

## **Behaviour functions in personality psychology**

Philip J. Corr

Psychology,  
Faculty of Social Sciences,  
University of East Anglia,  
Norwich,  
NR4 7TJ, UK.

[Philip.Corr@btopenworld.com](mailto:Philip.Corr@btopenworld.com)

### **Abstract**

Furr's target article highlights the importance, yet under-representation, of behaviour in published articles in personality psychology. Whilst agreeing with most of his points, I remain unclear as to how behaviour (as specifically defined by Furr) relates to other forms of psychological data (e.g., cognitive task performance). In addition, it is not clear how the *functions* of behaviour are to be decided: different behaviours may serve the same function; and identical behaviours may serve different functions. To clarify these points, *methodological* and *theoretical* aspects of Furr's proposal would benefit from delineation.

As a journal editor and reviewer, I am heartened to receive personality studies that contain some overt form of behaviour, either as target dependent variables or in the form of manipulation of independent variables. There is a certain directness about these studies and appealing face validity (e.g., time delay to knock on a professor's office door as a function of social anxiety). The fact that restrictions are not placed on the subject's behaviour, and they are behaving naturally, often in naturalistic settings, adds theoretical creditability. Furr makes a strong case that behaviour should be awarded a more prime position in personality psychology, although researchers may not entirely agree with his definition of behaviour as "verbal utterances or movements that are potentially available to careful observers using normal sensory processes". However, this definition is parsimonious, plausible and potentially useful in arriving at a consensus as to what constitutes 'behaviour'.

Furr does an excellent job of providing a viable taxonomy (Table 2) of the ways of measuring overt behaviour. His careful delineation of the pros and cons of the different methods of behaviour measurement should prove valuable. I agree that Furr has "...offered as a starting point for focused discussion of these important issues, potentially enhancing the field's standing as a truly behavioural science."

To some extent, there is still a tension between behavioural approaches and the concerns of the personality psychologist, who frequently is interested in internal states of emotion, motivation, concepts, etc., very often couched in terms of traits conceived as internally-organised structures capable of agency. There are (I would guess) few of us who would want to abandon these internal state/trait variables in favour of an exclusive focus on observable behaviour. To many of us, these are vital explanatory concepts – indeed, these internal processes are often demanded by careful analysis of behaviour itself (e.g., the concept of frustration as explaining resistance to extinction on partial reinforcement schedules; or behaviourally silent learning as seen in sensory preconditioning).

One major attraction of considering behaviour as the central unit of analysis is its 'down-stream' nature: it embodies the accumulation of up-stream causal influences that manifest in ways that impact on the environment, from which the organism receives feedback in the form of reinforcement, etc. On evolutionary grounds alone, this is a compelling point: selection does not work directly on thoughts, feelings, etc, but on their behavioural consequences in the real world. It is this level of analysis that really matters. For this reason, geneticists often overt behaviour in preference to specific cognitive tasks or endophenotypes. One eminent behavioural geneticist told me that he prefers to measure actual behaviour because many experimental tasks in psychology are "hokey" – if they have reliability and validity, often they have little power of generalisation or real-world application.

Furr's article raises a number of issues that may benefit from clarification.

Furr's focus is on overt behaviour, but it is unclear (at least to me) how this level of analysis should relate to others (e.g., computerised cognitive performance). I agree that tapping the keyboard in some computerised cognitive task (e.g., Stroop test) is behaviour in only a trivial sense, but performance on the cognitive task may be far from trivial -- the results of which may throw light upon the causes (e.g., weakened inhibitory control) of the carefully observed overt behaviour (e.g., impulsivity) that meets Furr's criteria. Assuming that we have agreed upon a theoretically-coherent and consensual model of behaviour, then we would surely be drawn back to the question of the meaning of such behaviour, entailing consideration of underlying cognitive, emotional, and motivational antecedents? Furthermore, behaviour often contains the conflation of multiple separate causal influences, and it is difficult to decompose these sources of influence: causes are difficult to infer from effects, especially multiply interacting ones. The unscrambling egg problem.

In addition, two quite distinct behaviours (e.g., submissive vs. assertive behavioural styles) may have similar, or identical, meaning and causal antecedents (e.g., a specific motivation to elicit help from others); and similar (even identical) behaviours shown by two people (e.g., anger) may have different meanings and causal antecedents (e.g., defensive vs. predatory aggression). The inclusion of verbal utterances in the definition of behaviour adds a further complication, because this 'behaviour' contains a high potential for deception and manipulation especially in environments where there is high motivation to dissemble. Thus, we cannot take overt behaviour at face-value.

One way around these problems is to undertake rigorous manipulation of independent variables in order to isolate separate causal influences; but this requirement must be absent when observing naturally occurring behaviour where experimental manipulation and control are neither desirable nor possible. In addition, some causal influences are simply not "available to careful observers using normal sensory processes", especially those relating to internal processes (e.g., sensitivity to rewarding and punishing stimuli). Determining the meaning of overt behaviour is difficult, chiefly because behaviour *itself* does not encapsulate function. Interpretation of behaviour requires analysis, and this would (of necessity?) involve the collection of non-behavioural data (e.g., cognitive task performance and questionnaire data).

At the heart of these concerns is the following issue: is Furr's call for more rigorous classification and recoding of behaviour principally *methodological* (i.e., of improving the quality of data), or *theoretical* (i.e., improving understanding of personality psychology, over and above that achieved by enhanced methodology)? If the latter, given the problems identified above, how is this to be achieved in terms of uncovering primary and separable causal influences on behaviour?