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Joshua J. Jackson, Patrick L. Hill and Brent W. Roberts
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Guest Editorial

Misconceptions of Traits Continue to Persist: A Response to Bandura

Joshua J. Jackson

Washington University in St. Louis

Patrick L. Hill

Brent W. Roberts

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

In his defense of self-efficacy, Bandura (Journal of Management, vol. 38, no. 1) does the field a disservice by misconstruing what constitutes a trait. The authors of this response discuss current definitions of a trait and contrast these conceptions with the definition put forth by Bandura. Integral to this disagreement is the level of specificity across different psychological constructs. The authors suggest that if levels of specificity are acknowledged, traits may be meaningfully integrated into social cognitive models of personality. They contend that integrating traits and social cognitive units can benefit both fields and meaningfully impact applied research.

Keywords: *personality trait; self-efficacy; person–situation debate; predictive validity; personality assessment*

Few social cognitive constructs are as ubiquitous as self-efficacy—and with good reason given that self-efficacy measures demonstrate predictive validity for management and occupational outcomes (e.g., Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), academic outcomes (e.g., Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991), and even health outcomes (e.g., Holden, 1991). For these reasons, we concur with Bandura’s (2012) overall belief that investigations of self-efficacy can be

Corresponding author: Joshua J. Jackson, Washington University in St. Louis, Department of Psychology, One Brookings Drive, Campus Box 1125, St. Louis, MO 63130, USA

E-mail: j.jackson@wustl.edu

useful. However, in defending self-efficacy, we believe he makes multiple misrepresentations of other constructs—and in doing so undermines the effectiveness of his argument. In particular, we believe Bandura misconstrues what constitutes a trait, which has large ramifications for understanding the relationship between generalized and contextualized measures, the ability to predict meaningful outcomes, and the integration of trait and social cognitive approaches. By addressing his missteps, we hope to present a stronger foundation on which to discuss the role of individual differences in management research and to provide evidence that personality traits are useful constructs.

Unfortunately, Bandura (2012) espouses an antiquated view of traits that continues to resurface despite the many attempts to put it to rest (e.g., Funder, 1991; Roberts, 2009). In this view, traits are portrayed as a simplistic, one-size-fits-all approach that neglects theory and contexts—all at the cost of lower predictive power. Instead, Bandura (2012) argues for measures that are functional and contextual, which are putatively better able to explain the dynamics of human functioning (e.g., Bandura, 1986, 1999). By advancing this view of traits again, many of the recent advances in personality psychology—as well as the original characterization of traits that Allport (1937) introduced more than a half a century ago—are outright dismissed. We hope to make clear that current views of personality traits do not conform to the simplistic model of traits put forth by Bandura (2012). Specifically, personality traits do have explanatory and predictive powers, and moreover, traits and social cognitive variables, such as self-efficacy, can be meaningfully integrated.

What Are Personality Traits?

Personality traits are neurophysiological structures that cause relatively enduring, automatic patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that tend to manifest in certain ways under certain circumstances (Depue & Lenzenweger, 2001; Roberts, 2009; Roberts & Jackson, 2008). This view builds on previous definitions of personality traits such as those offered by Allport (1937), Funder (1991), Johnson (1999), and Tellegen (1991). From this definition, it is important to note that personality traits reflect more than just behaviors; traits also reflect thoughts (cognitions) and feelings (emotions, affect). Thus, describing traits as solely collections of behaviors, as Bandura (2012) does, is an inaccurate portrait of personality traits. Moreover, the criterion-related validity of traits does not rely on past behavior predicting future behavior; instead, it relies on the ability to predict outcomes in novel situations (Funder, 1991). The circularity argument that Bandura (2012: 26) brings to the table has been addressed and refuted multiple times (see Funder, 1991; Roberts, 2009; Tellegen, 1991). It is unfortunate that no apparent integration of these past discussions appears in Bandura's recent article.

Equally troubling is the view that personality traits reflect a “behavioral fixedness” (Bandura, 2012: 26), where someone will behave in the same manner regardless of the situation. Definitions of personality traits have never made this claim (Funder, 1991; Johnson, 1999; Tellegen, 1991; Wiggins, 1997) and often explicitly expect cross-situation variation (Roberts, 2009). Take, for example, what it means to be polite. Allport (1961: 346) notes,

A truly polite person will vary his behavior even to the extent of breaking his polite habits in order to maintain his trait of politeness. . . . A polite American while traveling will quickly learn to belch in satisfaction over his meal in some countries; in others, to avoid this hearty act.

Intrinsic to the definition is the ability to adjust one's behavior to the situation as is necessary—not to act like an automaton. As such, part of the definition of being polite (a trait) is to behave differently—but coherently—across situations. Behavior fixedness is not a prerequisite for a trait and does not play a role in any contemporary theory of personality traits.

As the above example shows, the conceptualization and assessment of personality traits are explicitly contextualized within situations (Roberts, 2007). Personality traits reflect the emergent qualities that arise in the combination of behaviors, thoughts, and feelings occurring and varying across specific situations. For example, polite individuals change their behavior systematically depending on the crowd they are in, and people act more or less extraverted depending on the situation they are in. As in Bandura's (2012) article, personality traits are often described as decontextualized (e.g., Cervone, Shadel, & Jencius, 2001), an apparent knock on traits as neglecting the important situational influences that people are always embedded in. While personality trait psychologists could do better at incorporating the situation into their measurement models, situational influences are not completely absent in personality trait theories or measures. Moreover, personality questionnaire items are often contextualized by embedding properties of the situation into the items (e.g., work context or social situations)—so much so that some personality items are indistinguishable from self-efficacy items. For example, compare an item from the self-efficacy scale for learning (“How well can you organize your school work?”; Bandura, 1996) with an item from a conscientiousness measure (“I need a neat environment in order to work well”; Hill & Roberts, *in press*). Both are contextualized within an achievement domain (school and work), and both assess content that is related to organization and cleanliness. While not all personality trait items include contextual cues, many do and almost all major questionnaires employ such items (e.g., Revised NEO Personality Inventory [NEO-PI-R], California Psychological Inventory [CPI], and International Personality Item Pool [IPIP-Big Five]). Thus, personality traits should not be blanketly considered “decontextual generalities” (Bandura, 2012: 23), which thus “shortchanges the contribution of personal factors” (Bandura, 2012: 26). If looked at closely, many items used to assess self-efficacy could be interchanged with items to assess personality traits.

The Blessings and Banes of Specificity

One of the overarching themes of Bandura's continuing criticism of constructs like personality traits is that they are too broad and too decontextualized to do much good in either predicting or explaining outcomes. In contrast, the social cognitive model is predicated on the idea that with greater specificity comes better prediction and better explanation. Unfortunately, these assumptions about specificity are not always true.

In terms of predictive power, Bandura (2012) suggests that broader traits such as personality traits or even trait self-efficacy are not good predictors of important outcomes. This bold statement is in contrast to numerous studies that find that personality traits predict a broad range of outcomes at levels that are as large or larger than the gold standards of psychological predictors: IQ and socioeconomic status (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Personality traits predict longevity, health, criminality, occupational attainment, and marriage satisfaction, just to name a few important outcomes. These studies use multiple methods to assess personality traits and in some instances assess personality

traits decades before the onset of the outcome (e.g., Friedman, Tucker, Tomlinson-Keasey, Schwartz, Wingard, & Criqui, 1993). It is thus regrettable that the power personality traits have to predict non-test outcomes is not mentioned in the review.

Clearly, the broader level of analysis at which personality traits sit can be quite useful. Bandura (2012: 26), however, suggests that personality traits are either weak or uninformative predictors, with the take-home message that traits are useless. It is unfortunate that a construct that is able to offer a parsimonious explanation of behavior, that predicts important outcomes (Roberts et al., 2007), that demonstrates rank-order consistency across decades (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), that is heritable (Krueger & Johnson, 2008), and that is identified in many species, suggesting that it is of evolutionary importance (Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007), is outright dismissed by a prominent theorist.

Given these misconceptions of traits and their utility, it is perhaps unsurprising that Bandura (2012) is critical of the work on general self-efficacy (GSE). Indeed, Bandura (2012: 7) downplays this research by stating that “people differ in their efficacy, not only across different domains of functioning but even across various facets within an activity domain.” This statement is clearly accurate, as few of us hold the same certainty in our ability to write a paper as we have in our ability to kick a field goal. Nor do kickers believe they can throw a touchdown pass as easily as they can kick a field goal. And yet this statement in itself presents no actual attack on the usefulness of studying GSE.

As these examples note, clearly someone high on GSE does not believe that he or she will be effective across *all* domains or even across *all* tasks within a single domain. Instead, as Chen, Gully, and Eden (2001: 63) note, “GSE captures differences among individuals in their tendency to view themselves as capable of meeting task demands in a broad array of contexts.” In other words, GSE reflects an overall sense of efficacy across different tasks and situations, and *not* a belief that one has the same level of efficacy for *all* tasks and *all* situations. While this view of self-efficacy might not coincide with how Bandura initially viewed the construct, the distinction between GSE and contextualized self-efficacy is similar to the distinction between traits and contextualized assessments. GSE scores positively correlate with self-efficacy scores specific to different occupational contexts (Chen, Gully, et al., 2001), suggesting that while GSE might not perfectly capture self-efficacy for any one domain, there is evidence that GSE is capturing something that is shared across domains.

Of course, almost all researchers are aware of the fact that measurement specificity can bring higher predictive validity for outcomes that are aligned appropriately with one’s predictor (Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986; Hogan & Roberts, 1996). Thus, many personality psychologists will pursue and use narrow facets of broader domains in order to increase predictive validity (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001). Similarly, Bandura argues for using narrow, highly contextualized measures of self-efficacy to enhance explanation and prediction (although, it should be noted, he does not point out which contexts or situations are the most important). While being generally supportive of assessing constructs across the spectrum from broad to narrow (Jackson, Wood, Bogg, Walton, Harms, & Roberts, 2010; Roberts & Pomerantz, 2004), we are also acutely aware of the costs that come with any level of analysis, including more narrow levels of analyses like those represented with context-specific measures of self-efficacy.

Often, the broad and narrow distinction is mistaken for levels of explanation. A level of analysis that is more specific to the situation will likely lead to higher levels of prediction, but that in and of itself does not necessarily mean better explanation. Bandura (2012) suggests that because self-efficacy measures are contextualized they are better able to explain internal psychological processes. However, embedding the predictor in the criterion—the typical way of contextualizing a self-efficacy measure and thus increasing its predictive validity—is a poor facsimile for contextualizing something in a meaningful and explanatory fashion. Unfortunately, greater predictive power is often conflated with explanation (bigger is always better, right?), even though predictive validity does not relate to explanatory ability. Greater predictive validity can be achieved with more narrow measures, but this does not automatically give an insight into the process and likely occurs because the criterion is more closely aligned with the predictor. Thus, lower order constructs such as self-efficacy do not in and of themselves provide better explanation.

Greater predictive efficacy can also come at a cost. In a recent study, both conscientiousness and self-efficacy in various subject matters, such as math and languages, were used to predict effort levels and grades (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Roberts, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2009). Across four studies, a very consistent pattern emerged. Self-efficacy in any given subject predicted effort and grades within that competency quite well. However, self-efficacy in one domain, such as math, tended to be negatively correlated with effort and achievement in another domain, such as English. In contrast, conscientiousness predicted self-efficacy, effort, and accomplishment *positively* across *all* domains. Viewed from a selection perspective, if students were selected based on their math efficacy, you would inevitably pay a price with lowered performance in languages. However, if you selected on conscientiousness, then the resulting effect would be to enhance performance across multiple domains, albeit at a more modest level of proficiency because the magnitude of the correlation with conscientiousness is slightly lower than that found for self-efficacy. Clearly, both levels of analysis offer costs and benefits. Any doctrinaire approach that eliminates one level or another would appear to be the least efficacious way forward.

Integrating Self-Efficacy Within a Personality Trait Framework

It is unfortunate that many social cognitive theorists have misgivings and misunderstandings of traits, and therefore they neglect trait theory (Roberts, 2009). Taking a social cognitive approach is not antithetical to a trait approach and offers no excuse for excluding broad general constructs like personality traits. Neglecting traits ignores testing many reasonable integrative models of human functioning such as whether broader constructs (traits) cause more narrow level effects (self-efficacy). Bandura (2012: 31) alludes to this possibility but dismisses this outright because he is unable to see how “bygone causes do things . . . in the here and now,” labeling such a process as “mysterious.” Of course, one researcher’s mystery is another researcher’s riddle to be solved. The time lag between trait and outcome is not so formidable of a conceptual and causal barrier that researchers cannot overcome it. In fact, the irony is that social cognitive systems could be one set of intervening mechanisms that would explain the role of a long, distant trait and a current outcome, such as leadership, health, or interpersonal functioning.

A promising avenue for future research is to examine how self-efficacy can help us understand why broad personality traits demonstrate such impressive predictive validity for important life outcomes (Roberts et al., 2007). Conceptually, this can be thought of as a typical mediation model, with the causal pathway between broad-level traits and a specific outcome going through more narrow measures of self-efficacy. For instance, self-efficacy measures have been shown to mediate the links between conscientiousness and (a) test scores for college students (Lee & Klein, 2002; Trautwein et al., 2009), (b) performance on simple work-related tasks (Chen, Casper, & Cortina, 2001), and (c) learning software programs for work (Martocchio & Judge, 1997). Put differently, this work suggests that conscientiousness might confer one with stronger self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn helps to explain why conscientious individuals often achieve more than their counterparts do. While this work has focused primarily on the links between conscientiousness and self-efficacy, recent work has begun to demonstrate that contextualized self-efficacy might serve to mediate links with respect to agreeableness and associated outcomes as well (e.g., Caprara, Alessandri, & Eisenberg, in press). Accordingly, equipped with the more progressive definitions of traits espoused above, we believe that researchers should continue building bridges between generalized constructs (e.g., the Big Five, GSE) and self-efficacy, rather than spending their energies to divide them.

This integration would be especially beneficial when investigating issues within the workplace. People enter the workplace with many broad dispositional variables, like traits, that are predictive of performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), occupational attainment (Duckworth, Weir, & Tsukayama, 2011), and workplace behaviors (Roberts, Harms, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2007). Nevertheless, the workplace is a highly dynamic environment with new tasks, skills, and people to learn and interact with on a daily basis. Having a more narrow, contextualized assessment along with the assessment of broader traits will likely yield definitive benefits. Contextual assessments can boost predictive validity within that context, whereas broader traits can predict behavior in novel situations. Together, these variables can be used to better understand the person in situ, examining the processes that occur across time.

Conclusion

The work on self-efficacy has few parallels within psychology with respect to its depth and progeny. Indeed, perceptions of self-efficacy appear to help explain performance on multiple tasks across multiple domains. However, in his defense of self-efficacy Bandura (2012) misrepresented work within personality psychology in order to bolster his own. In this commentary, we hope to have presented a more contemporary and accurate account of personality traits, as well as a discussion of how generalized personality constructs can be useful, depending on whether the researcher chooses to study variables at broader or more context-specific levels. Moreover, we strongly believe that the best approach for moving forward with the study of self-efficacy is not by investigating its utility relative to that of other constructs. Instead, researchers must continue to examine how self-efficacy beliefs can be predicted by broader personality dispositions and thus whether they help explain the

effects of these traits in the process. In other words, the discussion should not center on the differences between traits and self-efficacy beliefs, but rather on their commonalities.

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