A Class Exercise in Personality and Psychological Assessment

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Our course in introductory psychology provides two kinds of classes for the students: a large lecture section of approximately 240 students that meets twice a week and a small group class (20-30 students) that meets once a week for each student. Thus each large lecture class is subdivided into 8-12 smaller groups. Activities vary in these small groups but they have in common an attempt to take advantage of the small class size and thus to do things that could not be handled in the large lecture section. Some small group sessions involve demonstrations, others experiments, and still others are discussion oriented. This article describes a two-week exercise that focuses on personality and psychological assessment. That is, it is a two-part activity conducted in successive weeks in conjunction with lecture material on personality the first week and psychological assessment in the second week. These small groups are staffed by graduate students who have completed (or are currently enrolled in) a graduate course on the teaching of psychology.

Procedure. The personality activity begins with the instructor making some introductory remarks about the nature of personality as a construct and the difficulty psychologists have in defining it. The students are then asked to call out terms that they feel are part of the construct of personality. The instructor merely serves as a recorder at this time, writing each of the terms on the chalkboard. Usually in 5-10 minutes there are 25 to 30 terms on the board including such things as sense of humor, sociability, friendliness, honesty, sincerity, leadership, and so forth. At this point, the instructor tells the students that they are going to participate in the construction of a personality test. To do this they need to narrow their list of terms to the eight that they feel are major components of personality. (There is nothing magical about the number eight, more or fewer terms could be used.) In this part of the exercise the instructor takes a more active role in the process by encouraging students to eliminate most terms from the list, otherwise the class will spend the entire hour in debate without reducing the number of terms. Some terms can be eliminated quickly because most students will agree that they are of lesser importance. In other cases terms can be combined, for example, sociability and friendliness, or honesty and trustworthiness. We have found that the final list of eight terms is usually agreed upon by about 20-25 minutes after the start of class.

Quickly the instructor divides the class into eight groups, each composed of 2-4 students. This can be done easily by forming groups where students are seated so that they do not have to move around. Next, one of the terms is assigned to each of the eight groups and each group informed that they have 10-15 minutes to jointly write two items that they believe will measure that particular characteristic of personality. In order to ensure uniformity in the format of the items, several examples are provided for the students, typically using one of the terms that was not included in their final eight. For example, suppose that leadership is a term that the class did not select. The instructor 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." Students are made to understand that the questions need to be written so that they can be answered "true" or "false."

If there is time at the end of the class, several of the groups are asked to read one or more of the items they have written. Someone in each group should have the responsibility of recording all the items on a single sheet. These sheets are collected and students are given instructions about the rest of the exercise. They are told that 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 since the results they are likely to produce will lead to interesting discussion.) These questionnaires will be coded with a number corresponding to each class so that students will not use the questionnaire generated by some other class. The tests are typed and copies made available a day or so after the class meeting. They are placed in an envelope marked with the class number and can be picked up at the office of the graduate student in charge of that class section. Students are told to take one copy of their test and administer it to two students (preferably one male and one female) who are not enrolled in the introductory psychology classes. The test contains a disclaimer which indicates that it has no validity and is being used solely for instructional purposes. Answer sheets contain only the number code for the particular form of the test and the sex of the person answering the questions. Students in the small group classes are told to bring those responses to class with them the following week.

Analysis. The class session in the second week is begun by placing the numbers 1 through 16 on the chalkboard and listing the number of "true" responses for each item by sex. This tallying procedure is accomplished easily by having the students "vote" by a show of hands. The instructor might begin with responses from males, starting with item 1, by asking for a show of hands on "true" responses. Students who had not tested any males obviously would not vote at that time. Other students would hold up one hand, both hands, or no hands, depending upon the responses of their male subjects. The response frequencies for female subjects are then recorded 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 in the class will need to have their copy of the survey in front of them so that the discussion that follows is meaningful. The recording of these responses on the board
usually takes no more than 10 minutes.

We usually focus the discussion on three kinds of findings. First, are there any items that show major sex differences in terms of the frequency of responses? Typically one or two items will show such differences and the students are asked to speculate on the reasons for the different response patterns. Second, we look at the pairs of items (which are not adjacent in the test since the items are randomly distributed prior to typing) that are supposed to be measuring the same characteristic. It is common to find that one member of the pair of items will produce a response pattern that is quite different from the other member of the pair. Such a result makes for an interesting discussion about what the two items may be measuring. Third, we look at the items to see if any seem not to discriminate, that is, items which nearly everyone answered either true or false. In addition, we give the students a handout showing the various sets of eight terms generated by the other classes. This information is useful to show the lack of consensus in defining the most important characteristics of personality.

Values. There are a wealth of issues surrounding personality and psychological assessment that can be experienced and discussed in this exercise, e.g., issues of reliability and validity, difficulty in defining constructs, issues in item construction and test construction, and so forth. We have used the exercise in our course for the past two years and it has rated as a favorite activity for a number of students. We believe that the assets of the activity are as follows: (a) it teaches students about the complexity of psychological constructs, (b) it taps an area, personality, that is familiar to students and of great interest to them, (c) it gives them first-hand experience with the issue of face validity, (d) it gives them an opportunity for participation in some small group (2-4 students) activities, (e) it provides them with an opportunity to actually collect some 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 students 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 the instructor. The feedback we have received in written evaluations from students indicates that they view those two weeks as a significant learning experience.

Of course the activity that has been described here can be modified in a number of ways, even to fit larger classes. Instructors should make whatever modifications they desire to best fit their teaching situation.

Note
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An Inexpensive Solid-State Reaction Timer

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Commercially available solid-state reaction timers are beyond the budget of all but the most affluent psychology departments. However, a solid-state alarm clock kit may be modified to time events to the nearest 1/60 sec at a cost of less than $20.00.

Briefly, the clock is permanently wired in the "alarm display" mode. When the experimenter presses the "start" push-button, the clock advances at a rate of 60Hz. The clock stops when the subject presses the "stop" button and the experimenter may record the data while the subject keeps the "stop" button depressed. Normally, a flip-flop would be used to control the timing circuit, but in this apparatus economy is served by the use of a simple NO-NC switch circuit (see Fig. 1).

The components are assembled in the Superseal Food Saver (or comparable plastic box) and have served to measure reaction times in over 300 subjects without any electrical or mechanical problems. As with any device powered by 115 VAC, supervision of undergraduate experimenters must be provided. The circuit can be further modified to provide the experimenter with a remote switch, program additional stimuli (with DPDT "start" and "stop" switches), and serve as a timer for any events up to 24 sec in duration.

Table 1. List of Materials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>MA1002G (or 1002E) Clock Kit, including transformer</td>
<td>$10.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>115 VAC line cord and plug</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Normally Closed (NC) switch, momentary</td>
<td>$0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Normally Open (NO) switch, momentary</td>
<td>$0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Superseal Clear 48oz Flat Food Saver</td>
<td>$3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note
Reprints may be obtained from J. R. Corey, Department of Psychology, C. W. Post College, Greenvale, NY 11548.

Figure 1. A solid-state reaction timer circuit from a modified alarm clock module and two switches.