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What Does Exercise-Based Assessment Really Mean?

FILIP LIEVENS
Ghent University

My commentary addresses Lance's (2008) recommendation to reorient assessment center (AC) practice away from dimensions toward exercise-based assessment. As exercise-based assessment is dealt with only in general terms in Lance's article, I aim to delineate what exercise-based assessment really means. Two points are made. First, I argue that taking dimensions away from ACs does not mean that assessee behavior is no longer determined by latent traits because behavior is inherently trait determined. Second, I elaborate on the practical and research implications of exercise-based assessment because these implications are underdeveloped in Lance.

Exercise-Based Assessment

Theoretical underpinnings. Conceptually, it is crucial to make a distinction between trait expression (on the part of candidates, employees, etc.) and trait evaluation (on the part of assessors, raters, etc.). In other fields, examples of this distinction are abounding. For example, in performance appraisal, one might rate employees on their accomplishment of specific objectives instead of on dimensions (as is the case in management by objectives). However, at the same time, it is still acknowledged that in day-to-day interactions, employees might demonstrate behavior that is determined by their standing on traits and activated by situational characteristics. By the same token, exercise-based AC practices might go hand in hand with acknowledging that candidate behavior is trait determined. The only difference is that in exercise-based assessment, the traits under consideration (the AC dimensions) are no longer rated. Thus, eliminating dimensions as rating tools from ACs does not imply that candidate behavior is no longer trait determined. In other words, the notions of assessors rating dimensions in an AC and candidates demonstrating trait-determined behavior are independent from each other.

Let me clarify that "trait determined" does not imply stability in candidate behavior. This is well reflected in a recent interactionist theory such as trait activation theory (Lievens, Chasteen, Day, & Christiansen, 2006; Tett & Burnett, 2003). Trait activation theory focuses on the person–situation interaction to explain behavior based on responses to trait-relevant cues found in situations. Trait activation theory starts with the common notion that a person's trait level is expressed as trait-relevant behavior (at work, in AC exercises, etc.). Apart from the main effect of situations on work behavior (and vice versa), a key axiom underlying trait

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Filip Lievens. E-mail: filip.lievens@ugent.be

Address: Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

Filip Lievens, Department of Personnel Management, Work and Organizational Psychology, Ghent University.

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activation theory is that traits will manifest as trait-expressive work behaviors only when trait-relevant cues are present. It is posited that specific task features (e.g., a messy desk), social features (e.g., problem with colleagues), and organizational features (e.g., team-based organizational culture) are posited to moderate whether and how traits are expressed in trait-relevant behavior. For example, a trait such as autonomy is likely not to be expressed in routine monotonous jobs (task level), in the presence of a controlling supervisor (social level), or in a rigid autocratic culture (organizational level), whereas it is likely to be activated in the reverse conditions. All these examples are easily transferable to AC exercises.

Lance mentions trait activation theory. However, it is treated as another "fix" for solving ACs. Granted, in prior studies that have examined trait activation in ACs (e.g., Lievens et al., 2006), this theory was used post hoc for explaining the results obtained. However, relegating trait activation theory to one of the AC fixes does not pay tribute to this theory because trait activation primarily deals with *candidates* demonstrating trait-relevant behavior (trait expression model) instead of with *assessors* perceiving and rating that behavior in trait-like terms (trait evaluation model; see Lance, Foster, Gentry, & Thoresen, 2004). Therefore, it has great benefits to shed light on strategies for increasing the amount of candidate behavior to be observed in exercises. Hence, the remainder delineates how trait activation theory might be used to advance both research and practice of exercise-based assessment.

A research agenda. As Lance noted, most prior AC research focused on assessors. Given the importance of candidates' cross-situationally inconsistent performance across exercises, I agree that research should also pay attention to *assessees*. Below, I provide concrete research suggestions around the three general issues (individual characteristics, exercise characteristics, and their interaction) noted by Lance.

First, we need to better understand which individual differences variables affect candidate performance across exercises. It might be particularly relevant to examine a broad category of constructs called social effectiveness constructs. According to Ferris, Perrewé, and Douglas (2002), social effectiveness is one of a number of "broad, higher-order, umbrella terms, which groups a number of moderately related, yet conceptually distinctive, manifestations of social understanding and competence" (p. 50). These social effectiveness constructs are known under various aliases such as social competence, self-monitoring, social skill, and so on. People high on these constructs are typically able to "read" situations better than others and flexibly adapt their interpersonal behavior in line with the cues gathered. In the particular context of selection, the ability to identify the criteria used in a selection procedure fits in this broad category of social effectiveness constructs (König, Melchers, Kleinmann, Richter, & Klehe, 2007). For instance, König et al. showed that the ability to identify criteria explained part of the relationship between performances in selection procedures even after controlling for cognitive ability. Such research might provide insight in individual differences variables that affect cross-situational inconsistency.

Second, research should scrutinize exercise characteristics. To date, an AC exercise is largely a black box. We know little about how variations in exercise instructions and exercise design might influence performance. We need to find out which exercise characteristics are "incidentals" (i.e., surface exercise characteristics that do not determine performance) and which ones are "radicals" (i.e., structural exercise characteristics that determine performance). In a related domain (situational judgment tests), research has shown that even minor variations in the situations presented to candidates might affect performance (Lievens & Sackett, 2007).

Third, the interaction between individual differences variables and exercise characteristics should be an important focus of future research. In this context, an interactionist theory as trait activation theory might serve as inspiration. For clarity reasons, trait

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activation theory is not used here to increase convergent and discriminant validities. Instead, it might help to better understand factors that affect candidate performance variations across exercises. For example, trait activation theory might help to identify which exercise factors trigger and release trait-relevant candidate behavior versus which ones impede trait-relevant candidate behavior (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Clearly, such programmatic research on candidate behavior and AC exercises is welcome.

The practical side. At a practical level, I want to extend Lance's article by outlining what exercise-based assessment might really mean in practice. Exercise-based assessment is more than simulating key task, social, and organizational demands and rating general exercise performance. It also means that we build opportunities in AC exercises that elicit job-related behavior. In other words, it also includes important exercise design issues. Again, I want to emphasize that these practical suggestions are not meant to fix the AC to obtain "better" convergent and discriminant validities. Neither are they provided to rate personality traits in exercises. Conversely, these suggestions are meant to guarantee that trait-relevant and job-relevant *behaviors* are displayed by candidates. Regardless of how that behavior is then captured by assessors (in task-based models, dimension-based models, etc.), eliciting and observing behavior are key to effective ACs and development centers.

One way to elicit behavior consists of paying attention to exercise instructions. In ACs, exercise instructions provide information and expectations to candidates about what behavior to show or not to show. For example, exercise instructions might be vague (e.g., "solve the problem") or more concrete (e.g., "motivate the problem subordinate"). Similarly, exercise instructions might be unidimensional (e.g., reach consensus) or multidimensional (e.g., reach consensus and make the company more profitable). Clearly, these are only some examples of possible variations in exercise instructions. To date, we know little about how such variations might affect the AC behavior demonstrated and its determinants.

Roleplayer cues are another means for eliciting trait-related behavior. In current AC practice, roleplayers are typically given a specific list of things to do and to avoid. Roleplayers are also trained to perform realistically albeit consistently across candidates. Although these best practices have proven their usefulness, a key function of trained roleplayers consists of evoking dimension-related behavior from candidates (Thornton & Mueller-Hanson, 2004). Roleplayer cues that are determined on the basis of trait activation theory should subtly elicit assessee behavior because otherwise the situations might become too strong.

More generally, AC developers should carefully build design characteristics into exercises that might elicit specific trait-related behavior. In current AC practice, exercises are primarily developed to increase fidelity and criterion-related validity. I am not proposing that this practice should be abandoned. However, strategies that activate trait-relevant behavior should also play a role. For example, if organizations want to activate behavior related to the trait of emotional stability (without rating this trait) that was deemed important on the basis of a job analysis, they must use exercises that put people in a situation that might activate behavior relevant to this trait. An oral presentation with challenging questions might be an obvious strategy. Other examples might be the inclusion of stringent time limits, sudden obstacles, or information overload in exercises.

Conclusions

Lance argues that AC researchers have been asking the "wrong" questions for years. My commentary extends Lance's article by outlining what might be the "right" questions in the next years. From a research perspective, my commentary might serve as a springboard for examining what determines assessee behavior and performance. At a practical level, it might provide practitioners with

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clues for better exercise design and for generating more trait-related and job-related behaviors in exercises.

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