



TRAIT ACTIVATION THEORY

A Practical Application

Presented by G. Mulder

Aim of presentation:

- Introduction to TAT
- Critically evaluate existing AC simulations
- Compare existing AC simulations to TAT simulations
- 'How to guide' for implementing TAT

Outline

1. Introduction
2. Trait Activation Theory
3. Practical Application within an In-basket and Role-play
4. Research on TAT
5. Conclusion
6. Questions

Introduction

- What is an AC?
- “A standardised evaluation of behaviour based on multiple inputs. Several trained observers and techniques are used. Judgements about behaviour are made, in major part, from specifically developed assessment simulations.”
 - International Task Force on Assessment Centre Guidelines (2010)

Introduction

- “a simulation-based process employing multiple assessment techniques and multiple assessors to produce judgements regarding the extent to which a participant displays selected competencies required to perform a job effectively. ACs are usually employed either for selection or development purposes.”
 - Schlebusch & Roodt (2008)

Introduction

- What is the aim of an AC then?
- To create a situation where it is possible for a candidate to illustrate certain behaviours in order for those behaviours to be observed .
- In essence to make judgements and evaluations on the behaviours illustrated.

Introduction

- Basic process of AC's
- Simulation → Candidate perceives the simulation
- Candidate reacts on the simulation → Behaviours are displayed
- These behaviours are observed by assessors or observers → Judgements are made for either selection or development purposes.

Introduction

- What would then happen if these exercises are not targeting the correct dimensions or competencies?
- Can the decision for selection or specific development feedback still then be seen as valid?

Introduction

- Typically exercises are developed to target pre-determined competencies – why are these competencies then sometimes not displayed?
- How do you ensure that the correct competencies are then targeted and displayed within an exercise?

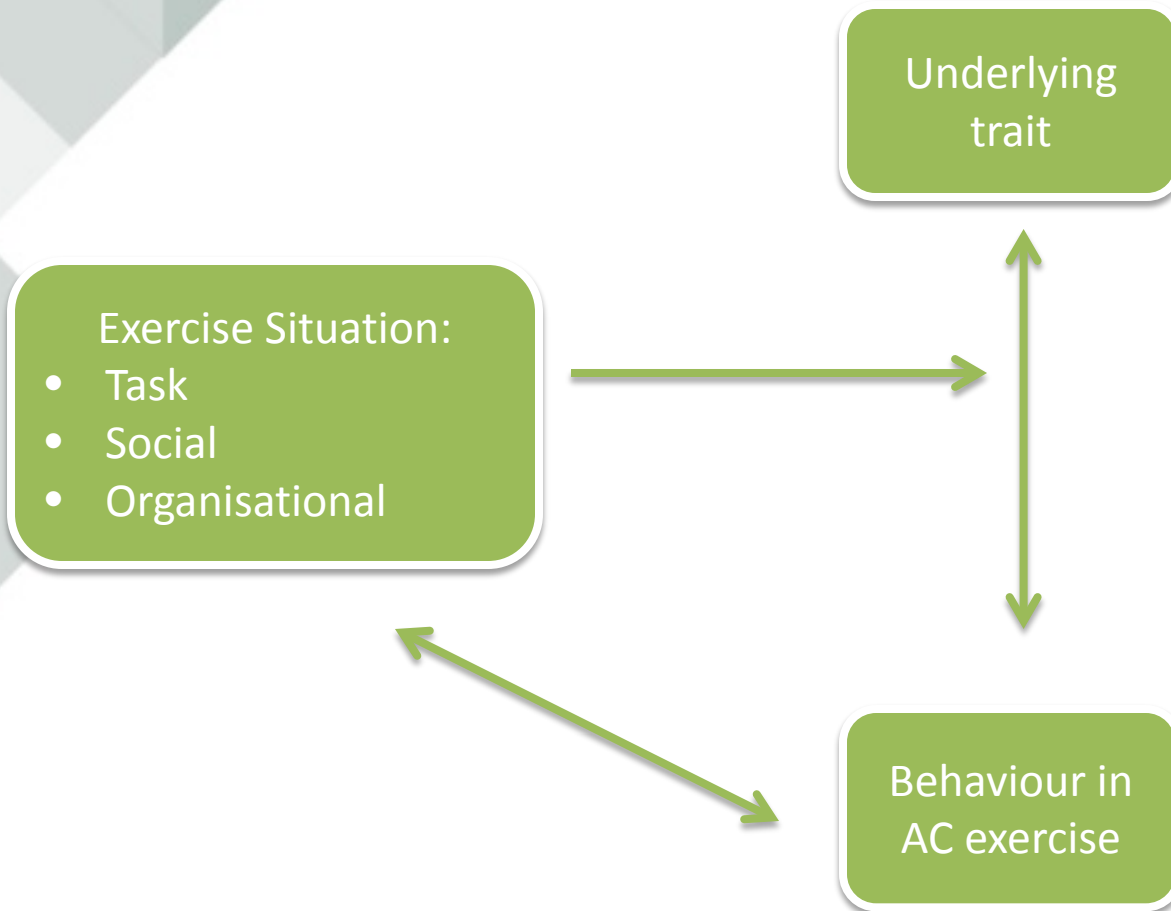
Introduction

- Previous research and theory has identified **Trait Activation Theory** as a possible solution to this dilemma

Trait Activation Theory

- Theory focusing on person-situation interaction
- Aims at understanding how individual traits express as work-related behaviour – how this behaviour relates back to performance (Lievens, Chasteen, Day & Christiansen; 2006)
- Looks at the impact of the situation trait relevance – meaning which situations would be favourable for certain traits to be illustrated for e.g. aggression during a religious event (Lievens, 2010)

Trait Activation Theory



Lievens; 2012

Introduction

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Trait Activation Theory

- A situation can be seen as relevant if it provides cues for the expression of trait relevant behaviour (Lievens; 2010)
- Any situation has a certain Trait Activation Potential (Lievens, Chasteen, Day, Christiaansen; 2006)
- Trait activation potential can best be explained in terms of *relevance* and *strength* of the situation (Tett & Burnett; 2003)

Trait Activation Theory

- What is the difference between situation relevance and situation strength?
- Works like a radio – **relevance** is the station it's tuned into, **strength** is the volume.



Trait Activation Theory

Situation Relevance:

- A situation is deemed relevant when it provides cues for the expression of trait relevant behaviour. Could be task, social and organisational. (Tett & Gutterman; 2000)
- For instance: wants to target dimension of Planning and Organising – could relate back to trait of Conscientiousness – situation should make it possible to illustrate this trait.

Trait Activation Theory

- Not relevant situation for planning and organising:



- *“I feel very dissatisfied with your service and would like to know what you are planning to do about it”*
- Targets another dimension and thus trait – but not relevant for this dimension or trait.

Trait Activation Theory

- Relevant situation for planning and organising:



- *“Could you please let me know how you intend to schedule and allocate the given resources for this project”*
- Gives cues for the candidate to illustrate the proposed dimension and trait.

Trait Activation Theory

Situation Strength:

- How much clarity is there with regard to how the situation is perceived. (Lievens, 2010)
- Can be seen as continuum of how much ambiguity exist with regards to how the situation is perceived. (Lievens, Chasteen, Day, Christiaansen; 2006)
- Situations with strength would be unambiguous – outcomes are clearly understood.

Trait Activation Theory

- Weak situation pertaining to planning and organising:



- *“We have a big event coming up with so many things that needs to be done – I don’t know how we will manage everything. What do you think?”*

Trait Activation Theory

- Strong situation pertaining to planning and organising:

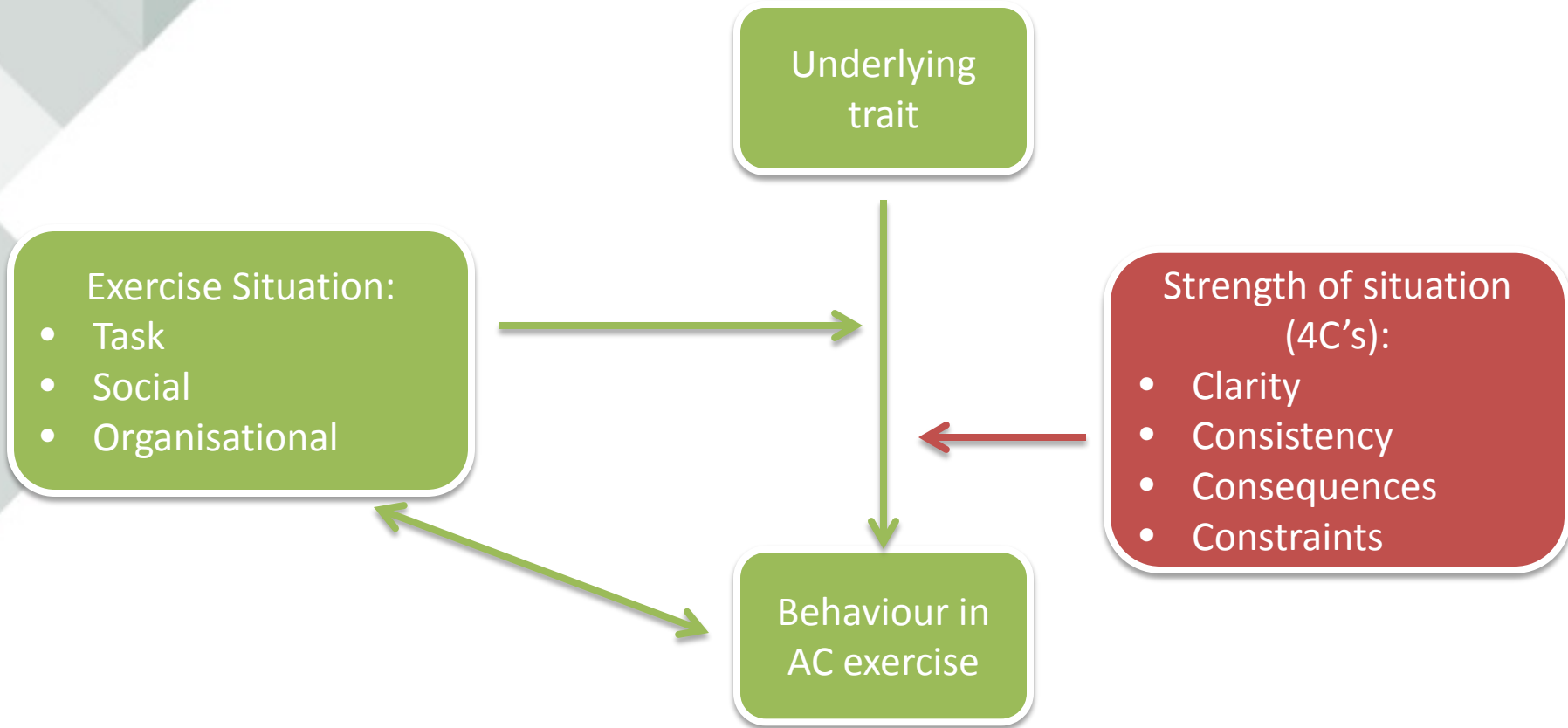


- *“We have a big event coming up with so many things that needs to be done – I don’t know how we will manage everything. What do you think we should focus on first? In short describe a five-step action plan on how you think we should approach this project”*

Trait Activation Theory

- What would happen if the situation was too weak?
- What would happen if the situation was too strong?

Trait Activation Theory



Lievens; 2012

Trait Activation Theory

- What could be the consequences if a situation has relevance but not strength?

Misconceptions of Trait Activation Theory

- What is the difference between dimensions and traits?
- Different dimensions can load onto the same trait.
- Innovation and Adaptability as dimensions differ vastly but could both pertain to the trait Openness.

Trait Activation Theory

Benefits of using TAT in simulation exercises:

- Improves convergent validity and discriminant validity
- Helps identify which exercises triggers trait-relevant behaviour and which don't
- Ensures that trait relevant and job relevant behaviours are displayed

- Lievens; 2007



Practical Application

- TAT makes conceptually sense, but is often difficult to implement practically
- How is this incorporated into AC simulation exercises?
- Practical look at the different AC exercises

Practical

- In-Basket

Practical

- Role Play

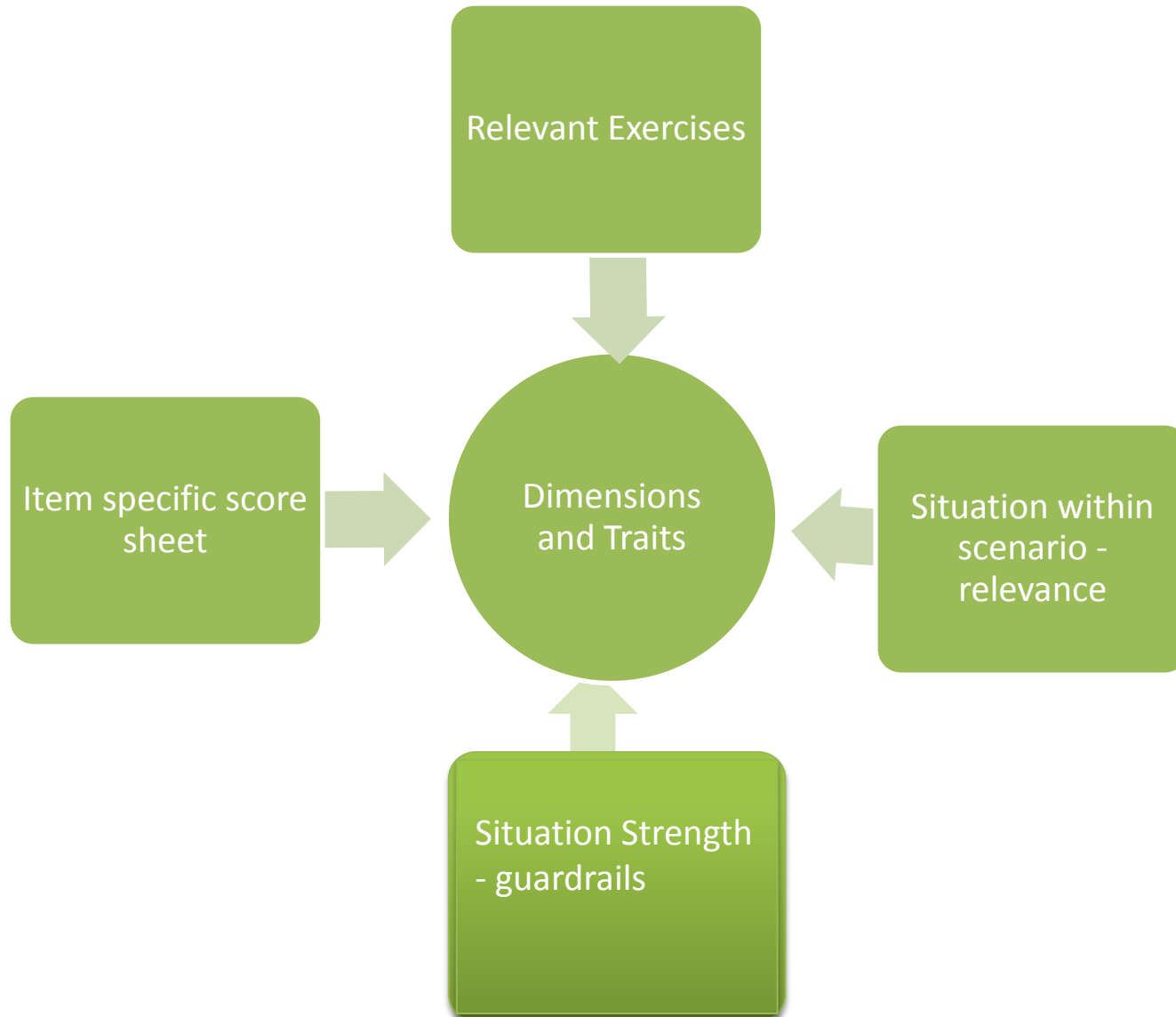
Process to follow when designing TAT exercises

- Look at the job analysis
- Identify the competencies/dimensions and then traits
- What exercises would increase the Trait Activation Potential – relevance (interactive or written)
- Design scenarios appropriate for job level

Process to follow when designing TAT exercises

- Increase relevance by designing situation in scenario based on dimensions and opportunity for traits
- Increase strength of situation – guardrails
- Design score sheet according to specific dimensions and guardrails

Process to follow when designing TAT exercises



Research on TAT exercises

- TAT – specifically introduced with the aim of appreciating the interactionist nature of AC scores/ratings
- Congruence between the mixed model approach and TAT is particularly strong
- Expectation:
 - Stronger convergence of dimension scores when using exercises with strong trait activation potential
 - More on target (i.e. relevant behaviour)

Research Support

- Relatively little research support to date, since the technique is relatively new.
- Halaand & Christiansen (2002) found stronger convergent validity of dimension rating across exercises using TAT principles.
- Lievens , Chasteen, Day, & Christiaansen (2006) found strong support for TAT across 30 existing AC studies.
- V3 range is still very new – but preliminary analysis suggest that the PEDR scores seems to converge not only within exercise, but also between exercises of the same dimension.
- However, only single cases have been investigated, more data is needed to evaluated the discriminant and convergent validity.
- Furthermore, fewer items seems to be left out, which suggests that clients grasped what was expected of them in the exercises.
- This can however not be interpreted as unambiguous support that the relevant trait was activated.



Conclusion

- Can AC simulations without TAT be seen as fair?
- Can it be seen as ethical and generalisable?
- Can AC simulations with too much TAT still discriminate between candidates?
- Are we possibly failing ourselves and failing candidates by not using TAT in simulations?



Questions?



Thank you!

For further discussion please contact me on:
gerdi@jvrafrica.co.za

