WHAT CONSTRUCTS UNDERLIE MEASURES OF HONESTY OR INTEGRITY?

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The problem of assessing peoples’ honesty or integrity, predicting their trustworthiness and dependability, detecting their efforts to deceive others, etc. has long been the focus of research, speculation, and debate (Ekman, 1975; Ekman & O’Sullivan, 1991; Kleinmuntz & Szucko, 1984; Lykken, 1981; Murphy, 1993). Methods of addressing this problem run the gamut from those used in criminal investigations (e.g., forensic science, interrogation methods) to those used by most of us in everyday life (e.g., using nonverbal behaviors as clues that a person might be insincere when giving a compliment). Assessments of honesty, integrity, and dependability are of particular interest to organizations, for a number of reasons. In particular, there is evidence that workplace dishonesty, including theft, fraud, embezzlement, etc. is both widespread and costly.

Murphy and Luther (1997) and Murphy (1993) discuss a number of methods used by organizations to measure honesty or integrity or to detect deception, including: (1) integrity tests, (2) interviews and other self-reports, and (3) graphological analyses, (4) polygraph analyses, (5) voice stress analyses, (6) drug and alcohol tests, and (7) assessments of behavioral cues to deception. The current chapter focuses on paper-and-pencil measures that purport to measure peoples’ honesty, integrity, dependability, or reliability, that is, integrity tests. However, before discussing this class of tests in detail, it is useful to describe the relationships between the various measures used by organizations, as well as some of the constructs different classes of measures are designed to tap.

The tests and assessment techniques listed above are all designed to provide information about honesty, but they differ substantially in their focus. It is useful to distinguish first between deception and integrity or dependability. Measures of
integrity or dependability are used to make inferences about an individual’s past or future behavior. For example, integrity tests are typically used to forecast future workplace dishonesty (sometimes on the basis of admissions of previous misdeeds). Similarly, integrity interviews, application blanks, and a variety of self-report measures are used to make predictions about an individual’s likely level of honesty and dependability. These inferences might be based on information about past behavior, or on measures of specific traits and attributes thought to be relevant to workplace honesty, but in all cases, the focus is on predicting future behavior rather than drawing inferences about the truthfulness of specific claims or statements.

Assessments of deception are designed to determine whether an individual is telling or withholding the truth in a particular context. For example, polygraph examinations are structured to support inferences about whether a subject’s responses to a specific set of questions are truthful. Similarly, voice stress analyses are designed to determine whether answers to specific questions are truthful. Drug and alcohol tests are used to determine whether individuals are withholding information about their use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances of abuse. In all of these cases, these tests are used to draw inferences about the probability that individuals are attempting to deceive or withhold information from the examiner.

The distinction between tests of deception and predictions of future honesty is often blurred in practice. For example, it is common practice in many American firms to use drug or alcohol tests in pre-employment screening. These tests may do little more than indicate whether an individual has ingested alcohol or drugs within the last few hours to days, and might be more suited to detecting and deterring deception (e.g., in determining whether drugs or alcohol were involved in an accident) than to predicting whether a job applicant is likely to be a good prospect for employment (Murphy & Wright, 1996). In general, tests or assessment methods that provide valid information about deception in specific contexts might nevertheless prove useless in predicting future dishonesty (Ben-Shakhar & Furedy, 1990; U.S. Congressional Office of Technology Assessment [OTA], 1983). Similarly, measures of integrity or dependability may provide little information about the truthfulness of a specific statement or claim.

Although the terms honesty, integrity and dependability are often used interchangeably in this literature, a useful distinction should be drawn between them. Honesty refers to a particular respect for truthfulness, whereas integrity and dependability imply slightly broader conceptions, including a willingness to comply with rules, internalized values, norms and expectations. Tests that are used to infer future behavior in the workplace are likely to draw upon this broader conception rather than focusing narrowly on honesty per se. Integrity tests vary considerably in their content and focus, but for the most part, they have been developed with the goal of assessing this broad conception of “integrity” or with