exchange program obtain lower scores for leadership and conscientiousness in their self-description than applicants for a regular, reserve, or warrant officer career.

In addition, female applicants for the exchange program appear to be less creative and more neurotic than their male peers, judging from their free-response self-description scores. It would be interesting to investigate whether or not this sex difference is specific to students applying for an overseas exchange experience.

Finally, the scores obtained by the group of high school students clearly are the most distinct from those of all other groups. They describe themselves as being less extravert, agreeable, conscientious, leading and creative, having less general culture, and being more neurotic than the subjects of the other groups. Although this group can be expected to differ from the others because of various reasons (e.g., they have not made a decision regarding their future yet), the fact that

their self-presentation is also less socially desirable suggests that these differences can at least partly be accounted for by the absence of the pressure characterizing most selection situations.

The results of the discriminant analysis corroborate these findings. In every group significantly more subjects are assigned to the correct group on the basis of their free-description scores than to any other group. Again, this is particularly the case for the high school students, who can be assumed to differ mostly from the other subjects. Conversely, the highest percentage of incorrect classifications can be observed for male and female subjects applying for the same cultural exchange program.

CONCLUSION

The study presented in this article was conducted to gain additional information about the validity of the free-response self-description method, not to establish its validity unequivocally! For the latter purpose, the obvious way to proceed would be to study criterion predictions. Using such a design, the validity of the method discussed here has been proven to equal that of most other personality assessment methods.

However, the results of the present study demonstrate that the free-response self-description method can serve as a useful tool for discriminating between subjects and for classifying them into groups of people with a similar personality structure.

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