

# The New Foundation of Organizational Psychology. Trait Activation Theory in the Workplace: Literature Review

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Trait Activation Theory (TAT) is a comprehensive examination of the personality-job fit and is based on the model of job performance. This theory's main argument is how individuals express their personal traits when exposed to trait-relevant situational cues. The trait-relevant situation can be assessed through the cues that play a role in the manifestation of trait-relevant behaviors. The situational cues may originate from social, task, and organization. These cues may provoke or trigger the behaviors related to traits but not related to performance measures. The three central principles suggested in TAT are: (1) personal traits are expressed in the behaviors related to work as responses to the situation cues that are trait-relevant, (2) trait-relevant situation cues originate from social, task, and organization, (3) job performance and work behaviors that are trait expressive are distinct, with job performance to be discussed as valued work behavior. The research conducted and presented below includes articles that are in the majority of the last two decades and the findings suggest that TAT was reviewed usually against managerial roles and qualities. In some articles, TAT was also reviewed and researched together with other major personality theories to explain behavior.

*Keywords:* Trait Activation Theory (TAT), personality traits, situational cues, job-fit, performance

## Trait Activation Theory

The principle of trait activation captures the idea that, personality traits are underlying predispositions to behave in certain ways. These traits are expressed as responses to trait-relevant situational cues and intrinsic fulfillment will be gained from expressing one's traits.

The idea that personality is based on environmental stimuli is rooted in interactional psychology; thus the trait activation principles are not new. Trait Activation Theory (TAT) is based on a specific model of job performance and can be considered an extended view of personality job-fit. It is how an individual expresses their traits when exposed to situational cues that are related to these traits. The situational cues can arise from organization, social, and task cues and in turn they can activate personality traits related to job tasks that will value the organization overall.

According to the trait-based model of job performance that Tett and Burnett introduced (2003), the Trait Activation Theory suggests three central principles, as already mentioned.

1. Traits are expressed in work behavior as responses to trait-relevant situational cues;

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2. Sources of trait-relevant cues can be grouped into three categories: task, social, and organizational;
3. Trait expressive work behavior is distinct from job performance.

Trait Activation Theory suggests that employees will look for and derive intrinsic satisfaction from a work environment that allows for the easy expression of their unique personality traits. However, the theory stipulates that only in situations where these traits are valued on the job does activating the trait lead to better job performance and potential increased extrinsic rewards. Individuals are attracted to work spaces that are encouraging the natural and frequent expression of their personality traits. On another note, lack of trait activation weakens the trait-performance relationship.

To explain the theory, suppressed traits are expressed as work behavior in reaction to trait-relevant situational cues, yielding intrinsic reward as the need for satisfaction. One needs three distinct sources of trait-relevant cues: (1) Task source includes all day-to-day duties found in the job analysis; (2) social source arises from interacting with colleagues; (3) organization source includes organizational culture, climate, and policies.

Moreover, it is essential firstly, to separate trait-expressive behavior and job performance in order to understand how a given trait can be positively or negatively linked to valued job performance and secondly, to realize that the same situational cues that activate traits to generate trait-expressive behavior are also used to evaluate that behavior as performance and also that is fundamental to incorporate extrinsic rewards offered in reaction to the individual's evaluated performance.

Lastly, one has to accept that work behavior is both an effect and a cause of workplace demands. People will naturally alter their situations in order to increase or decrease trait-relevant cues.

In short, TAT suggests that people will want to be employed where they are rewarded for being themselves. This means that job tasks, interactions, and organizational culture offer abundant opportunities for individuals to express their traits and that the trait-expressive behaviors will be appreciated in the mean of extrinsic rewards.

Tett and Burnett (2003) offered a classification of the practical (in the sense of contributing) trait-relevant situational features that includes: demands (trait relevant cues, responses to which contribute positively to performance), releasers (counteract constraints), distracters (trait relevant cues, responses to which contribute negatively to performance), facilitators (magnify trait-relevant cues), and constraints (limit cues for trait expressions).

Other relevant concepts linked to Trait Activation Theory are:

**Bidirectionality:** A personality trait can positively predict job performance in one situation and negatively predict it in another situation. For example, conscientious individuals tend to be detail oriented and very cautious in their decision making. Conscientiousness is in general linked to positive job performance behaviors. Research, however, has shown that companies selecting for job roles that require an employee to be adaptable to change might not benefit from selecting an individual high in conscientiousness.

**Situational strength:** It refers to cues provided regarding desirability of behavior. Strong situations involve ambiguous demands while weak situations are characterized by ambiguous expectations for behavior. Situation strength is related to trait relevance.

Trait Activation Theory is a psychological approach that includes studying personality traits as relatively stable individual differences which describe general predispositions or predictable common patterns of thinking and experiencing emotions that affect behavior. The most well-known categorization of personality traits is the Big Five personality trait theory, which includes five personality dimensions: conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and neuroticism.

Personality-job fit theory: It suggests that certain job environments are more suited to individuals with certain personality characteristics and that hiring individuals who are the best fit will result in higher employee satisfaction, wellbeing, and better job performance.

Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, and Quade (2014) examined abusive managerial practices as a trait activator in order to predict unethical behavior in organizations. They concluded that, interaction of unethical manipulation and vicious supervision is the most predictive of amoral behavior, whereas the interaction of desire for control and abusive supervision is the primary predictor of amoral behavior.

Their effort was to theoretically identify trait-relevant situational cues that activate the Machiavellianism-to-unethical behavior relationship. Notably, trait activation and related personality theories (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) suggest that personality should be examined in terms of situation-behavior profiles. Situation-behavior profiles capture the unique way that personality-driven behaviors can vary across situations, such that if people with Personality X are exposed to particular situational cues, and then they are likely to respond in specific, predictable ways. An application of Trait Activation Theory within the behavioral ethics literature is useful because it provides a theoretical framework for identifying conditions that activate trait-expressive unethical behavior. In accordance with Trait Activation Theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), we identify abusive supervision as a specific social situation that triggers a Mach's inclination to exhibit unethical behaviors.

Machiavellianism has been theorized as having four underlying facets: distrust in others, desire for control, desire for status, and amoral manipulation. Tett and Burnett's (2003) Trait Activation Theory is specific to job performance; however, the theory can be effective in predicting other, important work-related behavior, such as (un)ethical behavior. Furthermore, the theory is broad enough to apply to a range of personality traits (Tett & Burnett, 2003), which may provoke a more systematic research on person-situation interactionism in predicting (un)ethical behavior.

Trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000) and related personality theories (the cognitive-affective system theory of personality; Mischel & Shoda, 1995) argue that people are attentive to situations that activate psychological processes that trigger their personalities. In particular, the trait activation process occurs when the situation is relevant to a person's values, goals, and the way they want to present themselves. The "force" of the situation then motivates the person to behave in accordance with their personality by engaging in trait-expressive work behaviors. Therefore, a unique characteristic of TAT is the concept that personality traits, in combination with trait-relevant situational factors, can serve as a theoretical (and not just a descriptive) basis for predicting workplace behavior (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The theory provides an organizing framework for identifying conditions that are likely to trigger the trait activation process.

Tett and Burnett (2003, p. 502) note that "we see traits by what we see people do". Their theory suggests that personality serves as a "latent potential" that resides within an individual until it is triggered, upon which it becomes evident in the expression of behaviors. Consequently, situation-trait relevance, which exists when situational cues allow for the expression of one's personality, is vital to understanding the effects of personality within organizations. The expression of one trait over another, via behavioral expression, must be considered in light of particular contexts. Doing so allows organizations to identify situational factors that activate trait-relevant behaviors (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), such as trait-expressive unethical behaviors. Trait Activation Theory suggests that trait activation may occur because of social demands that arise from constituents, such as peers, subordinates, clients, and/or supervisors.

A key aspect of Trait Activation Theory is that the force of the situation urges people to exhibit trait-related behaviors. Situation-trait relevance exists when a particular context provides cues that are thematically related to one's underlying traits (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Abusive supervision involves behaviors such as ridiculing subordinates. Hence, abusive supervision can provide cues that are relevant to the core Machiavellian traits.

Blicke, Schütte, and Genau (2018) conducted a multi-source study on manager psychopathy, TAT, and job performance and they found that the predatory orientation of managers high in psychopathy and especially high in the trait of cruelty was behaviorally activated by high levels of dominance prospects and prospects for income increases. High psychopathy, mediated by consideration towards subordinates and moderated by high ascendancy prospects and high prospects for income increases, was associated with low supervisory job performance ratings. It is especially important to understand individuals with high levels of psychopathy in managerial positions as their position power potentially forms a multiplier of toxic consequences (Mathieu et al., 2013).

The proposal that high psychopathy in managers is associated with troubled subordinate relationships and consequently low manager job performance was tested (J. Hogan, R. Hogan, & Kaiser, 2011) and provided that high prospects for preeminence or income increases (Holland, 1997) behaviorally activate the cruelty dimension of psychopathy (Patrick, 2018). This would mean that manager psychopathy has negative effects on interpersonal relationships and job performance above and beyond common method bias (P. M. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & N. P. Podsakoff, 2012) given that conducive behavioral activators in managers' work situations are present.

Judge and Zapata (2014) developed and tested an interactionist model governing the degree to which five-factor model personality traits are related to job performance. One concept that of situation strength was hypothesized to predict the validities of all Big-Five traits, while the effects of the other, that of trait activation, were hypothesized to be specific to each trait. Many of the traits also predicted performance in job situations that activated specific traits (for example, extraversion better predicted performance in jobs requiring social skills, agreeableness was less positively related to performance in competitive contexts, openness was more strongly related to performance in jobs with strong innovation/creativity requirements). Overall, the findings supported the interactionist model in which the situation exerts both general and specific effects on the degree to which personality predicts job performance. The results were much the same for the Trait Activation Theory variables. Conscientiousness and openness were more important to job performance for jobs that afforded independence in completing work, whereas emotional stability, agreeableness, and extraversion were more predictive of job performance in jobs with strong social skills requirements. Agreeableness was more negatively, and extraversion was more positively, related to job performance in jobs with high levels of competition. Openness was more predictive of job performance in jobs with strong innovation/creativity requirements. Extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability were more predictive of job performance where jobs involved dealing with unpleasant or angry people. Therefore, there certainly seem to be both general and specific situational conditions that facilitate the relevance of personality to job performance.

Alam et al. (2016) conducted research on Personality Traits Activation Through Conflict Handling Styles. Their study examined the interaction between personality and situation for Corporate Entrepreneurship outcomes in organizations. Since employees deal with various kinds of conflict situations using their personality coherent Conflict Handling Styles (CHS), CHS are proposed to be taken as situational cues for triggering personality effects for Corporate Entrepreneurship culture in organizations. Their study has proposed a theoretical framework for explaining the mechanism of personality traits (PTs) activation under the influence of situational cues for Corporate Entrepreneurship development.

Employees' personality at the workplace has long been accepted for academic attention towards occupational outcomes (Stajkovic et al., 2018). Many researchers have established the association with entrepreneurship outcomes (Alam, Kousar, Shabbir, & Kaleem, 2020).

Broad constructs of TAT are personality traits, situations, and job performance. In their study, personality traits are taken in the same sense as are used in TAT. Various studies have established a positive link between intrapreneurship or Corporate Entrepreneurship with job performance (Ahmed et al., 2020).

M. Kim, S. L. Kim, Son, and Yun (2022) reviewed "Perfectionism, Interactional Justice and Job Performance: A Trait Activation Perspective". From their study, it was found that an employee's self-oriented perfectionism is positively related to task performance and also positively related to organizational citizenship behavior.

Applying Trait Activation Theory, their findings exhibited that the self-oriented perfectionism trait's effect on job performance was activated when interactional justice was low rather than when it was high. These findings seem to be consistent with prior research indicating the positive effects of perfectionism, particularly perfectionistic strivings, on various performance consequences. Additionally, from the trait-activation perspective, the role of interactional justice as a trait-relevant situational cue to the manifestation of perfectionism at work was demonstrated.

Luria, Kahana, Goldenberg, and Noam (2019) studied the moderating role of group properties in the relationship between two prototypical leadership attributes (cognitive ability and adjustment) and leadership potential. Their study, however, is limited by the fact that the sample consisted of all-male military.

Building on Trait Activation Theory, they investigated one organizational cue (degree of centralization in the informal social structure) and one social cue (average level of the relevant attribute among other group members) and posited that the two prototypical leadership attributes would more likely be activated (leading to leadership potential) in more centralized groups and in groups where others had lower levels of the studied attribute. As predicted, the relationships of both adjustment and cognitive ability with leadership potential were moderated by group informal structure, with stronger relationships in groups with more centralized structures. Other group members' cognitive ability moderated the relationship between cognitive ability and leadership potential (stronger relationships in groups with lower mean of others' cognitive ability), but other group members' adjustment did not moderate the relationship between adjustment and leadership potential. According to TAT, social trait-relevant cues arise from working with others. These include expectations of peers regarding socially prescribed behaviors (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Noe, Tews, and Michel (2017) studied manager's informal learning for a TAT perspective. This was important to be studied as informal learning represents the majority of learning that occurs in organizations (Bear et al., 2008). It provides opportunities for individuals to acquire knowledge and skills on-the-job through work-related tasks, activities, and interactions with others (Tannenbaum, Beard, McNall, & Salas, 2010).

From a TAT perspective, higher job autonomy should facilitate greater informal learning for managers higher in learning goal orientation because it gives them the opportunity to pursue knowledge acquisition and skill acquisition. It should also facilitate greater informal learning for managers who have a high prove goal orientation because it gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their competence and receive positive evaluations from peers and supervisors.

They concluded that goal orientation, training climate, and job autonomy had significant positive direct relationships with informal learning.

Anderson and Tett (2006) presented the results of their study with regards to who prefers to work with whom, applying TAT in classroom teams, on the basis that individuals should prefer working with others offering cues for trait expression. The topic of their study derived from the fact that organizations are increasingly relying on work teams to perform critical operations (Devine et al., 1999; Morgan, Salas, & Glickman, 2001), making team building and group dynamics important targets of research.

Among the results were: Affiliative team members were preferred by those with abrasive traits of high dominance, high dependence, and low abasement (high achievement yielded a similar but non-significant pattern). Whether ratee affiliation confers acceptance or deactivation of abrasive trait expression (or both) is a matter for further inquiry. Trait Activation Theory warrants refinement by taking account of trait desirability. Specifically, individuals can be expected to seek conditions offering cues to express desirable traits and avoid those offering cues to express undesirable traits.

Lievens, Koster, and Schollaert (2008) assessed the importance of TAT in assessment centers. 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. A central concept 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.

Zagenczyk et al. (2017) used TAT and psychological contracts theories to build the argument that narcissism is a personality trait that will manifest itself in the form of exit and neglect when employees experience psychological contract violation. The results indicate that violation moderated the relationship between narcissism and exit such that narcissistic employees who experienced high levels of violation had higher levels of exit. However, they did not find support for the prediction regarding neglect. The findings suggest that the importance of narcissism at work may be contingent on the situation.

A pathway was investigated through which dispositional and contextual factors acted on the employees' work addiction. More specifically, we examined the moderating role of perceived work addiction of managers in the relationship between employees' perfectionism and work addiction. It was established that perceived managers' work addiction operated as a relevant moderator and strengthened the positive relationship between employees' socially prescribed perfectionism and work addiction. Hence, having high levels of socially prescribed perfectionism and perceiving managers as highly addicted to work might pose a greater risk of becoming addicted to work.

Trait Activation Theory does not need to be reserved as a theoretical framework but can be used as a valuable prescriptive framework. Critical research needs include personality-oriented work analysis, longitudinal study of trait-situation processes, trait activation in teams, within-job bidirectionality, and situation relevance as a unifying principle in advancing person-workplace fit.

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