Nature of personality assessment

- Personality
  - Any characteristic pattern of behavior, thought, or emotional experience that exhibits relative consistency across time and situations
- Personality assessment isn’t restricted to psychologists
- Assessments by nonpsychologists are more widespread and they may be even more important
  - Those done by your family, friends, you, etc.
- We make choices about who to spend time with and who to avoid based upon these assessments
- Most important is the degree to which it’s right or wrong
  - Regardless of the source of the personality assessment, it must be evaluated according to the same criteria
    - Validity—eval of professional personality judgments or personality tests
    - Accuracy—eval of amateur judgments
- Two basic criteria
  - Agreement
    - Does this judgment agree with other judgments obtained through other techniques or from other judges (professional or amateur)?
  - Prediction
    - Can this judgment of personality be used to predict behavior?

The business of testing

- Some tests look superficially alike, but below the surface they are not the same
  - You need to know some about how personality assessments are constructed to tell a valid one from an invalid one

Personality tests

- Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)
- California Psychological Inventory (CPI)
- Sixteen Personality Factor (16PF)
- NEO-PI
  - Measures 5 broad traits + subscales
  - “Type A” personality
    - Measures just 1 trait

S-data vs. b-data personality tests

- Most personality tests provide “S” data
  - Ask what you’re like-a summary of how you’ve described yourself
- Other assessments yield “B” data
  - MMPI
    - The item “I prefer a shower to a bath” provides info about some aspect of personality rather than the literal answer (preferring the shower is an empathic response)
  - Implicit Associations Test (IAT)
    - Measures how quickly participants can respond to instructions to discriminate between terms that apply to “me” or to “others” and between terms that are relevant, or not, to the trait being measured
    - The theory is that people who “implicitly” (not consciously) know they’re shy will have faster associations between “me” and “why” than between “me” and “nonshy”
  - Intelligence or IQ tests
    - Ask questions of varying difficulty, such as reasoning or math problems, that they might get right or wrong
    - The more answers they get right, the higher their (tested) IQ
    - The right or wrong answers are “B” data
Projective tests

- Based on a theory of how to see into someone’s mind
- If someone tries to describe or interpret a meaningless, ambiguous stimulus (i.e. an inkblot)
  their responses can’t come from the stimulus itself because the stimulus doesn’t actually mean anything
- The answer must come from (i.e. be a “projection” of) the inner workings of the person’s mind
  – Rorschach inkblot test
  - Whatever they report seeing must reveal something about the contents of their mind
  - “Draw-a-person” test
  - Interpreted by what kind of person is drawn and what body parts are exaggerated, omitted, etc.
  – Thematic apperception test (TAT)
  - Attempted to tell a story about pictures they are shown
  - The themes of the stories are considered to reflect the client’s motivational state
- Limited objective research on the validity of these tests despite their popular use
- Only two projective tests have a background of evidence that comes close to establishing validity by typical standards for personality tests
  – TAT—measures “implicit motives”—achievement, intimacy, power, etc.
  – It’s possible that the TAT reflects what people want and traits measured by questionnaires predict how those motives will be expressed
- Rorschach

Objective tests

- Test consisting of a list of questions to be answered Y/N or T/F or on a numeric scale—esp. if it uses a computer-scored answer sheet
- Validity and subjectivity of test items
  – An MMPI item such as “I like mechanics magazines” may seem more objective compared to a question like “what do you see in this inkblot,” but how is “like” defined? What does it mean?
  – The CPI includes a “commonality” scale of items that are answered in the same way at least 95% of all people
  - It’s intended to detect illiterate individuals pretending to know how to read and individuals deliberately trying to sabotage the test
  - Random response choices tend to average 50%
  – People enjoy answering the commonality items because they don’t seem ambiguous, but these items aren’t useful for personality measurement because they’re the ones that few people differ so certain amount of ambiguity may be a good thing

Objective tests

- Methods of objective test construction
  – 3 basic methods for constructing objective personality tests
    1. Rational method
    2. Factor analytic method
    3. Empirical method
1. The rational method

- The basis of this approach is to come up with items that seem directly, obviously, and rationally related to what the test developer wants to measure.
- Data gathered are "S" data or direct, undisguised self-reports.
- I.e. Woodworth Personality Data Sheet (WPDS)—checklist relevant to potential psychiatric problems.
- To be a valid indicator of psychiatric disturbance, and for any rationally constructed, S-data personality test to work, 4 conditions must hold:
  1. Each item must mean that same thing to the person who fills out the form as it did to the psychologist who wrote it.
     - I.e. "dizziness," exactly?
  2. The person who completes the form must be able to make an accurate self-assessment.
  3. The person who completes the form must be willing to report his self-assessment accurately and without distortion.
  4. All of the items on the form must be valid indicators of what the tester is trying to measure.
     - I.e. does dizziness really indicate mental illness?

2. The factor analytic method

2. The factor analytic method (cont.)

3. The empirical method

3
3. The empirical method (cont.)

- This lack of concern with item content (face validity), has 4 implications
  1. Empirically derived tests, unlike other kinds, can include items that seem contrary or even absurd
     - i.e. "I prefer a shower to a bath" answered true is correlated with empathy and "I like tall women" tends to be answered true by impulsive males—the reason doesn’t matter
  2. Responses to empirically derived test are difficult to fake
     - With a personality test of the straightforward, S-data variety, you can describe yourself the way you want to be seen and that’s the score you get
     - Because the items on empirically derived scales sometimes seem backward or absurd, it’s difficult to know how to answer in a way that guarantees the score you want—great advantage of this method
     - The literal truth on questions doesn’t matter because these answers are important for their own sake, but rather only as indicators of what group the person belongs to—gives B-data rather than S-data
  3. Even more than tests derived through other methods, empirically derived tests are only as good as the criteria by which they’re developed or against which they’re cross-validated
     - If diagnoses of MMPI were wrong, would perpetuate those errors
     - A problem is that the empirical correlates of item response by which these tests are assembled are found in one place, at one time, with one group of participants
  4. It can cause serious public relations and even legal problems—can be difficult to explain to a layperson why certain questions are being asked
     - Face validity is the property of a test seeming to measure what it’s supposed to measure
     - Content validity is when the content of the test matches the content of what it’s trying to predict

A combo of methods

- Quite a few investigators still use a pure form of the rational method
- The factor analytic approach still has a few adherents
- Pure applications of the empirical approach are rare
- The best modern test developers use a combo of all 3 approaches

Purposes of personality testing

- If a personality test is valid, then how will this test be used?
  - Tests to measure vocational interests to help students choose careers
  - The CIA uses personality testing when selecting its agents
  - The best modern test developers use a combo of all 3 approaches
- Almost any kind of testing can be objected to on two grounds
  1. Tests are unfair mechanisms institutions use to control individuals—by rewarding those with the institutionally determined "correct" traits (i.e. high conscientiousness)
  2. Traits such as "conscientiousness" do not matter until and unless they are tested, and are "constructed" by the tests themselves
     - Underlying these two objections is that there is something undignified or even humiliating about submitting oneself to a test and having one's personality described by a set of scores
- Personality traits are not just invented or constructed by the process of test construction, but are also discovered
- Employers are not obligated to hire anybody and need to use good sense in deciding who would be the best person to hire which results in traits being judged, but the question is how
  - One alternative would be for the employer to talk with the prospective employee to gauge his/her conscientiousness by how well their shoes are shined, their hair is cut, or some other clue (employers frequently do that)
  - You might prefer to be judged by a person than a computer, but it’s important to be clear about the choice being made
- The choice cannot be for personality never to be judged, but rather how you prefer to have your personality judged?