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ScienceDirect
Journal of Research in Personality 40 (2006) 472–481
JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN PERSONALITY
www.elsevier.com/locate/jrp

Informant reports: A cheap, fast, and easy method for personality assessment

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Available online 21 November 2005

Abstract

Despite widespread agreement that multi-method assessments are optimal in personality research, the literature is dominated by a single method: self-reports. This pattern seems to be based, at least in part, on widely held preconceptions about the costs of non-self-report methods, such as informant methods. Researchers seem to believe that informant methods are: (a) time-consuming, (b) expensive, (c) ineffective (i.e., informants will not cooperate), and (d) particularly vulnerable to faking or invalid responses. This article evaluates the validity of these preconceptions in light of recent advances in Internet technology, and proposes some strategies for making informant methods more effective. Drawing on data from three separate studies, I demonstrate that, using these strategies, informant reports can be collected with minimal effort and few monetary costs. In addition, informants are generally very willing to cooperate (e.g., response rates of 76–95%) and provide valid data (in terms of strong consensus and self-other agreement). Informant reports represent a mostly untapped resource that researchers can use to improve the validity of personality assessments and to address new questions that cannot be examined with self-reports alone.

Keywords: Methodology; Personality assessment; Peer evaluation; Informant reports; Personality traits

1. Introduction

Assessing personality is a challenging task that cannot be accomplished thoroughly with a single method. Yet personality researchers frequently do just that, relying exclusively on

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0092-6566/$ - see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2005.03.003

self-reports. Indeed, an analysis of all studies published in the Journal of Research in Personality (JRP) in 2003 revealed that of the 45 studies in which personality was assessed, 44 of them (98%) used self-reports and for 31 of these (70%) this was the only measure collected. In contrast, only 24% of the JRP studies collected informant reports (i.e., ratings of the targets by well-acquainted others, such as friends, spouses, or co-workers). The purpose of this paper is to encourage researchers to increase the number of methods they routinely use by adding informant reports to their battery of research instruments.

In addition to collecting informant reports for the sake of multi-method assessment, many researchers have provided compelling arguments for exploiting this rich source of information (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1988; Craik, 1986, 1996, 2000; Hofstee, 1994; Hogan, 1998; John & Robins, 1993; Kenny, 1994; Kolar, Funder, & Colvin, 1996;McCrae, Stone, Fagan, & Costa, 1998; Oltmanns, Turkheimer, & Strauss, 1998; Paulhus & Morgan, 1997; Paulhus, 2005; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). In fact, informant reports are an ideal complement to self-reports because self-reports provide a view of personality from the inside (i.e., identity) whereas informant reports provide a view of personality from the outside (i.e., reputation; Hogan, 1998). Perhaps the most important feature of informant reports is that, unlike self-reports, they can be aggregated across observers to obtain a more reliable assessment of personality (Block, 1961; Hofstee, 1994).

In light of these obvious and compelling benefits, Why are informants not more widely used? Given that the benefits are evident, the reasons must lie in the costs, or in researchers' preconceptions of the costs. What are the perceived costs of collecting informant reports? It is difficult to address this question empirically, but having spoken to numerous researchers about this issue, it seems that the reluctance to use informant reports is driven by four widely held preconceptions (Table 1). First, researchers seem to believe that collecting informant reports is time consuming. Second, many researchers cannot afford the monetary costs they assume would be associated with collecting informant reports. Third, researchers anticipate low cooperation on the part of informants. Fourth, researchers worry that because informants frequently complete their ratings outside of the laboratory (e.g., from home), the lack of control over the ratings will adversely affect the quality of the data, perhaps even leading to fake responses. In my experience, all four of these beliefs are unfounded. Informant methods are much easier and more successful than many researchers believe.

After learning how easy the procedure is and how willing informants are to cooperate, many initially skeptical colleagues have incorporated informant reports into their studies.

Table 1
Four preconceptions about informant methods: Evaluation and strategies

Preconception	Evaluation	Strategies
1. Informant methods are time-consuming	False (only true for traditional informant methods)	Use the Internet
2. Informant methods are expensive	False (only true for traditional informant methods)	Use the Internet Do not compensate informants
3. Informants will not cooperate	False	Take steps to avoid spam filters Keep questionnaire simple and brief Send reminders to informants
4. Informant data are not valid (because of faking or dishonest responding)	False if precautions are taken	Emphasize confidentiality Make compensation to participants independent of informant cooperation

Therefore, I suspect that if more researchers were convinced that their preconceptions are groundless, many of them would collect informant reports and personality research would be less one-dimensional. This would not only improve the validity of personality research, but also allow researchers to address new questions that cannot be examined with self-reports alone. In this paper I evaluate these preconceptions in light of new technological advances, describe the strategies I have learned for addressing them, and present results from three studies that implemented these strategies.

2. Four preconceptions: Evaluation and strategies

2.1. Preconception 1: Informant reports are time consuming

Perhaps the biggest reason for our field's over-reliance on self-reports is that they are seen as far more convenient than any other method. A corollary of this belief is that any other method, including informant reports, would be a strain on either the researchers or the participants. However, recent technological advances have increased the practicality and efficiency of many methods of data collection, including informant reports.

Specifically, the proliferation of the Internet and e-mail has opened up a new avenue for collecting informant reports. According to a survey conducted in 2003, 54.6% of American households have access to the Internet, and 75% of individuals without Internet access at home still use the Internet at least once a week (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004).

Researchers can take advantage of this trend by administering informant questionnaires on the Internet. Creating a web questionnaire can be done in under an hour with the help of free websites specializing in survey construction or by using special software or programming guides (e.g., Fraley, 2004). After the web questionnaire has been created, researchers can simply send an e-mail to the informants with a link to the questionnaire and a unique ID number.

This simple procedure saves the researcher a lot of time compared to the traditional postal mailings or the even more time-consuming process of asking informants to come into the laboratory. In addition to eliminating the need for making photocopies and stuffing envelopes, Internet questionnaires also save time by eliminating the need for data entry, and making it easy for the researcher to keep track of informants' participation.

Another important benefit of Internet questionnaires is that they require less effort on the part of informants than do traditional methods. Clicking on a link in an e-mail and completing an Internet questionnaire takes less effort than opening a letter, completing a paper-and-pencil questionnaire, and mailing the questionnaire back to the researcher.

Researchers may worry that Internet questionnaires introduce new problems that are not present when using paper-and-pencil questionnaires, but many of these concerns are also unfounded (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Several researchers have expressed the specific concern that Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) would require them to obtain written consent from the informants, which cannot be administered over the Internet. In my experience, which has been corroborated by other researchers, IRBs do not require written consent for Internet questionnaires as long as the subject matter is not sensitive or private. Informants can simply give their consent by clicking a button.

Another common concern is that not all potential informants will have e-mail addresses and access to the Internet. Although this seems like a valid concern, in my own research I have rarely encountered this problem, despite having solicited over 700 informants from

participants, including groups of informants potentially less likely to have Internet access (e.g., older adults). For example, in one study I specifically asked each participant to nominate a parent as an informant. College students' parents are likely to fall into the age group with the least Internet access (30% of adults 50 years old and over had access to the Internet in 2000, compared with 55% for 25–49-year-olds; U.S. Department of Commerce (2000)). Nevertheless, 65 out of the 80 participants provided a parent as an informant, indicating that at least 81% of participants had a parent with Internet access. Furthermore, 60 of the parents (92%) completed the ratings. Thus, lack of access to the Internet does not seem to be a major obstacle to collecting informant reports. In fact, we even collected informant reports from one grandmother and one great-grandmother, the so-called silver surfers.

2.2. Preconception 2: Informant reports are expensive to collect

Many personality researchers may be concerned that recruiting informants will cost more money than they can afford. Part of these anticipated costs are associated with the postal mailing, which can be avoided by using the Internet, as described above. The rest of these anticipated costs are associated with compensating the informants. There is a simple and effective solution for this: do not compensate the informants.

Researchers seem to believe that compensating informants will increase response rates. This may be true, but there are two reasons not to compensate informants, in addition to saving money. First, as I demonstrate below, it is relatively easy to obtain very high response rates without compensating informants. Second, compensating informants introduces an incentive for participants to cheat (i.e., fill out their own informant reports) and for informants to provide non-serious responses simply to get the reward. Thus, I recommend that researchers avoid compensating informants unless they are asking the informants to complete a difficult or time-consuming task. This has the added benefit of eliminating the monetary costs of collecting informant reports.

2.3. Preconception 3: Informants will not cooperate

As I alluded to above, many researchers assume that informants will be unwilling to cooperate unless they are compensated or otherwise given an incentive. As my own results will demonstrate, this skepticism is unfounded. Using a few very simple strategies, I have obtained response rates of 76–95% from informants.

I suspect response rates among informants are high for several reasons. First, completing a rating of someone one knows well is intrinsically interesting—it gives the informant the opportunity to reflect on their relationship with that person. Informants may think, often correctly, that they have some special insight into the target they are rating that will help the researcher understand the person better. In fact, I have sometimes gotten follow-up e-mails from informants who wanted to provide a more detailed description of the person they rated. Furthermore, a typical informant report consisting of 100 items only takes about 10 min to complete, so completing the ratings is not a significant burden on informants.

In addition, I use a few simple strategies to boost response rates. These strategies, described in detail in Section 3.1, include taking steps to avoid spam filters when contact-

ing informants, sending follow-up e-mails to non-responders, and asking participants to remind informants themselves. These common-sense strategies are relatively effortless and are surprisingly effective, suggesting that personality researchers may be overly pessimistic about people's willingness to cooperate with their demands.

2.4. Preconception 4: Informant reports are not valid (because of dishonesty or faking)

There are several ways in which the quality of informant data could be jeopardized. Surprisingly, the most common concern I have heard from researchers is that participants may fake their own informant reports. To evaluate this concern, we must ask ourselves two questions: Would it be possible for participants to do this? And, are participants motivated to do this?

Using the strategies I have proposed here, it would be very difficult for a participant to fake their own informant reports. Instead of providing real e-mail addresses for each of the two or three informants, participants would have to provide two or three of their own e-mail addresses without it being obvious to researchers that the addresses are their own.

Furthermore, participants have nothing to gain from doing this, unless there is some compensation to the participant that is contingent on the informants' cooperation. For this reason, as well as in fairness to participants, any compensation to the participant should not be contingent on the cooperation of the informants. Hopefully this lays to rest any fears researchers have about participants cheating on their informant reports.

A more likely threat to the validity of informant reports is the possibility that informants may not respond honestly. As mentioned above, non-serious responses can be discouraged by not providing compensation to the informants. However, it is still possible that informants will not be completely honest because they fear that the participants will see their answers, or that negative ratings would affect the participant's standing in the experiment or even in school (if the participants are students). This is a reasonable concern and the reality is probably that, like most methods, informant reports are not completely honest. Researchers should take steps to reassure informants that the participants will never see their ratings (e.g., by omitting any identifying information from the questionnaire). Furthermore, research suggests that people feel even more comfortable providing sensitive information with Internet questionnaires than with traditional paper-and-pencil questionnaires (Turner et al., 1998), suggesting that informants may be more honest when the questionnaire is administered online. In addition, Johnson (2005) suggests several effective strategies for handling invalid ratings, such as eliminating ratings with long strings of consecutive responses in the same category (e.g., a string of 1s on a Likert scale).

Researchers particularly concerned about socially desirable responding may want to take additional steps to measure and control for informants' response bias (Paulhus, 1991). One possibility would simply be to ask informants, after they have submitted their ratings, how honestly they responded and how much they trust that their answers will be kept confidential. Another possibility is to change the instructions to informants from "How do you see X?" to "How do people (in general) see X?" This would reduce the pressure on the informants to respond positively and may even lead to more valid ratings because informants may be able to mentally aggregate their impressions with others' impressions (Hofstee, 1994). This is a question for future research.

3. Three illustrative data sets

In this section I describe the procedure my collaborators and I have used for collecting informant reports. Study 1, described in Vazire and Gosling (2004), consisted of 80 adults and their informants across the US. Studies 2 (Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2004) and 3 (Vazire & Mehl, 2004) consisted of students recruited at the University of Texas at Austin and their informants. Although the procedures varied slightly across the three studies, I describe the general procedure here noting any major deviations as appropriate. Further details along with a packet of materials can be obtained at www.simine.com or by contacting me.

3.1. Method

Participants were asked to nominate two or three people who know them well and would probably be willing to serve as informants. In Study 1, participants provided this information on their consent form, which they returned to us by mail. In Studies 2 and 3, participants provided this information upon arriving to the laboratory (after completing the consent form). In Study 3 we specifically asked for one friend, one parent, and one dating partner (but told participants they could replace any of these with any other informant who knows them well if they could not provide one of each), but in the other two studies we did not specify who the informants should be. We asked participants to provide the first names and e-mail addresses of each informant. The participants were told that the informants' ratings would be completely confidential and that they themselves would never see their informants' ratings.

Soon after the participant began the study, we contacted the informants by e-mail. To avoid the possibility that the informants (or their e-mail filters) would delete our e-mail thinking it was spam, we asked the participants to tell their informants to expect an e-mail from us. We also avoided spam filters by sending the e-mails from a university-affiliated address and using the target participant's name in the subject line.

To further increase the likelihood of cooperation, we kept all communications with the informants as brief as possible. The body of the e-mail to informants contained a two-sentence description of the study, a link to the website, and a unique ID number to use for the questionnaire. Once informants clicked on the link, they were taken to a page with a short description of the study emphasizing that their ratings would be kept confidential. The next page consisted of a consent form conforming to IRB regulations, at the bottom of which was an "I Agree" button which informants clicked to give their consent. The questionnaire itself was also brief, consisting of about 100 items, including the 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999). Participants also completed self-reports on the BFI.

Every two weeks we checked the data to determine which informants had yet to complete the ratings and contacted those informants with a short follow-up e-mail. After two or three follow-up e-mails, we stopped contacting the informants. If an e-mail got bounced back to us, we contacted the participant and asked for another e-mail address for the informant (or for a new informant).

The informants were not compensated in any way. Participants were compensated either with feedback on their self-reports and websites (Study 1), partial fulfillment of course requirements (Study 2), or money (Study 3). In all cases the compensation was independent of whether or not the informants cooperated.

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Preconceptions 1 and 2: Informant reports are time consuming and expensive to collect

Contrary to the widely held preconceptions about informant reports, the procedure did not require extensive effort or monetary costs (Preconceptions 1 and 2). Although the amount of time and indirect monetary costs (there were no direct monetary costs of collecting the informant reports) cannot be measured empirically, the detailed descriptions of the strategies and procedures used should make it clear that the method was indeed simple and cheap.

3.2.2. Preconception 3: Informants will not cooperate

Table 2 presents the basic features and descriptive results for the three studies. The studies differed in terms of sample composition (student vs. non-student), number of informants requested (two vs. three), compensation to participants (feedback vs. course credit vs. monetary), and purpose and procedure of the study. Despite these differences, the cooperation rate across all three studies was above 75%. At least two informant reports were obtained for 88% of participants, and at least one informant report was obtained for 98% of participants. These results suggest a widespread willingness among informants to cooperate. Notice that the response rates are slightly lower when we asked for three informants per participant, but overall the response rates we obtained were comparable to, if not higher than, those obtained by traditional methods (e.g., Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002).

3.2.3. Preconception 4: Informant reports are not valid

There are several ways to test whether the ratings provided by informants are valid. First,higher levels of acquaintance between informants and participants will tend to increase the validity of the informants' ratings (Paulhus & Bruce, 1997; Paunonen, 1989; Watson et al., 2000). As Table 2 shows, informants were, on average, very well-acquainted with the participants they rated (M = approximately 10 years in all three studies).

Another indicator of the validity of the informants' ratings is the degree to which the informants agreed with each other (consensus) about the target. As Table 2 shows, consensus correlations (averaged across the five dimensions examined) ranged from .36 to.40.

Table 2
Basic features and descriptive results for three studies involving informant reports

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Number of participants	79	160	80
Compensation to participant[a]	Feedback[b]	Credit	Money
Number of informants requested per participant	2	3	3
Number of informants providing data	150	381	182
Informant response rate	95%	79%	76%
Mean self-informant acquaintance in years (*SD*)	10.2 (10.1)	9.6 (7.3)	10.0 (7.7)
Informant-informant agreement (consensus) [c] (*r*)	.40	.36	.37
Self-informant agreement [c] (*r*)	.47	.54	.53

Note. Study 1: Vazire and Gosling (2004). Study 2: Vazire et al. (2004). Study 3: Vazire and Mehl (2004).

[a] Informants received no compensation.

[b] This feedback did not include any information about the informants' ratings.

[c] Averaged across the five dimensions of the Five Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1999).

These correlations reflect the average level of pairwise agreement among informants who completed their ratings independently and who, in many instances, had never spoken to each other. In comparison, consensus correlations among informants in research using traditional informant methods typically range from .20 to .50 (Paunonen, 1989).

Finally, self-informant agreement is another indicator of the validity of informant reports. As Table 2 shows, self-informant correlations (averaged across the five dimensions examined) ranged from .47 to .54. Again, these values are similar to those found in research using traditional informant methods, which typically range from .40 to .60 (Watson et al., 2000).

If the informants in these studies were providing fake or dishonest responses, this would be reflected in weakened consensus and self-informant agreement, which was not the case. Thus, the findings suggest that the data provided by informants were at least as valid as data obtained from traditional methods.

These results, along with the ease with which they were obtained, should dispel any reservations researchers may have about collecting informant data in personality research. As a result of new technological advances, informant reports have become far easier and less expensive to collect than they were a decade ago, without compromising the validity of the data. Furthermore, informants are much more willing to cooperate than many researchers assume.

4. Conclusion

The perplexing pattern of over-reliance on self-reports in the field of personality research seems to be based, at least in part, on the outdated belief among researchers that other methods of assessing personality place a significant burden on the researcher or participants. Unfortunately, this belief has led many researchers to overlook informant reports, which provide rich, valid assessments of personality at minimal cost to the researcher. In their cost-benefit analyses of informant methods, researchers seem to have overestimated the costs, and perhaps underestimated the success and usefulness of informant methods. The data reported here show that informant reports can easily be incorporated into personality-assessment procedures, and that the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Using the strategies I have recommended here, informant reports should be within the reach of all personality researchers. Although some of these strategies may seem obvious, the fact that so few researchers exploit this source of data suggests that these points are not so obvious. Considering the benefits of informant reports, it seems unlikely that researchers would forego their use if they were aware of how easy they are to collect.

By combining informant reports with other sources of data, researchers can increase the validity of their personality assessments. In addition, informant reports allow researchers to address new questions that cannot be examined with self-reports alone. For example, my collaborators and I have used informant reports to examine questions of reputation (e.g., are people seen the same way by all of their informants?; Vazire, Mehl, & Rentfrow, 2005), meta-accuracy (i.e., do people know how others see them?; Vazire & Gosling, 2003), and prediction of behavior (i.e., are informant reports or self-reports better at predicting behavior?; Vazire & Mehl, 2004), all questions that require multi-method designs. I hope that the new technological advances which have made collecting informant reports so effective will stimulate more research in these and other exciting domains.

Acknowledgments

Preparation of this article was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grants MH64527-01A1 and MH52391, and National Science Foundation Grant 0422924. I am grateful to Sam Gosling, Cindy Chung, Katie Larsen, Pranjal Mehta, and Erik Noftle for their helpful comments on this paper and to Sam Gosling, Matthias Mehl, Jamie Pennebaker, and Jason Rentfrow for making their data available.

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