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An Experimental Analysis of the Assessment and Perception of Behavior Change: How Summary Measures Influence Sensitivity to Change Processes

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ABSTRACT

A series of experiments examined how summary assessment measures influence people's ability to detect change in behavior over time and across situations. Two measures that are often used to assess child behavior (Teacher Report Form) and adult personality (Five Factor Inventory) were examined. Each instrument led perceivers to focus on the overall frequency of targets' behavior, even when targets differed both in how they reacted to social events and in how often they experienced those events in their interactions with others. Although people adopted an overall frequency perspective when using summary measures, they detected changes in events and targets' if ... then ... reactions to events when using alternative context-specific measures. The findings demonstrate how summary trait methods can shift perceivers' attention away from situational factors and thereby yield trait scores that are insensitive to context-specific but potentially important changes in targets' social behavior.

KEYWORDS

Personality; Social Perception; Assessment; Behavior Change; Social Context

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