1. Introduction

Assessment centers have always had a strong link with practice. This link is so strong that the theoretical basis of the workings of an assessment center is sometimes questioned. In this chapter, we posit that trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett 2003) might be fruitfully used to explain how job-relevant candidate behavior is elicited and rated in assessment centers. Trait activation theory is a recent theory that focuses on the person–situation interaction to explain behavior.
based on responses to trait-relevant cues found in situations. These observable responses serve as the basis for behavioral ratings on dimensions used in a variety of assessments such as performance appraisal, interviews, but also assessment centers.

The outline of this chapter is as follows. We start by explaining the basic tenets behind the assessment center method and trait activation theory. We thereby clarify the relevance of trait activation to the assessment center paradigm. Second, we delineate the implications of trait activation theory for assessment center practice. Finally, we show how trait activation theory might have key implications for current and future assessment center research. Hereby we also provide various directions for future assessment center studies.

2. Assessment Centers

The International Task Force on Assessment Center Guidelines (2000) defines an assessment center as “a standardized evaluation of behavior based on multiple inputs. Several trained observers and techniques are used. Judgments about behavior are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations. These judgments are pooled in a meeting among the assessors or by a statistical integration process.” In other words, in an assessment center procedure, the candidate or assessees is observed by multiple assessors on job-related dimensions (competencies) across several exercises. These exercises are job-related simulations, for example in-basket exercises, group exercises, interview simulations, oral presentations, and fact-finding exercises.

Assessment centers can be part of selection, diagnostic and training programs (Thornton 1992). The specific design of the assessment center is contingent upon these different purposes. Given that assessment centers for selection are aimed at selecting the best candidate for a specific job, assessors often act primarily as observers and evaluators. Conversely, in diagnostic programs, assessment centers (also known as “development centers”) are primarily developed to shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of assesseees. Assessors are no longer observers as they also provide assesseees with feedback for improvement and development upon completion of the development center. Finally, participants of so-called “training centers” are trained in job-related skills which are required for their current job or promotion. In this application, assessors typically serve as individual coaches and trainers, who provide instant feedback to participants during the exercises. In the design of an assessment center, one has to carefully ensure that all assessment center attributes and characteristics match the purpose of the assessment center.
Worldwide, assessment centers are quite popular. This is probably due to their psychometric advantages. On average, assessment centers have good criterion-related validity, ranging from .25 to .39, depending on the dimension measured (Arthur et al. 2003). Overall, the interrater reliability is found to be moderate to high (.60-.90), depending on the level of experience and the training of assessors (Lievens 2002). Assessment centers further demonstrate good utility (Hoffman and Thornton 1997) and little adverse impact (Terpstra, Mohamed, and Kethley 1999). Finally, assesses react positively to the procedure (Hausknecht, Day, and Thomas 2004). This is not to say that assessment centers enjoy a perfect psychometric record. In particular, over the last years questions have been raised with respect to the quality of construct measurement in assessment centers (Lievens and Conway 2001; Lance et al. 2004; Sackett and Tuzinski 2001) because ratings of the same dimension do not seem to converge well across exercises (i.e., poor convergent validity). In addition, there appears to be little distinction between dimensions within a specific exercise as within-exercise dimension ratings are highly correlated (i.e., poor discriminant validity).

3. Trait Activation Theory

In assessment centers, candidates participate in various exercises, which is essentially similar to individuals acting in different situations. To make well-grounded evaluations about a candidate’s performance in assessment centers, it is of major importance to understand how behavior is expressed and evaluated in different situations. The answer to this issue has its foundations in the long debate in personality and social psychology over the relative importance of traits and situations as sources of behavioural variance. Along these lines, interactional psychology recognizes that people can behave consistently across distinct situations as well as that situations can cause several individuals to behave similarly (Tett and Guterman 2000).

Trait activation theory is a recent theory that focuses on this person–situation interaction to understand how individual traits express as work-related behavior and how this behavior is related to job performance (Tett and Burnett 2003). Figure 9.1 gives a schematic overview of the main ideas behind trait activation theory. As shown in Figure 9.1, trait activation theory starts with the common notion that a person’s trait level is expressed as trait-relevant behavior at work. Apart from the main effect of situations on work behavior (and vice versa), a first key axiom underlying trait activation theory is that traits will manifest as trait-expressive work behaviours only when trait-relevant cues are present (see arrow 4) (Tett and
Burnett 2003). According to trait activation theory, these trait-relevant cues can be categorized into three broad interrelated groups: task, social, and organizational. That is, specific task features (e.g., a messy desk), social features (e.g., problem colleagues), and organizational features (e.g., team-based organizational culture) are posited to moderate whether and how traits are expressed in trait-relevant behavior. For example, a trait such as autonomy is likely not to be expressed in routine monotonous jobs (task level), in the presence of a controlling supervisor (social level), or in a rigid autocratic culture (organizational level), whereas it is likely to be activated in the reverse conditions. In trait activation theory, situations are then described on the basis of their situation trait relevance, which can be referred to as a qualitative feature of situations that is essentially trait specific. It is informative with regard to which cues are present to elicit behavior for a given latent trait. For example, when an employee opens a messy drawer full of odds and ends, this situation is relevant for the trait order (conscientiousness). Similarly, when someone is confronted with an angry customer, this situation provides cues for traits such as calmness (emotional stability).

A second axiom underlying trait activation theory is that trait expression is not only dependent upon the relevance of the situation. The strength of the situation also plays a role (Tett and Burnett 2003). This notion of situation strength builds on the research about strong and weak situations. In contrast to situation trait relevance, situation strength is a continuum that refers to how much clarity there is with regard to how the situation is perceived. Strong situations contain unambiguous behavioural demands where the outcomes of behavior are clearly understood and widely shared (Mischel 1973). Strong situations and their relatively uniform expectations are therefore likely to result in few differences in how individuals respond to the situation, obscuring individual differences on underlying personality traits even where relevant. Conversely, weak situations are characterized by more ambiguous expectations, enabling much more variability in behavioural responses to be observed. In Figure 9.1, this notion of situation strength is captured by the box “intrinsic and extrinsic rewards” (Tett and Burnett 2003). The rationale is that trait-relevant work behavior that is favourably regarded in light of task, social, and/or organizational demands is likely to receive positive responses (e.g., bonuses, approval). Conversely, behavior at work that is unfavorably regarded is likely to get negative responses. Building on the research on weak situations, trait activation theory posits that a requirement for trait expression is that the associated rewards are modest or ambiguous. Staying with the same example as above, when a supervisor instructs the employee to clean the messy drawer, it will be much more difficult to observe individual differences related to the trait Order, whereas the opposite might be true in the absence of such clear-cut supervisory instructions.

Thus, the above shows that the greatest variability in trait-expressive behavior might be expected when individuals act in situations (1) that offer trait-relevant
cues (the notion of “situation trait relevance”) and (2) where extrinsic rewards are modest or ambiguous (the notion of “situation strength”). Both of these distinct characteristics of situations determine a situation’s trait activation potential (Haaland and Christiansen 2002; Tett and Burnett 2003). So, a situation’s trait activation potential is defined as the ability to observe differences in trait-related behaviours within a certain situation. The more probable it is to observe these differences, the higher that situation’s trait-activation potential is considered.

As trait activation theory describes situations on the basis of the traits activated by the situations, trait activation theory offers a substantial advancement as compared to earlier theories of interactional psychology by providing a trait-based frame to define situations. Specifically, the Big Five personality traits are typically used for describing the situations because these traits consist of clearly understood behavioural domains and represent the natural categories that individuals use to describe and evaluate social behavior (e.g., Costa and McCrae 1992;

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1 The analogy used by Tett and Burnett (2003) to distinguish between the two concepts is that trait relevance is akin to which channel a radio is tuned to, whereas situation strength is more similar to volume; relevance determines what is playing and strength whether it will be heard.
Goldberg 1992; Haaland and Christiansen 2002; Lievens, De Fruyt, and Van Dam 2001). Hence, they facilitate classification of situations with similar situational demands.

Third, trait activation theory distinguishes trait-expressive work behavior from job performance, the latter defined as valued work behavior (Tett and Burnett 2003). As indicated by Figure 9.1, trait-related work behavior is rated positively (+), negatively (−), or mediocre (0) depending on whether the behaviors expressed meet task (e.g., does the work meet the performance objectives), social (e.g., does the person fit in the group), and organizational (e.g., do the behaviors shown match the organizational values) demands. This shows that the situational features serve as reference points for evaluating work behaviours. We refer interested readers to Tett and Burnett (2003) for a detailed and excellent primer on trait activation theory.

3.1 Assessment Center Workings Framed in Trait Activation Theory

Figure 9.2 shows how assessment centers can be framed in trait activation theory. In assessment centers, a person’s trait level is measured as a score on a trait-related competency (e.g., stress tolerance as being related to emotional stability) that is based on behavior in various assessment center exercises. Assessment center exercises represent situations that differ in terms of their trait activation potential. The more likely behavior can be observed within an exercise that is relevant to a particular Big Five trait, the higher the exercise’s activation potential would be for that trait. As posited by trait activation theory, the trait activation potential of assessment center exercises will be determined by two factors: the availability of trait-relevant exercise cues and the rewards provided (also known as the strength of the exercise). With respect to the former, assessment center exercise descriptions typically contain information about the three levels: job demands, social demands, and organizational demands. That is, a given assessment center exercise tries to simulate these demands, hereby eliciting trait-relevant behavior. Apart from the fact that exercise descriptions contain information about the work itself (task demands), unique advantages of assessment center exercises over other predictors are that they also simulate working with others such as clients, colleagues, supervisors (played by role-players or other candidates) and that they are embedded in a specific organizational culture.

In assessment center exercises, the rewards are represented by the specific exercise instructions that provide information and expectations to candidates about what to do or not to do. For example, exercise instructions might mention that the general aim of the exercise is “to reach consensus,” “to motivate the
problem subordinate,” “to make a good impression,” or “to give an oral presentation on strategic issues.” Instructions and cues about effective behavior do not come only from the exercise instructions. Candidates might also get a sense of what is effective through prior experience in assessment center exercises, information from other candidates, prior coaching, etc.

4. Implications of Trait Activation Theory for Assessment Center Practice

Trait activation theory does not need to be reserved as a theoretical framework. If desired, one can go even further by using trait activation theory as a useful prescriptive framework in assessment centers. Prior to presenting some implications, we want to emphasize that trait activation theory does not mean that assessors
should directly rate traits and that dimensions should be removed from assessment centers. Organizations choose dimensions for a variety of reasons, only one of which is their representation of traits. An important advantage of dimensions is that they are often formulated in the language of work behavior, increasing their apparent relevance to management. In fact, dimensions capture acquired work skills (e.g., negotiation and organization skills) and are closely linked to job activities and organizations’ competency models (Lievens, Sanchez, and De Corte 2004).

We believe that the theory-based implications of trait activation for assessment center practice are diverse. First, one way to use the logic of trait activation in practice concerns the development of exercises. In current assessment center practices, exercises are primarily developed to increase fidelity and criterion-related validity. We are not proposing that these practices should be abandoned. However, trait activation theory should also play a role. Specifically, trait activation emphasizes the importance of characteristics of the situations for observing differences in trait-relevant behavior in assessment center exercises. As noted above, the opportunity to observe these differences in trait-relevant behavior depends primarily upon the relevance and strength of the situation. This leads to two implications. On the one hand substantial efforts should be undertaken to increase the situation trait relevance of exercises. For example, if organizations want to assess candidates on a dimension such as resistance to stress that is related to the trait of emotional stability, they must use exercises that put people in a situation that might activate behavior relevant to the trait of interest. An oral presentation with challenging questions might be a good example as this kind of situation is likely to evoke dimension-relevant behavior. Other examples might be the inclusion of stringent time limits, sudden obstacles, or information overload in exercises. In addition, assessment center developers might ensure that cues at the three different levels (task, social, and organizational) are embedded in the exercises. On the other hand trait activation theory highlights that exercises should not represent strong situations. If organizations design exercises with clearly defined tasks and role players with strict rules about what to say or do, there might be few options left open for the assesses. Examples in a role play might be exercise instructions that prescribe candidates to fire the employee (instead of leaving this option open). Such exercise instructions with clear-cut expectations invoke too strong situations, reducing the variability in the expression of relevant dimensions. Therefore, organizations typically design exercises with a certain amount of vagueness and ambiguity so that differences in how assesses tackle the situation are more easily elicited and observed.

Second, there are various implications for assessment center dimensions. Assessment center dimensions are typically based on job analysis. However, once job analysis has identified the dimensions to be measured, trait activation theory might be used to eliminate or combine dimensions within an exercise that seem to capture the same underlying trait (e.g., “innovation” and “adaptability” are
based on behaviours that might be expressions of Openness). In addition, trait activation theory advocates using specific dimensions instead of general concepts (Tett and Schleicher 2001). At a practical level, use of specific dimensions allows precise diagnosis for developmental purposes (Thornton 1992) and more points of comparison in matching individuals to work environments (Tett and Guterman 2000).

Third, there are implications for the development of scoring methods (Tett 1999). That is, trait activation prescribes that the observation of behavior has to be well separated from the evaluation. Evaluation based immediately on observations obscures the relation between behaviours which on the surface may seem opposite or even are related to different dimensions, but in fact share the same underlying trait. In addition, trait activation theory suggests developing scoring checklists that include behavioural clusters, i.e. behaviours sharing a common underlying dimension and trait (see also Lievens 1998).

Fourth, trait activation theory provides a theoretical underpinning for the provision of training to assessors. Specifically, the clear distinction in trait activation theory between observation and evaluation suggests that assessor training should not only provide assessors with information about the behaviours to be observed but also about the evaluation of these behaviours. This is exactly what frame-of-reference training aims to accomplish (Lievens 2001; Schleicher et al. 2002). In frame-of-reference training, a performance theory is imposed on assessors to ensure that they rate candidates in accordance with the norms and values of a specific organization. This performance theory consists of competency-relevant behaviours and their effectiveness levels. Accordingly, trait activation theory provides a theory-based underpinning for the importance of providing a frame-of-reference training to assessors.

Fifth, assessment center users might fruitfully build on trait activation theory when constructing role-player instructions. In current assessment center practice, role players are typically given a specific list of things to do and to avoid. Role players are also trained to perform realistically albeit consistently across candidates. Although these best practices have proven their usefulness over the years, a key function of trained role players consists of evoking dimension-related behavior from candidates (Thornton and Mueller-Hanson 2004). Trait activation might help identify which specific traits can be evoked by specific role player stimuli (i.e., specific statements or actions). These role-player cues should subtly elicit assessee behavior because otherwise the situations might become too strong.

Finally, trait activation theory has also implications for assessment center feedback. There has been some debate about whether assessment center feedback reports should be built around dimensions versus exercises (Thornton et al. 1999). When feedback is built around dimensions (e.g., “You score weak on resilience”), the advantage is that such dimension-specific feedback is relevant across a wide variety of situations. Yet, this feedback assumes that these dimensions
are indeed measured across many situations (exercises). Research shows this is often not the case. Conversely, feedback might also be built around exercises (e.g., “You score weak in the oral presentation”). This is in line with most of the research evidence showing that exercises capture much of the variance in assessment center ratings. Yet, this feedback lacks depth as it generalizes to only one specific situation (one exercise). The interesting point is that trait activation theory takes a middle of the road position between these two extremes. Specifically, trait activation theory suggests building feedback reports around the situations that activate the traits (e.g., “You score weak in situations where you are put under pressure”).

5. Implications of Trait Activation Theory for Assessment Center Research

5.1 Convergent Validity of Assessment Center Ratings

One of the strongest implications of trait activation for current assessment center research is related to the research stream on the convergent validity of assessment center ratings. As described above, assessment centers are found to lack convergent validity, since common MTMM findings indicate that ratings of the same dimension do not converge well across assessment center exercises (see Sackett and Tuzinski 2001). From a theoretical point of view, these findings undermine the position of dimensions as cornerstones of assessment centers. In addition, the common use of final dimension ratings for giving feedback can be questioned. After all, for this feedback to be meaningful, it is essential that there is indeed evidence that these final dimension ratings measure the dimensions consistently across various situations (exercises).

Trait activation theory provides an alternative theory-based approach for looking at the convergent validity findings. As exercises differ in their trait activation potential, it will be difficult to observe consistent behavior across exercises. Therefore, convergence will be poor for ratings of a dimension related to a given personality trait, when exercises differ in their activation potential for that trait. Trait activation theory predicts that stronger convergence should be expected when ratings are based on exercises in which there is significant opportunity to observe trait-relevant behavior in each exercise. For example, consider ratings on the dimension of interpersonal influence, which are based on behaviours that are expressions of the Big Five trait of extroversion. As a leaderless group discussion
and a role-play exercise can be both expected to provide cues relevant to this trait, convergence between ratings should be expected. However, as a planning exercise probably does not provide as many cues for expression of trait-relevant behavior, ratings on the interpersonal influence dimension from this exercise should not be expected to correlate very strongly with those from other exercises.

There is growing evidence to support this argument. Highhouse and Harris (1993) found higher convergence across exercises in which the same behavior can be observed. However, it is noteworthy that the trait activation approach extends beyond pure behavior, because the exact same behavior need not be observed in two exercises to be considered similar; behaviors can appear different on the surface, but in fact are related to the same personality trait (Haaland and Christiansen 2002). The example used by the researchers to illustrate this involved consideration of one exercise that requires risk-taking behavior to successfully resolve the situation and one that involves persuading a group of people to adopt the candidates’ position. Given that these behaviours can be seen as falling within the construct domain of extroversion, convergence on ratings from a dimension linked to this Big Five trait could be expected across these exercises.

Direct empirical support for this implication of trait activation theory can be found in a recent study by Haaland and Christiansen (2002). They examined whether poor convergence of assessment centers across exercises was due to correlating ratings from exercises that differed in trait activation potential. Subject matter experts were asked to judge whether it could be possible to observe behavior relevant to the Big Five traits in a given exercise. The subject matter experts were then instructed to link the dimensions of the assessment center with the Big Five traits, because greater convergence should only be expected on dimensions that were conceptually relevant to a given trait. The correlations between ratings from exercises high in trait activation potential were compared to the correlations between ratings from exercises low in trait activation potential, providing support for the implication that the trait activation potential of the exercises plays an important role in the convergent validity of ratings. Lievens et al. (2006) found support for trait activation as a theoretical framework for understanding convergent validity across a large number of assessment centers. That is, they found support for the proposition that convergence is better between exercises that provide an opportunity to observe behavior related to the same trait. Effects were small, though.

In sum, trait activation provides a deeper and more sophisticated approach for looking at the convergence of ratings of the same dimensions across assessment center exercises. An advantage of using trait activation theory is that convergence should not be expected among all dimension ratings. In fact, trait activation posits that convergence should be expected only between exercises that provide an opportunity to observe behavior related to the same trait. Furthermore, the greater psychological depth of trait activation is illustrated by the fact that convergence is
also expected across exercises that look different on the surface, but activate the same traits on a deeper trait level.

5.2 Discriminant Validity of Assessment Center Ratings

Trait activation theory also provides a novel look at discriminant validity research in assessment centers. As mentioned above, assessment centers have weak discriminant validity, because MTMM research has found high correlations between dimensions within exercises (see Sackett and Tuzinski 2001). These findings are not consonant with theoretical inferences, since assessment center theory emphasizes distinct dimensions as cornerstones of assessment centers. Instead, these findings suggest that ratings cluster within exercises, which again has implications for assessment center practice. For example, one might wonder whether it is still justified to organize evaluations and feedback around dimensions instead of exercises.

To our knowledge, all prior assessment center studies correlated all dimensions within a particular exercise to obtain an index of discriminant validity. Such a broad approach focuses only on the surface dimensions and ignores that these dimensions are conceptually related to underlying traits. Specifically, exercises may have cues for behaviours that are related to different dimensions, but are in fact expressions of the same trait. These dimensions will therefore correlate more strongly, because they share a common cause. Trait activation theory suggests that discriminant validity will be worse in part, because prior research assumes that assessment center dimensions are totally discrete whereas they may not be.

By specifying links to underlying traits as a causal explanation for strong dimension correlations within exercises, trait activation theory again goes beyond the simple conceptualization that dimensions may overlap because they require the same behaviours. For example, ratings on dimensions of oral communication and impact may be based on very different behaviours but may both be expressions of the Big Five trait of extroversion. Conversely, better discrimination might be observed when correlating ratings of problem solving and interpersonal skills because these dimensions are not expressions of the same underlying trait(s).

Support for this idea can be found in Kleinmann et al. (1995). In this study, use of conceptually distinct dimensions had positive effects on discriminant validity. With interchangeable dimensions, assessors gave interdependent ratings which did not differ meaningfully from each other. Lievens et al. (2006) provide even more direct support. In this large-scale study, subject matter experts were asked to link the dimensions of the assessment center to the Big Five traits. When examining discriminant validity, Lievens et al. (2006) took the relation between the dimensions and the underlying traits into account. Results revealed that discrimination among ratings within exercises was better for dimensions that were not expressions
of the same underlying traits than for dimensions that were. Again, effects were small.

In sum, trait activation theory has key implications for the discriminant validity of assessment center ratings. Traditional approaches for examining the discriminant validity of assessment center ratings have typically involved analyzing all correlations among all dimension ratings, without regard for underlying traits. Conversely, trait activation theory suggests that part of the reason dimension ratings correlate so highly, is that they may be based on behavioural cues related to a common underlying trait. From this point of view, weak discriminant validity between some assessment center dimensions can be expected.

5.3 Correlations with Other Assessment Methods

External validation research on assessment centers might also benefit from taking trait activation theory into account. In external validation, assessment center scores are linked in a nomological network to other instruments such as personality inventories, 360 degree feedback ratings, and cognitive ability tests. As argued by Tett and Burnett (2003), trait activation is a framework that applies to many assessment methods, such as assessment centers as well as other predictor assessment methods (personality inventories, 360 degree feedback inventories, structured interviews, etc.). Essentially, as long as these predictor methods create the opportunity to observe similar trait-relevant behavior as assessment center exercises, one can expect these methods to obtain convergent results. Conversely, when various assessment methods do not lend themselves to observe similar trait-relevant behavior, divergent results might be expected. Therefore, trait activation theory might also provide a novel look at research that correlates assessment center ratings with other assessment instruments. In particular, an intriguing avenue for future studies consists of incorporating trait activation ideas when externally validating assessment center ratings with those from non-assessment center methods with similar activation potential.

The value of this idea can be indirectly tested by reinterpreting the results of prior external validation research in the assessment center field. Although these prior studies did not rely on trait activation theory, it was striking that specific personality traits were correlated with specific assessment center exercises. For instance, Spector et al. (2000) discovered that “interpersonal” exercises correlated with personality constructs such as emotional stability, extroversion, and openness, whereas “problem-solving” exercises correlated with cognitive ability and Conscientiousness. In another study, Craik et al. (2002) reported that in-basket performance was related to Conscientiousness, Openness, and strategic dimensions such as decision making. Conversely, group discussion performance was best described by interpersonal dimensions and personality constructs such as agreeableness, extroversion, and
openness. Similar a priori formulated hypotheses were tested about relations between assessment center exercises and cognitive ability. Goldstein et al. (1998) reported that the relationship between assessment centers and cognitive ability tests varied as a function of the cognitive “loading” of assessment center exercises. When exercises (e.g., in-basket exercise) tapped cognitively oriented dimensions (e.g., problem analysis), there were stronger relationships between the exercise and the cognitive ability test. Similarly, Thornton, et al. (1997) found that the correlations of assessment center ratings with dimensions measured by comparable cognitive ability tests were higher than the correlations with dimensions measured by non-comparable cognitive ability tests. For example, assessment center ratings on routine problem solving correlated on average higher with tests of general intelligence, creativity, logic, and mechanical ability than with tests of spatial perception, accuracy of perception, writing ability, oral ability, and graphical ability.

More direct support for the idea to include trait activation potential in external validating research can be found in Lievens, De Fruyt, and van Dam (2001). They studied trait descriptors in assessor notes and found differences between assessment center exercises in terms of the personality adjectives noted, with particular personality traits linked to specific exercises. For example, in group discussions, assessors reported mainly extroversion adjectives, while conscientiousness markers were more frequently noted in the in-basket exercise. Haaland and Christiansen (2002) actually tested inferences of trait activation theory. They asked subject matter experts to evaluate assessment center exercises on their trait activation potential. These evaluations were taken into account when correlating the exercises with 16PF scores, resulting in higher correlations between the personality scores and exercises judged to be high in trait activation potential for that personality trait than correlations with exercises low in trait activation potential.

Besides looking at the personality trait inventories, another research suggestion consists of studying the relations between assessment center ratings and 360 degree feedback ratings. Prior studies (Atkins and Wood 2002; Hagan et al. 2006) that validated a 360-degree feedback program against an assessment center found high correlations between the overall assessment rating and the aggregated 360 degree ratings. Unfortunately, no analyses at the level of the dimension ratings were conducted. Future studies might employ trait activation theory to make more fine-grained predictions and to examine under which conditions both procedures yield convergent results. For example, trait activation theory suggests that ratings of interpersonal sensitivity in assessment center exercises that are high in trait activation potential for agreeableness might correlate higher with peer ratings on interpersonal sensitivity in 360 degree feedback than with supervisor ratings of interpersonal sensitivity. The rationale is that peers might provide good insight in these interpersonal aspects because they have the opportunity to observe behavior related to the trait of agreeableness, whereas supervisors have less opportunity to observe such behavior. Similar hypotheses might be posited for the
convergence of assessment center exercises with dimensions rated by other rating sources in 360-degree feedback programs.

In sum, prior research has externally validated assessment center ratings without paying attention to trait activation theory. Trait activation theory presents a more sophisticated and theory-driven strategy as it consists of mapping the trait activation potential of the assessment center exercises and the trait activation potential of the external criteria (personality inventories, 360-degree feedback, etc.). A similar theory-driven strategy can be followed when correlating assessment center exercises with construct-oriented situational judgment tests or structured interview ratings. So far, trait activation theory has been used only as an internal validation approach within assessment centers. However, the above shows that we can also easily apply the trait activation principles in an external nomological network.

5.4 Criterion-Related Validity of Assessment Center Ratings

Prior criterion-related validity research has shown that assessment centers are good predictors of job performance and potential, at the level of both the overall assessment rating and the final dimension rating (Arthur et al. 2003; Gaugler et al. 1987; Hermelin, Lievens, and Robertson 2007). Given the variability in assessment center design, it is feasible to search for factors that moderate the criterion-related validity of assessment centers. In Gaugler et al. (1987), assessment centers were more valid when a greater number of different types of exercises were used, a form of peer evaluation was applied, assessors were both psychologists and managers, the research methodology was solid, and the percentage of female candidates was high.

On the basis of trait activation theory other moderators might be suggested. In fact, the behavior consistency model of predictor validity (Wernimont and Campbell 1968) posits that the precision in predicting future performance improves if the correspondence between predictor and criterion measures is increased. These ideas can be linked to trait activation theory (see Tett and Schleicher 2001) which might present a theoretical basis for this behavior consistency model and for increasing assessment center validity. According to trait activation theory, the implementation of trait-relevant cues in situations is very important—as already emphasized earlier in the chapter. As an evident consequence, assessment centers that include work settings that activate the traits required for successful performance in the job might be more valid. To this end, cues related to the different levels (task, social, and organizational) might be built into the exercise descriptions. Another straightforward consequence is that assessment centers wherein assessors use the same standards for evaluating candidates as supervisors on the job will show higher predictive validity. Low predictive validity could then be due to the fact that situations in the assessment center exercises evoked different traits than those
needed for the job or that the evaluative standards in the assessment center do not converge with the ones on the job (Tett and Schleicher 2001). Finally, trait activation theory suggests that the conceptual accordance between assessment center scores and criteria might be enhanced by using the same dimensions in both the predictor and the criterion. For instance, assessment center dimensions (e.g., “detail oriented” or “being prepared” as expressions of the underlying trait of conscientiousness) are then correlated with similar dimensional criteria.

In sum, assessment centers should be designed to ensure their predictive validity. Along these lines, trait activation proposes several interesting insights (use of similar dimensions, use of exercises that elicit the relevant traits, etc.) that are related to increasing the overlap between assessment center ratings and criterion ratings.

6. Conclusion

It is generally acknowledged that the behavior of candidates in assessment centers is neither determined solely by dispositional factors (i.e., stable personality traits) nor solely by situational factors (i.e., assessment center exercises) but by the interaction of the person and the situation. Therefore, it is appropriate to conceptualize the occurrence of behavior in assessment center exercises and its evaluation in terms of a recent interactionist theory such as trait activation theory. A central concept within this theory is trait activation potential, which refers to the ability to observe differences in trait-related behavior within a given situation. The trait activation potential of a situation is determined by its strength and relevance.

The implications of trait activation theory for assessment center practice are far reaching as trait activation theory can be used as a prescriptive framework for assessment center design. First, one should keep the logic behind trait activation potential in mind during exercise development. Second, trait activation theory might be used to eliminate or combine dimensions that seem to capture the same underlying trait. In addition, trait activation theory advocates the use of specific dimensions instead of general concepts. Third, the underlying relations between dimensions and traits should be taken into account while developing scoring methods. Fourth, frame-of-reference training might be fruitfully used to impose both behaviours and effectiveness levels to assessors, two main components of trait activation theory. Fifth, assessment centers might benefit from trait activation theory when constructing role-player instructions. Last, trait activation theory suggests building feedback reports around situations that activate a specific dimension or trait.
Finally, this chapter shows that trait activation theory has also important implications for assessment center research. First, trait activation theory provides a deeper and more sophisticated explanation for the construct validity findings in assessment centers. Traditionally, multi-trait multi-method (MTMM) research posits that ratings on a specific dimension should correlate highly across all exercises, evidencing convergent validity. Conversely, according to trait activation theory, one should expect only high correlations across exercises which are high in trait activation potential for that dimension. In addition, trait activation theory also provides insights into the lack of discriminant validity evidence. Again, according to the MTMM approach, to establish discriminant validity, dimensions within an exercise should not correlate highly. To this end, all dimensions within a particular exercise are correlated. Instead, trait activation theory argues that this approach is too broad. That is, underlying relations between dimensions and traits are being ignored, because the MTMM approach assumes that assessment center dimensions are totally discrete whereas they may not be. From this point of view, particular dimensions which are related to the same underlying trait may correlate rather highly, establishing weak discriminant validity evidence. Besides offering valuable perspectives on these internal validation research efforts, external validation research may also benefit from trait activation theory. In particular, as long as assessment methods yield equal activation potential for a given dimension or trait, convergent results should be expected, whereas trait activation theory predicts divergent results between methods which are dissimilar in trait activation potential. So, trait activation theory offers a theory-driven strategy to develop a nomological network and externally validate assessment centers. Finally, trait activation theory has implications for predictive validity research. Although previous studies have already provided evidence for good predictive validity of assessment centers, it may even be increased by improving the similarity in trait activation potential between predictor and criterion.

In closing, this chapter outlined the value of trait activation theory and its opportunities for assessment center practice and research. Our contribution should encourage both practitioners and researchers to conceptualize assessment centers that are in line with the tenets underlying trait activation theory.

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