



## What do conscientious people do? Development and validation of the Behavioral Indicators of Conscientiousness (BIC)

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### ABSTRACT

Typical assessments of personality traits collapse behaviors, thoughts, and feelings into a single measure without distinguishing between these different manifestations. To address this lack of specification, the current study develops and validates a measure that assesses a number of broad behaviors associated with the personality trait of conscientiousness (the Behavioral Indicators of Conscientiousness; BIC). Findings suggest that the lower-order structure of conscientious behaviors is mostly similar to the lower-order structure in extant trait measures. Furthermore, a daily diary method was used to validate the BIC against frequency counts of conscientious behavior. Overall, the results identify specific behaviors that conscientious individuals tend to perform and highlight possible advantages of this approach over broad trait assessment.

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### 1. Introduction

The study of behavior is integral to the field of personality psychology (Furr, 2009). The importance of behavior in personality is even more apparent when considering the multitude of theories that rely on behavior to explain the mediation of psychological processes (e.g., how personality leads to job performance or relationship satisfaction) or that conceptualizes behavior as important manifestations of our underlying feelings and desires (Furr, 2009). Whether a researcher is interested in underlying mechanisms or concrete outcomes, behavior plays a role. Given the importance of behavior, it is reasonable as a science to document a list of behaviors that are associated with the major constructs that are the focus of scientific research (Funder, 2009). Despite the importance of behavior to the conceptualization of personality, personality psychology has failed to pay a proportionate amount of attention to the study of behavior (Fleeson, 2007; Furr & Funder, 2007; Wu & Clark, 2003). For example, only a small number of behaviors have been identified for the major trait dimensions of personality (Funder, 2001, 2006), despite each of these traits being associated with important life outcomes (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts et al., 2007).

The lack of the identification of specific behaviors associated with particular personality traits is even more unfortunate considering that personality traits are assessed, partially, by behavior and, therefore, defined in part by behavior (Werner & Pervin, 1986). Personality traits, however, are not just summaries of behavior. Rather, personality traits are typically defined as the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are manifest in trait-affording situations (Roberts & Jackson, 2008; Tellegen, 1991). Traditional measures of personality include all of these types—thoughts, feeling and behaviors—of personality manifestations (Pytlik Zillig, Hemenover, & Dienstbier, 2002; Werner & Pervin, 1986). From this view, behavior is only one part of what constitutes a personality trait. Thus far, personality traits are defined and researched only as the combination of these types of manifestations without an objective organization of trait dimensions into cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. As such, studying the behavioral components of a personality trait in isolation of other components may offer advantages over examining thoughts, feelings and behaviors simultaneously in the same questionnaire.

The goal of the present research is to answer the question, “what does a conscientious person do?” by documenting behaviors associated with conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is defined as individual differences in the propensity to follow socially prescribed norms for impulse control, to be goal-directed, planful, able to delay gratification, and to follow norms and rules (Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009). The breadth of this

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definition implicates a wide swath of important outcomes that are associated with conscientiousness. Indeed, conscientiousness is associated with better health, lower criminal activity, and better economic, interpersonal, and workplace outcomes (Roberts et al., 2009, chapter 25).

Uncovering the behavioral manifestations of conscientiousness is important for several reasons. First, it will increase our understanding of the trait itself, as it may clarify or enhance the spectrum of underlying facets that make up the domain of conscientiousness. Second, it affords alternative ways of assessing the trait. For example, behaviors can be thought of as state manifestations of a personality trait and can therefore better characterize variability in personality. Moreover, specific conscientious behaviors may help clarify why conscientiousness is associated with living longer and greater career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999; Kern & Friedman, 2008), as it may have to do with specific actions they take rather than attitudes or feelings they possess.

### 1.1. Behavior and personality

The Act Frequency Approach (AFA; Buss & Craik, 1980) is the most elaborate system to study behaviors to date, and it is necessary to discuss the AFA in order to distinguish it from the approach used in the present research. In the AFA, personality dispositions were defined by the frequency of acts that belonged to dispositional categories. For example, to be dominant one must perform a significant number of dominant acts over a certain time frame. It was reasoned that if a person behaved in such a manner in the past they then would behave similarly in the future (Buss & Craik, 1983).

A number of the assumptions and procedures that formed the basis of the AFA were criticized (Block, 1989), which subsequently caused the AFA, and arguably the study of personality and behavior, to fall out of favor. These criticisms have taken two forms. The first pertained to the lack of methodological and psychometric rigor in the initial efforts to validate the AFA. The second critique was more theoretical and dealt with the implications of viewing dispositions (i.e., traits) solely as summaries of behaviors and not explanatory concepts (Funder, 1991). Acts were used to define a particular disposition and this disposition was then used to predict future acts. This reasoning is circular and provides no power of explanation because it relies on past behaviors to predict future behaviors (Block, 1989). The AFA approach therefore leaves out psychological processes that are mostly unobservable, such as emotions, motives, goals, and interests.

Alternatively, Neo-Allportian (Funder, 1991) and Sociogenomic (Roberts & Jackson, 2008) models of personality traits propose that a trait is made up of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In these models, behavior can be either the result of thoughts and feelings or simply one component used to define a trait. In either case, behavior is an important component of a trait but not sufficient to define a trait and should not be equated with personality traits. Therefore, studying the behaviors associated with a trait would represent a start on cataloging one component of what comprises a personality trait. Moreover, it would allow researchers to tease apart the relations among trait-relevant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to the extent that one goes onto identify and define the relevant thoughts and feeling components of a personality trait.

Despite the shortcomings, the ambitious AFA and AFA-related offshoots yielded a number of promising results, both theoretically and empirically. A number of studies examined whether behavioral acts can be identified and reliably reported. Inter-judge agreement for molecular behaviors is high across a number of traits suggesting that lay judges realize (and agree) that certain

behaviors reflect particular dispositions (Borkenau & Muller, 1992; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1987; Funder & Sneed, 1993). Similarly, the behaviors that comprise these dispositional categories are correlated within a person (Buss & Craik, 1983). Moreover, people are able to accurately report their past behaviors (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1987; Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; Vazire & Mehl, 2008). For example, Gosling et al. (1998) found that retrospective reports of conscientious behaviors correlated around .45 with a judge's online report of behavior. Interestingly, these retrospective behavioral reports focused on specific types of utterances and directions rather than behaviors lasting more than a few seconds. These findings may underestimate the ability to recall behaviors that last longer and are not entirely verbal, which would lead to even more accurate retrospective reports of behavior. Moreover, the estimates in the study by Gosling et al. (1998) study were based on single behaviors. Act trends, using the original AFA terminology, or behavioral factors comprising multiple related behaviors, would provide better psychometric properties and likely yield higher levels of overlap (Epstein, 1979).

Recent studies have started to link the vast number of behaviors people perform everyday to personality traits (e.g., Asendorpf, Banse, & Mücke, 2002; Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2006; Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Church et al., 2007; Fast & Funder, 2008; Heller, Komar, & Lee, 2007; Hong, Paunonen, & Slade, 2008; Markey, Markey, & Tinsley, 2004; Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006; Nave, Sherman, & Funder, 2008; Paunonen, 2003; Spain, Eaton, & Funder, 2000; Wu & Clark, 2003). These studies identified a number of behaviors associated with the trait of conscientiousness, such as finishing a task on time, arriving to a meeting on time, having a slouching body posture, and skipping responsibilities on a whim (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2009; Church et al., 2007).

Despite the research on or inspired by the AFA, the breadth and scope of behaviors related to specific trait domains, such as conscientiousness, are not known. Previous research focused on behaviors in a small number of situations, such as laboratory settings, thus limiting the scope of the behaviors examined. Furthermore, a similar narrow focus also characterizes research that has studied behaviors from outside of the lab. In contrast, no study has attempted to catalog a comprehensive sample of behaviors associated with conscientiousness.

### 1.2. The present research

The present research builds upon the research legacy of the AFA to identify the behaviors associated with the personality trait of conscientiousness, answering the question of, "what do conscientious people do?" In three studies we identify behaviors that represent the concrete activities exhibited in people's day-to-day lives that are relevant to the trait of conscientiousness to create a measure of conscientious behaviors (Behavioral Indicators of Conscientiousness; BIC). In doing so, we examined the factor structure of conscientious behaviors to identify the hierarchical structure of conscientious behaviors, the convergent and divergent validity of the behavioral scales and finally we validated the measure using a daily diary study.

Conscientiousness is a broad domain of traits that subsumes multiple lower order facets. Presently, at least five facets can be thought of as components of conscientiousness: industriousness, orderliness, impulse control, reliability, and conventionality (Jackson et al., 2009; Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005; Roberts et al., 2004). Additional facets may also be part of conscientiousness such as virtue and decisiveness (Hough & Ones, 2001; Roberts et al., 2005) but have yet to be confirmed in subsequent research. Fewer numbers of conscientiousness facets also

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