

On the cross-cultural examination of acts and dispositions

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Abstract

The articles by Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) and Smid et al. (1988) raise several important issues about the study of acts, dispositions, and personality. While the results of Angleitner and Demtröder provide a powerful demonstration of the cross-cultural generality of the act frequency approach, several conclusions appearing in both papers require clarification: (1) multiple category membership is a complexity that occurs in the natural object domain as well as in the act-disposition domain, (2) the differences between the subjective conditional probability approach used by Smid et al., and the act frequency approach render the conclusions drawn by Smid et al. about the act frequency approach of Buss and Craik erroneous, and (3) distinctions among basic forms of personality data (beliefs about self, beliefs held by others about the self, and act trends in everyday life) require clear separation so that the multiple goals in personality psychology are not conflated.

INTRODUCTION

The articles by Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) and Smid *et al.* (1988) in the special issue of the *European Journal of Personality* raise important issues about the study of acts and dispositions in a cross-cultural context. Several of their basic conclusions, however, may be unwarranted. Our purpose is to clarify four conceptual and empirical issues raised by these papers so that they can be placed in a proper perspective. These issues are: (1) interpreting the multiple dispositional categorization of acts, (2) clarifying the act nomination procedure, (3) clarifying the differences between the conditional probability approach taken by Smid *et al.*

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(1988) and the act frequency approach of Buss and Craik, and (4) identifying the different forms of data available to personality psychologists.

Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) are to be applauded on a major and exceptional program of research. Their report not only replicates the prior research of Buss and Craik (1984), but extends and builds upon it in important and innovative directions. Their research program and that of Borkenau and Ostendorf (1987, 1988) combine to offer a rare instance of programmatic and cumulative research in personality psychology.

It is rather remarkable that Angleitner and Demtröder (1988), using *translations* of acts, a *different* culture, a *different* time period, and a *differently composed* sample, replicated the results of Buss and Craik (1984) so closely. Not only were similar validity gradients found associated with the prototypicality structure, but a highly similar structure was found associated with the multiple dispositional categorization of acts (Buss, 1985; Buss and Craik, 1986).

MULTIPLE DISPOSITIONAL CATEGORIZATION OF ACTS

The initial conceptual analysis of dispositions from the act frequency perspective (Buss and Craik, 1980, 1981, 1983a,b,c,) examined specific dispositional constructs separately. The eventual conceptual analysis of eight dispositions (Buss, 1981; Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c, 1984) provided as a by-product a set of 800 act descriptions (100 relevant to each disposition). The basis was then afforded to examine cross-dispositional relations, which Buss and Craik (1983a,b,c) have conducted with 800 act descriptions, Borkenau (1986) with 500 act descriptions, and Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) with 600 act descriptions. The latter two research projects have employed German translations of the Buss and Craik act descriptions, made by Borkenau (1986).

The multiple categorization procedures used in the three research programs have differed in some respects but the results of all three have highlighted the finding that some act descriptions can serve as highly prototypical exemplars for more than one dispositional category. These results represent a conceptual possibility that was not anticipated or considered in the initial act frequency formulation (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c). It has important implications for dispositional theory and for the dispositional assessment of persons.

Buss and Craik (1985) have argued that 'dispositional categories are composed of acts that differ in their *within-category status* from highly central or prototypical to progressively more peripheral until the fuzzy borders are reached and adjoining categories are entered' (p. 936, *italics added*). In treating dispositional constructs *separately* and *independently*, this statement does not require modification. In the analysis of cross-dispositional relations, however, conceptual elaboration is necessary (e.g. of the term 'adjoining'), and further attention is drawn to inter-relations among dispositions and among acts.

At the dispositional level, prototypicality ratings of acts and multiple category sorting of acts can provide one useful basis for establishing similarity of conceptual meaning among dispositions. Previously, for five dispositions (aloof, dominant, submissive, quarrelsome, agreeable) Borkenau (1986) has shown striking convergence among three *act-based measures of dispositional similarity*: (1) inter-act

overlap, (2) cross-classifications, and (3) inter-correlations of prototypicality ratings (Table 2). On the basis of the third measure, Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) have replicated the same pattern of conceptual similarity among these dispositions, namely, similarity between dominant and quarrelsome and dissimilarity/opposition for dominant-submissive, quarrelsome-submissive and quarrelsome-agreeable (Table 5). This replication for two German samples follows similar findings for U.S. samples (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c).

Specifically which particular pattern of conceptual similarity is to be anticipated among dispositional constructs is not theoretically addressed by the act frequency approach, which is a theory of dispositions but does not present a taxonomy of dispositions. However, act-based conceptual analyses can be and have been used to test theoretical formulations of dispositional taxonomies, such as that of Wiggins (1979) regarding interpersonal traits (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c, 1984). At a more atheoretical level, act-based analyses can illuminate the foundation and structure of cultural semantic similarity judgments, which have heretofore remained relatively primitive and opaque. Such similarity judgments by laypersons (e.g. Shweder, 1975) presumably entail synonymic considerations, although whether they meet such standards and what the basis for them might be have not received adequate attention. Borkenau's research program on the systematic overlap hypothesis has highlighted the potential for act-based conceptual analysis of semantic similarity judgments and has yielded important results (Borkenau, 1986; Borkenau and Ostendorf, 1987, 1988). For the five dispositions studied in common, Angleitner and Demtröder's (1988) findings provide striking replication of Borkenau's results regarding semantic similarity.

Taxonomies aside, multiple dispositional categorization of acts raises more central issues for the act frequency approach, especially with regard to the dispositional character of act descriptions and the dispositional assessment of persons.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISPOSITIONAL CHARACTER OF ACT DESCRIPTIONS

The theoretical formulation of dispositions as categories of acts not only provides an act-based conceptual analysis of dispositional constructs. In addition, the table can be turned to afford a dispositional analysis of act descriptions. In this light, the multiple dispositional categorization of acts raises a number of conceptual considerations.

An act that is judged to be highly prototypical for a given disposition *does not lose that information value* if it also serves as exemplary for one or more additional dispositions. The act description may possess a rich dispositional character and take on more complex cue-value with respect to assessing the conduct of persons dispositionally. Acts judged to be low in prototypicality for a given disposition might be presumed instead to be exemplary of some 'adjoining' or even remotely related disposition. However, some act descriptions may prove to be generally 'adispositional' in character. It would be worthwhile to analyze instances of them. Of course, to establish the adispositional character of an act description entails representative testing of it prototypically against the natural language roster of several thousand dispositional constructs (Buss and Craik, 1985).

As research continues, the incidence can be gauged for more representative samples of act descriptions, testing prototypically against a broader array of dispositional categories. For the case of act descriptions identified to be adispositional after exhaustive prototypicality tests, the conceptual question arises as to whether such statements constitute bona fide act descriptions and, more generally, what is the nature of acts and their descriptions. Comparative analysis of dispositionally rich, dispositionally narrow, and adispositional act descriptions will assist in clarifying these questions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISPOSITIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EVERYDAY CONDUCT

Act descriptions that are prototypical of more than one dispositional construct raise conceptual and procedural issues for the act summary approach to dispositional assessment of persons. This section will illustrate how the multiple dispositional categorization of act descriptions can be accommodated by an act frequency assessment procedure, as well as how multiple act descriptions drawn from the same event of conduct can be accommodated.

In this analysis, we take human actions to be a species of individual events which are *concrete particulars, unrepeatable, with a specific location in time and space* (Davidson, 1980; LePore, 1985). This view of action entails the notion of action re-description, the reference to the same action-event under different descriptions (Davidson, 1980; Rommetveit, 1980; Feinberg, 1965). Event-descriptions and specifically act-descriptions in everyday life typically take the form of more or less succinct narratives (Passmore, 1987) and the same event can be the subject of different descriptions depending upon the vantage point and aims of the observer.

Consider Menzel's example: *Smith mowing his lawn on Saturday morning in Scarsdale* (Menzel, 1978; Rommetveit, 1980). As Rommetveit shows, what Smith is doing in his yard can be described differently by observers with different vantage points upon the event. To a prying neighbor Smith may be continuing a quarrel with Jones, a neighbor who likes to sleep late on Saturdays, getting back at him by waking him up with his lawnmower noise. This act description might be highly prototypic for the disposition *quarrelsome*. However, prototypicality analysis may reveal that the act-description is also exemplary for the disposition *calculating* (Buss and Craik, 1985).

As Angleitner and Demtröder (1988, p. 137) suggest, in the summary approach to dispositional assessment of everyday conduct, this act-description could be counted toward the act trend indices for both calculating and quarrelsome. Over an extended period of observation, of course, Smith's conduct may, for example, entail many act-descriptions categorized as prototypically calculating (with some also exemplary of other dispositions) but no further act descriptions exemplary of quarrelsomeness.

Two other observers of Smith's conduct may generate different descriptions of this event. As Rommetveit notes (1980), a pedantic passerby may describe the act as 'helping to keep up the physical appearance of the neighborhood'. And Smith may describe his own act as 'anxiously fending off a possible heart attack by exercising'. The issue of multiple descriptions of the same act-event can be handled in the same

fashion as multiple dispositional categorization of a given act description. That is, this event could earn Smith tallies for the dispositions of *responsible* and *anxious*, if prototypicality analysis of these act descriptions warrants those categorizations.

The dispositional assessment of persons' everyday conduct in this way is still in the planning stage and requires the exploration and resolution of a host of interesting conceptual, strategic and logistical issues. A fundamental question is: Which observers on what basis contribute usable descriptions of the target person's acts? However, regarding the matters under immediate consideration, these points can be made:

- 1) observed acts can be treated as individual events
- 2) observed acts are open to differing descriptions and re-descriptions
- 3) each act description can be dispositionally analyzed via prototypicality judgments
- 4) the same act-event under different descriptions may be counted for more than one disposition, if prototypicality analysis warrants, and
- 5) a given act description may be judged prototypical of more than one dispositional construct and thereby counted for each relevant disposition in the assessment procedure.

Thus, multiple act descriptions of the same event of conduct and multiple dispositional categorization of the same act-description underscore the complex challenge of conducting act summary assessment of a person's dispositions based upon everyday conduct but they fail to render it infeasible.

MULTIPLE CATEGORIZATION: NATURAL OBJECTS AND ACTS

A final caution should be entered on the interpretation of the multiple categorization of acts. Findings from research on natural categories are more complex than portrayed by Angleitner and Demtröder (1988). Research in natural categories has indeed found examples of 'unclear cases' (e.g. McCloskey and Glucksberg, 1978; Smith and Medin, 1981). Subjects tend to be unsure, for example, whether a 'tomato' belongs in the category of 'fruit' or 'vegetable', and high prototypicality judgments are often found for both of these categories.

This complexity increases when moving from natural entities in the natural environment such as tomatoes or birds to man-made or man-used objects such as guns or toys, all of which are considered to be *natural objects* (Rosch, 1975; Rosch and Mervis, 1975; Rosch, Simpson and Miller, 1976; Smith and Medin, 1981). Consider the object 'telephone'. This can be categorized both as an **appliance** and as **piece of furniture**. The object 'scissors' provides another example. Is this a **weapon** or a **tool**? Natural objects and their categorization may or may not be as complex as acts and their dispositional categorization, but both cases contain the complexities of multiple category membership.

This complexity becomes even greater when the *vertical* as well as *horizontal* structure of categories is considered. A telephone may be categorized as an appliance or furniture at the same horizontal level, but also as a household object, an electronic device, or even a human artifact at levels higher in the vertical structure. Evidence provided by Hampson, John and Goldberg (1986) documents

that trait categories, like object categories, appear to occur at different levels in the hierarchy—a result that suggests that multiple categorization of acts may occur via categories of varying hierarchical level, as well as due to category overlap at the horizontal level.

The central point is that categorization of acts *and* objects are both more complex than initially conceived, and the notion of simple single category membership is not applicable to either domain. Therefore, a judicious conclusion would **not** be that the principles of categorization are not transferable from objects to acts, but rather that conceptual formulations of *both* domains must reflect their inherent multiple category complexity.

CLARIFICATION OF THE ACT NOMINATION PROCEDURE

Angleitner and Demtröder (1988) report initial difficulty with use of the act nomination procedure, which tended to produce general impressions or trait terms. This is a difficulty also reported by Buss and Craik (1980), who found that, along with acts, many subjects nominated general tendency statements, synonyms, and phrases considered too vague to constitute an observable act.

Recent modifications of this early instructional set have resulted in a much improved act nomination procedure (Buss, 1988a). The general form draws attention to the specificity of acts, and requests from subjects only instances of acts. A sample instructional set involving acts of *hierarchy negotiation* (getting ahead in dominance or status) is as follows:

'In this study, we are interested in the things people do to *get ahead*: How do people climb, elevate, jockey, or defend positions in the status or dominance hierarchy? *Please be specific*: We are interested in specific acts or behaviors. One should be able to answer the following questions about each of your act nominations: Have you ever performed this act? If so, how often have you performed it? Please think of specific people you know (including yourself) of your own sex, and write down five acts that they have performed to get ahead in status or dominance hierarchies. Now think of people you know of the *opposite sex* and write down five acts or behaviors that they have performed to get ahead in status or dominance hierarchies.'

Although it does not eliminate entirely the need for editorial judgments, investigators are encouraged to use a version of this modified act nomination procedure in studies that focus on the actions of persons in everyday life—a critically important source of data for personality psychology.

ACT FREQUENCY ASSESSMENTS VERSUS CONDITIONAL PROBABILITY REPORTS

In the dispositional assessment of persons, the act frequency approach summarizes trends in conduct. Each act is considered to be an individual event with a unique location in time and space. Act trends are monitored for dispositional relevance over a period of observation. In contrast, the research by Smid *et al.* (1988) employs a different conceptual rationale and different measurement procedure

from those used by all previous act frequency studies (e.g. Angleitner and Demtröder, 1988; Angleitner, Buss and Demtröder, under review; Borkenau, 1986; Buss, 1984; Buss and Craik, 1984). As a consequence the conclusions of Smid *et al.* (1988) do not apply to the act frequency approach to personality (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c).

The Smid *et al.* (1988) rationale and procedure focus on subjective conditional probabilities that a person might display a hypothetical act under hypothetical circumstances. The act frequency approach has not employed subjective conditional probabilities in its conceptual formulation and assessment procedures for two major reasons.

(1) First, the act frequency approach adopts a summary formulation of dispositions

Thus, it deals with what individuals have said and done, not with their own estimates of what they might do if exposed to hypothetical conditions. In this sense, the act frequency approach is both historical and public in its orientation. It is historical in that it is concerned with what actions the person has indeed taken and with those specific individual events that have constituted the person's daily life, and ultimately the individual's life history to date. At the same time, the act frequency approach is basically public in that it seeks to deal with those observable or potentially observable deeds that have taken the form of events with a determinant time and place.

From its earliest formulation the act frequency approach has been distinguished conceptually from purposive-cognitive approaches (Alston, 1975; Buss and Craik, 1980, 1983a,b,c), which deal with wishes, desires, fantasies and imaginings, many of which may never be expressed by the person or acted upon. Thus, the act frequency approach addresses questions of personality from the vantage point of historical actuality rather than psychodynamic possibility.

On the same basis, act frequency assessments of persons' dispositions can be differentiated in nature and aim from traditional personality scales and inventories. Werner and Pervin (1986) have shown that for six widely used personality inventories, only 28% of their item content refers to the behavioral domain of everyday conduct and only 7% of their item content has a past time reference. The majority of the scale items deal with the present (81%) and with the affective-cognitive area of functioning (72%). Indeed, Buss (1980) has argued that personality scale items referring to past acts without specifying a time frame (e.g. 'I have been in trouble with the law') can be inappropriate and misleading in calculating estimates of temporal stability of personality dispositions.

In contrast, when self-report procedures are employed in act frequency assessments, the content consists of *specific act descriptions* and the respondent is instructed to report accurately on actual past conduct. Conceptually, the respondent is considered in this assessment procedure as only *one* of several possible sources of witness. Typically, act frequency studies in the past five years have used at least two data sources (e.g. self-report, reports from close friend or intimate observer) to assess act performance.

Act reports gathered from respondents are recognized to be subject to validity vulnerabilities, some shared with other self-report techniques (e.g. faking good, faking bad, acquiescence, and other self-presentational distortions) as well as those

pertinent to the event-reporting goal (e.g. distortions of memory priming and retrieval; lack of shared act description). The main point is that the act frequency approach focuses on event recording procedures, including those of self-reports, external observer reports, and reports by intimate witnesses to the event.

These considerations all emphasize the point that the construction of new versions of traditional personality scales and inventories has not been an aim of the act frequency approach. Broughton's (1984) application of the prototype strategy to personality scale construction, with some success, employed adjectival trait terms, not act descriptions. Broughton acknowledges (1984, pp. 1337, 1345) that the act frequency approach has focused upon improved criterion analysis. Regarding act trend assessment, a symmetry exists between predictors and criteria (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c) in that act trends assessed over one period of observation can be employed as predictors of act trends over another subsequent period of observation. Act trends can also serve as useful criteria for gauging the validity of traditional personality scales and conducting conceptual analyses of them (Buss and Craik, 1983a,b,c) but the approach itself is not in the business of developing new forms of the latter. Although somewhat novel, the self-report scales developed by Smid *et al.* (1988) are closer to traditional scales in their focus upon cognitive content rather than event-reports.

(2) The subjective conditional probability approach assumes equality of opportunity structure—that all persons have an equal probability of being exposed to each situation

Consider the sample item given by Smid *et al.* (1988): 'In carefully chosen words he explained to his girlfriend why he could not keep his appointment.' (Exactly why this item is considered to be 'introverted' is not clear, and raises serious questions about the dispositional appropriateness of the Smid *et al.* items.) A respondent who does not have a girlfriend is forced to imagine a situation that does not apply, and to make guesses about how he might respond under circumstances he has never encountered. We do not know much about the merits of a procedure that asks respondents to make self-reflections about hypothetical conditions, but these estimates cannot be considered act frequency assessments.

A crucial feature of personality is that persons *select* environments that they inhabit, *evoke* responses from others in those environments, and *manipulate* others intentionally (Buss, 1984, 1988b; Buss, Gomes, Higgins and Lauterbach, 1987). By crossing all levels of situations with all trait categories, Smid *et al.* have violated the basic truism that in everyday life, all persons are not exposed equally to all environments. Their conclusions about the limits on predictive validity apply solely to their own conditional probability formulation, and not to the act frequency approach.

The Smid *et al.* (1988) assessment procedure is closer to the conditional approach to dispositional constructs recently advanced by Wright and Mischel (1987) as an alternative to the act frequency approach. Viewed as clusters of if-then propositions, dispositional constructs are seen by Wright and Mischel as summarizing categories of behavior and categories of conditions. However, for the self-prediction format to be fully compatible with the Wright and Mischel formulation, subjective probabilities of encountering each situation would have to be gathered

as well as subjective probabilities of performing the acts. It should be noted that Wright and Mischel (1987) have not reported use of self-predictions but instead behavioral observations, situational assessments, and dispositional judgments by observers.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTINGUISHING DIFFERENT FORMS OF DATA IN PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY

The conceptual confusion between conditional probabilities and act frequency analysis in the Smid *et al.* (1988) article raises a final point that requires clarification. This concerns the different forms of data available to personality psychologists. From the act frequency perspective, at least four forms of data compose the subject matter of personality psychology (Buss and Craik, 1986): (1) *act trends in everyday conduct in the lives of persons*, (2) *beliefs people hold about their own personalities* (typically measured by self-ratings on trait terms), (3) *beliefs observers in the 'natural audience' hold about a given person* (typically measured by observer trait ratings), and (4) *important life outcomes* (e.g. marriage, divorce, income, accidents, alcoholism).

As discussed in some detail by Buss and Craik (1983a,b,c, 1986), there are compelling reasons why these different forms of data may not be highly related to each other. Acts that are vivid, salient, or performed early in a time sequence may lead an observer to form the impression that a person has a stronger disposition than would be indicated by an act frequency analysis. As pointed out by Angleitner and Demtröder (1988), physical appearance, ascribed role status, and cognitive schemata are likely to affect trait judgments of self and other that lead to divergences with an act frequency analysis. The use of 'peer ratings' as the *sole criterion* for validating personality measures constructed to assess different forms of personality data must be regarded as inadequate and misleading. The construction of validated self-report scales is one method for achieving a subset of goals within personality psychology, but it cannot be considered the major goal of the field itself.

Perhaps it is time at this stage in the resurgence of the field of personality to recognize (1) that there are multiple goals in personality psychology, (2) that different forms of personality data will be used to address these varying goals, and (3) that different personality assessment instruments are required to gather these different forms of personality data. The quest for a single assessment technique to serve all goals is an illusory quest. Since one major goal is to identify the links between personality formulations and manifestations of personality in everyday life, instruments to assess the performance of dispositionally-relevant acts in the daily lives of persons are indispensable.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les articles d'Angleitner et Demtröder (1988) et de Smid *et al.* (1988) traitent différents aspects importants concernant l'étude d'actes, de dispositions et de personnalité. Bien que les résultats d'Angleitner et Demtröder fournissent une puissante démonstration de la généralité transculturelle de l'approche 'act-frequency', diverses conclusions qui ont été tirées dans les deux articles méritent quelques éclaircissements: (1) l'appartenance de plusieurs catégories est un phénomène complexe qui apparaît tant dans le domaine des objets naturels que dans le domaine des actes-dispositions, (2) les différences entre une approche en termes de probabilités subjectives conditionnelles comme celle utilisée par Smid *et al.*, et l'approche 'act-frequency' font que les conclusions tirées par Smid *et al.* à propos de l'approche 'act-frequency' de Buss et Craik sont fausses, et (3) des distinctions entre différentes formes de base de données sur la personnalité (idées sur soi, opinions que les autres ont sur le moi et modes de l'acte ('act trends') dans la vie quotidienne) exigent des séparations claires afin que les multiples objectifs de la psychologie de la personnalité ne se confondent pas.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Artikel von Angleitner und Demtröder (1988) und von Smid *et al.* (1988) thematisieren wichtige Probleme bei der Untersuchung von Handlungen, Dispositionen und der Persönlichkeit. Während die Befunde von Angleitner und Demtröder eine eindrucksvolle Demonstration der transkulturellen Generalität des Act Frequency-Ansatzes bieten, so erfordern dennoch mehrere Schlußfolgerungen in beiden Papieren eine Klarstellung: (1) Multiple Kategorienzugehörigkeit ist ein komplexes Phänomen, welches im Bereich natürlicher Objekte ebenso auftritt wie im Bereich von Handlungen und Dispositionen; (2) die Unterschiede zwischen der Analyse subjektiver bedingter Wahrscheinlichkeiten, wie sie

von Smid *et al.* vorgenommen wurde, und dem Act Frequency-Ansatz führen zu fehlerhaften Schlußfolgerungen bei Smid *et al.* bezüglich des Act Frequency-Ansatzes von Buss und Craik; und (3) die Unterscheidung zwischen grundlegenden Formen von Persönlichkeitsdaten (Selbstbild, Fremdbild und Handlungen im täglichen Leben) muß strikt eingehalten werden, damit die vielfältigen Ziele der Persönlichkeitspsychologie nicht vermengt werden.

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