



Not seeing the forest for the traits: A comment on Hogan and Foster (2016)

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Hogan and Foster outline the positive and negative agendas of socioanalytic theory. I agree with their call for more robust integrative theorizing that incorporates the social context. I am less impressed by their rhetorical attack on traits (broadly conceptualized) and what I think is their overly constructionist stance regarding behavior. Hogan and Foster ask us not to be complacent in our theorizing, which is a fair demand. In return, we should ask socioanalytic theory to display more coherence.

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I think that it is perfectly valid to say that a question like “What is the agenda of socioanalytic theorists?” is a very socioanalytic thing to ask. After attentively reading the article of Hogan and Foster (2016), I think I learned enough to try to answer the question.

There are plenty of worthy agendas that I share with the authors. Like them I would like to see more work on explanatory theories of personality that build on the excellent work on traits that the field has amassed. I believe that Hogan and Foster (2016) would be heartened by the fact that there have been recent and prominent calls for integrative theories in personality, evidenced by an entire special issue devoted to this in the *Journal of Research in Personality* in 2015, and by DeYoung (2016, in this issue) as a particular example. I am fairly certain that concepts like identity, roles, and reputations, along with genes, neural networks, and immune systems, will form part of the discussion we will be having about personality theories in the near future. I am also sympathetic to the idea that we should begin using the term “trait” in more precise ways, although I am more partial to Fleenon and Jayawickreme’s (2015) conceptualization, where they explicitly talk about the descriptive side and the explanatory side of traits. After all, as Funder (1999; and also in this issue) has pointed out, both ways of viewing traits are scientifically valid and necessary. Finally, I have no quarrel with the idea that observer ratings (O-ratings) can sometimes be more predictive of behavior than self-reports (S-ratings) since this has been empirically shown (e.g. Vazire, 2010).

It is less apparent to me whether shifting the center-stage from traits to reputations gets us a better theory of personality. Supposedly, the authors see this as a necessary thing to do because reputations are clearly observation-based and have less metaphysical baggage than the concepts of traits and true scores. This might be a valid concern, but I believe that it also comes at the cost of theoretic

cal incoherence. Specifically, it severs the link between S-ratings and O-ratings that is usually theoretically assumed and often empirically demonstrated. If it were the case that S-ratings are reports primarily of identity related concerns, while O-ratings are measures of reputation caused by the enactment of roles, then we should not expect much agreement between them. For one thing, although both are derived from identity agendas, S-ratings according to Hogan and Foster (2016) are supposedly much more directly tapping identity than O-ratings or reputation, which have to be mediated by role-taking, situational factors, and social cognitive processes on the observer’s part. Additionally, since roles are conceived as being contingent on specific situations, we should expect less consistency across situations from O-ratings of reputation than from S-ratings. Socioanalytic theory itself agrees by claiming that identity is “relatively stable throughout adulthood” (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek 1985, p. 183). And yet, what we find when such studies are conducted is that there is a substantial degree of correspondence between what we say about ourselves and what others observe (McCrae & Costa, 1987; see Connelly & Ones, 2010, for a meta-analysis; see del Pilar, Sio, Cagasan, Siy, & Galang, 2015 for a non-WEIRD sample). And as we see from the work on cross-situational consistency (Funder & Colvin, 1988; Epstein 1980), independent observers agree to a significant degree in the way they describe unfamiliar persons even when the person is seen in different and separate contexts. Situations that differ in terms of what goals are active (e.g., an idle conversation as opposed to a debate) should elicit different kinds of role-taking, but clearly there is evidence of substantial (though not complete) consistency of behavior. These results hint at a stronger link between O-ratings and S-ratings than what socioanalytic theory would seem to allow. This correspondence seems much more easily explained if, as most other personality frameworks assume, both O-ratings and S-ratings are causally determined in large part by actual trait-relevant behavior and not just by situationally contingent role-and-reputation management (for a related argument, see Shchepbetenko, 2017).

As far as agendas go, the second most peculiar claim in Hogan and Foster (2016) (with the first being a meditation on the advantages of being non-introspective) is the idea that faking on personality questionnaires is simply not a problem. This attitude reveals an interesting facet of their reasoning: that they are not at all concerned with the problem of accuracy. This is striking since they have lots of things to say about assessment. This may be because socioanalytic theory side-steps the whole issue of accuracy altogether by implying that there is no gap between the concept called “reputation” and the scores on a questionnaire of reputation. What you see is what you get. We cannot ask the question “How do we know that the reputation questionnaire measures reputation?” because reputation to the proponents is not a construct. It is simply what people say about someone else, in particular what they say on a questionnaire. This is of course a masterstroke because it means that a person can never have a reputation score that is not congruent to their “actual” reputation because Hogan and Foster assert that there is no such separate thing. As long as the questionnaire predicts job performance or grade-point averages, we need not appeal to any theoretical entities, or so it seems. It is like saying that we do not care what a thermometer actually measures (meaning, what is the physical phenomenon it is actually tracking) as long as it helps us predict the weather. “Kinetic energy” is just another phlogiston. Because it is not concerned with accuracy, the assessment regime that Hogan and Foster describe does not even need to concern itself with the actual behavior of the person being assessed. Indeed, the authors can more or less continue to hold forth on the subject of personality without ever needing to refer to actual behavior patterns that we normally call traits. As a way of illustrating, imagine that I agreed to put myself under 24/7 surveillance. This is easily conceivable in the current age of fitness trackers, networked cameras, and implantable sensors. The data that result can then be processed and classified according to behaviors that are generally acknowledged to be relevant to personality and easily identifiable, such as frequency of initiating conversations, amount of time spent reading works of fiction, etc. This can be done by either human judges or algorithms. At the end of such an exercise, we can ask “What then is the theoretical status of such data?” On the one hand some of the data would be the type of information that would be inaccessible to casual observers since the behaviors they index are done in private. So this is not reputation data. But at the same time this is not self-reported data either. Nor does it represent the kind of outcomes that Hogan and Foster are keen to talk about, since data on how often I actually clean my room is not a proxy for work performance, or academic achievement, or any other obvious signs of evolutionary fitness. I contend that this kind of data is perfectly relevant to personality assessment, since in many cases this might serve as the criterion against which assessment procedures might be compared. And yet I am not sure how it fits within a socioanalytic framework where the only objects of analysis are interactions and perceptions. I even suspect (based on previous behavior and reputation) that the proponents could claim that such data, compared to responses on a reputation questionnaire, were perfectly useless and uninteresting. Unobserved behavior will never get you that

first date or book deal. A trait that falls in the forest, with no one to hear it, makes no sound it seems.

To my limited imagination, only by committing to a completely constructionist view of personality can I arrive at the same conclusion about faking as Hogan and Foster. To make an admittedly oversimplified stab at a characterization of constructionism, this means that I only take seriously what things are said about a person and the context surrounding this discourse, rather than asking what a person is “really” like. Within limits, this is a valid social scientific stance (Gergen, 1985). But the upshot of this is that, by abandoning a realist conception of traits or behavior patterns (or “density distributions” as per Fleenon & Jayawickreme, 2015), and thereby ignoring issues of accuracy (Funder, 1999), socioanalytic theory simply has nothing coherent to say about behavioral data beyond questionnaires. Which is a shame since when I looked at an earlier version of the theory (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985), it did seem to present a reasonable emendation to the often individualistic focus of most personality theories, and the idea of reputations was not portrayed as antagonistic to the concept of personality traits. They even lay out the scope and limitations of their approach very explicitly in a statement which I find very realist in outlook: “In our view, self-presentation can be best understood in the broader context of personality theory. From this perspective, self-presentational behavior is, as it were, the tip of the iceberg; *it is behavior that itself requires interpretation and analysis.*” (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985, p. 194; italics added by me). I am getting the impression that the tip now holds a greater fascination than the rest of that troublesome, hidden mass.

But in spite of that, what the passage gestures at is the fact that socioanalytic theory can and must be seen as having common ground with a recalibrated conceptualization of traits, and with the rest of the body of work in empirical psychology. On the one hand, we cannot simply take on board Hogan and Foster’s (2016) claims without looking very carefully at how well they cohere with valid empirical results which we currently have no good reason to discard (back in graduate school, we called this quaint idea “construct validity”; Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). And yet we should not ignore their challenge either since they offer levels of analysis that personality psychologists too often overlook.

Once we get past all the huff about traits, wanting to get along should be a nomological agenda as much as a personal one.

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