

ACTIVITY 2

Personality and Personality Assessment

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From original TOPSS unit lesson plan on *Personality*

Introduction

This activity provides a vehicle for the discussion of numerous issues, including test construction, gender differences, operational definition, reliability, validity, methodology, and so forth. There is virtually no advance preparation, but you will need to type and reproduce the personality test between classes. Because of the data collection component, the activity extends over two class sessions. You should familiarize students with the guidelines for research with human participants. The activity could be used with classes of virtually any size.



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Concept

This activity is a multipart exercise that focuses on personality and personality assessment. It can be used as a starting point for discussion of a wide variety of issues surrounding personality and personality assessment, as well as issues of reliability and validity, difficulty in defining constructs, issues in test construction, and so forth. The exercise described is for a class of 24 students; the procedures and groups can be modified to fit classes of different sizes.

Instructions

Begin the personality activity by making some introductory remarks about the nature of personality as a “construct” and the difficulty psychologists have in defining it. Ask students to call out terms that they feel are part of the construct of personality, commonly called personality traits or characteristics. Write each of the terms on the chalkboard. Usually in 5 or 10 minutes there are 25 to 30 terms on the board, including such terms as sense of humor, sociability, friendliness, honesty, sincerity, leadership, and so forth.



At this point, tell the students they are going to participate in the construction of a personality test. To do this, they are to narrow their list of terms to eight they feel are the major components of personality. Encourage students to eliminate most terms from the list, because otherwise the class will spend large amounts of time in debate without reducing the number of terms. Some terms can be eliminated quickly because most students will agree they are of lesser importance. In other cases terms can be combined; for example, sociability and friendliness, or honesty and trustworthiness. The final list of eight terms is usually agreed on about 20 to 25 minutes after the start of the class.

Quickly divide the class into eight groups, each composed of three students. (This can be done easily by forming groups where students are seated so they do not have to move around.) Assign one of the terms to each of the eight groups and tell the students they have 10 to 15 minutes to write, as a group, two test items they believe will measure that particular characteristic of personality. To ensure uniformity in the format of the items, provide several examples for the students, typically using one of the terms not included in their final eight. (This means you should prepare sample items for several potential constructs prior to class.) For example, suppose *leadership* is a term that the class did not select. You might give them sample items such as “When I join clubs, I like to assume one of the officer positions in the club” or “People usually seek my opinion when they are having problems.” Make students understand the questions need to be written so they can be answered true or false.

Tell students their items will be used to construct a personality test made up of 16 questions, that is, the two items they generated for each of the eight terms the class selected. (Poorly written items may be included because the results they are likely to produce will lead to an interesting discussion.) Type the tests and make one copy for each student. Tell them to take one copy of their test and administer it to two students (preferably one of each sex) who are not enrolled in any of the introductory psychology classes. Include a disclaimer in the test that indicates it has no validity and is being used solely for instructional purposes. Indicate on answer sheets only the sex of the person answering the questions.

After the test has been administered, begin the analysis by writing the numbers 1 through 16 on the chalkboard and listing the number of true responses given for each item by sex. This tallying procedure is accomplished easily by having the students vote by a show of one, both, or no hands. For example, begin with responses from men, starting with item 1, by asking for a show of one hand for true responses. Students would hold up one hand, both hands, or no hands, depending on the responses of

their male subjects. Record the response frequencies for female subjects in the same manner. It is also important to note the total number of female and male subjects in the survey to provide a context for evaluating the data. Students should have their copy of the survey in front of them so the discussion that follows is meaningful. The recording of these responses on the board usually takes no more than 10 minutes.

Discussion

I usually focus the discussion on three kinds of findings. First, are there any items that show major sex differences in terms of frequency of responses? Typically one or two items will show such differences, and I ask students to speculate on the reasons for the different response patterns. Second, we look at the pairs of items that are supposed to be measuring the same characteristic. (Remember that items are not adjacent in the test because they are randomly distributed prior to typing.) It is common to find that one item in a pair will produce a response pattern that is quite different from the other, which makes for an interesting discussion about what the two items may be measuring. Third, we look at the items to see if any were uniformly regarded in one way, that is, items that nearly everyone answered either true or false.

This activity has many benefits, including the following: (a) It teaches students about the complexity of psychological constructs; (b) it taps an area — personality — that is familiar and of great interest to them; (c) it gives them firsthand experience with the issue of face validity; (d) it provides them with an opportunity to participate in small-group activities (i.e., those with two to four students); (e) it allows them to actually collect psychological data; (f) it gives them some experience in thinking about the meaning of questionnaire results; (g) it shows them some of the problems inherent in psychological assessment; (h) it gives them a closer look at some of the problems of the trait approach to personality; and (i) it provides an excellent vehicle for class discussion with minimal involvement from you. In addition, this exercise can provide a teaching bridge into many other substantive areas of psychology.

