

CONSIDERATION OF WORD KNOWLEDGE
IN USAGE OF THE ADJECTIVE CHECK LIST

by

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ABSTRACT

The Adjective Check List (ACL) is a self-report inventory consisting of 300 adjectives to which the subject responds by checking those words judged to be self descriptive. If it is assumed that knowledge of word meaning is a prerequisite to the decision of self-applicability, then difficulty level of the words becomes an important issue. In this study the difficulty level of words appearing in the ACL was examined to determine if an appropriate group of subjects could demonstrate mastery of a selected sample of ACL words. Fifty words were sampled from the ACL, vocabulary items written for them, and submitted to two sample groups: 104 college juniors, and 56 junior college students. In both cases the subjects were not able to demonstrate mastery of the sample words.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Self-report inventories have been criticized as being susceptible to many sources of error that make them somewhat less than the most desirable method for assessing personality. As Tyler (1965) indicates, a score on such an instrument is largely dependent on the subject's honesty. In addition, since Cronbach's attention to response sets, other stereotyped methods of responding have been explored. Edwards (1957) revealed the existence of a social desirability factor in personality tests, while Messick and Jackson (1961) demonstrated that acquiescence is one of those consistent sets influencing obtained scores. Some instruments, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, have attempted to deal with this problem through the development of special scoring keys that can be utilized to detect these tendencies.

One self-report inventory currently in use, the Adjective Check List (ACL), appears not to account for many of these sources of error. Despite the aforementioned possible criticisms, as well as additional ones, the ACL is a widely used instrument due to ease of administration and the variety of information that can supposedly be obtained from scores obtained from it.

A review of the literature reveals the many and frequent uses for which this instrument has been selected. Heilbrun (1960) claims

that the scale can be useful in evaluating personality differences between emotionally maladjusted and adjusted college students.

Schaefer (1969) and Domino (1970) used the scale with high school students in identifying creativity. Parker and Veldman (1969) propose its usefulness for diagnostic and counseling purposes and as an aid to college counselors (Parker, 1969). Furthermore, Domino (1970, p. 48) refers to the ACL as "...an ideal psychometric instrument..." due to its ease of administration, non-threatening nature, and unlimited range of applicability.

The Adjective Check List was developed by Gough and Heilbrun (1965) and consists of a list of 300 adjectives presented in alphabetical order to which a subject responds by checking self-applicable items. These adjectives were selected from Cattell's list of 171 adjectives believed to be descriptive of most human personality traits. Gough and Heilbrun selected additional adjectives when constructing the ACL in order to describe a person from broader and more inclusive theoretical perspectives. Responses to the list can be scored by a number of keys including number of adjectives checked, and 21 other scales (including 15 based on Murray's need-press system). Scale reliabilities reported in the test manual, by the test-retest method with a ten week time interval, range from .01 to .86 with a mean value of .54. The authors recommend the following uses for the instrument: (1) for a self-report inventory, (2) for self versus ideal-self studies, and (3) for observer use (e.g., mothers rating the personality characteristics of their children).

Validity studies have been conducted comparing the ACL to Edwards Personal Preference Schedule, as both purport to measure Murray's needs. Wohl and Palmer (1970) concluded that the two measures do not in fact measure the same constructs in light of the small obtained empirical relationships. Poe (1969) noted that the validity coefficients he obtained were low enough to restrict the utility of both these instruments.

Questionable validity and susceptibility to response sets are only two of the possible criticisms one could entertain regarding this instrument. One additional problem that has not been extensively examined in reference to the ACL is the difficulty level of the words chosen and the effect that this difficulty level may have on responses made as well as the interpretation of those responses. If one assumes that it is necessary for a subject to understand adjective meaning prior to a decision regarding self-applicability, then difficulty level would appear to be a primary concern in considering the utility of the instrument. This would be especially important since the scale is recommended for use with high school and college students, as well as members of the general adult population, not all of whom possess extensive vocabularies. The present study is designed to examine the difficulty level of the words used in the Adjective Check List. It seemed possible that a sample of individuals with whom this instrument might be used would not be able to demonstrate mastery of a sample of the words from the ACL as regards definitional meaning.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

The first step in testing the hypothesis that a sample of applicable individuals would not be able to demonstrate mastery of the ACL was to develop an instrument for measuring vocabulary knowledge of a sample of the 300 ACL adjectives. Consequently, the ACL was submitted to 11 graduate students in reading at The University of Arizona who were requested to rate the difficulty level of the adjectives into 3 categories: (1) easy, (2) medium, (3) difficult, in relation to their knowledge of high school reading abilities. The ratings of the words were then tallied and from this information, 10 words that were rated as easy, 10 rated as medium, and 30 rated as difficult were selected on the basis of greatest agreement among the judges.

Multiple-choice items measuring word knowledge were prepared for those 50 words. There were originally 5 options offered for each item, each a possible synonym for the selected word; the keyed response in each case was the standard dictionary synonym for that chosen adjective. Four words on the original list were deleted and replaced with other words (again on the basis of the ratings) because they did not lend themselves to simple synonym type definitions. A pilot investigation was conducted with a small number of individuals (n=15) after which ambiguous items were rewritten, and the number of choices

was reduced from 5 to 4 through the elimination of the most unattractive distractors.

The multiple-choice vocabulary test was then administered to two groups of subjects. The first sample was composed of 104 students enrolled in undergraduate educational psychology classes at The University of Arizona. These students were at least of junior level in college. The second sample consisted of 56 junior college students all of whom had at least attained high school graduation, and who were enrolled in introductory psychology classes.

The first group of subjects were administered both the ACL and the vocabulary test. For this procedure the ACL was administered first in order that the vocabulary test would not function as a learning experience and influence subject responses to the ACL. The vocabulary test was scored for number correct, and percent of students demonstrating mastery at four predetermined levels was calculated. The levels chosen for this procedure were: (1) 80% or more of the items answered correctly, (2) 75% or more of the items answered correctly, (3) 70% or more of the items answered correctly, and (4) 65% or more of the items answered correctly. While one could argue that 100% mastery might be optimally required before decisions of self-applicability could be made, the four lower levels were judged to be more realistic criteria for mastery.

In addition to obtaining the percentage of subjects demonstrating mastery at each level, the obtained mean of the sample was compared against means for hypothetical populations that could be

considered to demonstrate mastery at those levels. Means for those populations were assumed to be:

Level of Mastery	Mean Number of Items Answered Correctly
1. 80% mastery	40 items
2. 75% mastery	38 items
3. 70% mastery	35 items
4. 65% mastery	33 items

Differences between the sample mean and each of the four hypothesized population means were evaluated by t-tests.

An exploratory investigation was also conducted by correlating vocabulary scores obtained and the total number checked on the ACL to examine any possible relationship between the two constructs.

The second sample was administered only the vocabulary test, and similarly, levels of mastery and comparison of means was evaluated for this group.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Item analysis was conducted with the obtained vocabulary scores of the 104 college subjects tested. Correlations between the items and total score revealed that 33 items yielded correlations significant at the .05 level; 8 additional items were significant at the .10 level. The remaining 9 items produced non-significant correlations with total score.

In considering item difficulty, those items that revealed the proportion of students passing the item to be greater than .70 were rated as easy. Those items where the proportion of subjects passing was between .40 and .69 were rated as medium; and those items where the proportion of subjects passing was less than .39 were rated as difficult. By this criteria, examination of item difficulty level yielded the following information: (1) of those items written for words rated as easy by the judging group, 5 were of easy difficulty level, 4 medium, and 1 was difficult; (2) of those items written for words rated as medium, 5 were easy, 5 were of medium difficulty level; (3) of those items written for words rated difficult, 13 were of easy difficulty level, 11 were medium, and 6 appeared to be difficult ones.

Reliability estimates were also computed for the vocabulary instrument on the college sample. Estimates computed by the split-half procedure, corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula yielded an r of

.77, whereas the estimate calculated by the method for coefficient Alpha yielded an r of .79. Similarly, calculations on the scores for the junior college sample yielded a split-half correlation, corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula, of .83.

For the college sample the group obtained a mean of 31.8 items correct with a standard deviation of 6.6. The range obtained by this group was from 13 to 47 items correct.

The junior college sample produced a mean of 28.5 with a standard deviation of 8.3. Here the range was from 7 to 47 items correct.

Percent of students demonstrating mastery at each level was as follows in Table 1:

Table 1. Percent of Students Demonstrating
Mastery at Four Levels

Levels of Mastery	College Sample	Jr. College Sample
80% or higher	10.6%	8.9%
75% or higher	21.5%	16.0%
70% or higher	32.7%	25.0%
65% or higher	42.3%	30.3%
lower than 65%	57.7%	69.7%

The results of the t-tests were as follows in Table 2:

Table 2. Summary of Comparisons of Obtained and Hypothesized Means

College Sample (N=104)

Level of Mastery	Hypothetical Pop Mean	Obtained Mean	Obtained S. D.	t
80%	40 items	31.8	6.6	t=12.81*
75%	38 items	31.8	6.6	t=9.704*
70%	35 items	31.8	6.6	t=5.04*
65%	33 items	31.8	6.6	t=1.16

Jr. College Sample (N=56)

80%	40 items	28.5	8.3	t=10.235*
75%	38 items	28.5	8.3	t=8.426*
70%	35 items	28.5	8.3	t=5.75*
65%	33 items	28.5	8.3	t=3.96*

* significant at .01 level

The exploratory study correlating the scores on the vocabulary test with number checked on the ACL did not produce a significant correlation ($r = -.03$).

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

One can see from these obtained results that neither sample was able to demonstrate sufficient mastery of the selected words. The college sample performed at about the 65% mastery level, or answered approximately 32 items correctly, while the junior college sample performed at a considerably lower level. Very few students in either group performed optimally (80% correct), and no subject succeeded in responding correctly to all items. It would appear, therefore, that these two groups did not demonstrate a sufficient knowledge of the sample words to fruitfully engage in consideration of the self-applicability of the selected words.

While these two groups cannot be considered to be random samples of the subjects who might be administered this inventory, perhaps their nonrandomness may even more strongly support the research hypothesis. These groups could be considered to be higher in educational level and probably vocabulary knowledge than a representative sample of subjects for whom the test is designed. If this more educated group cannot demonstrate mastery of a sample of ACL words, then one questions the applicability of such an instrument to the general populace.

The lack of correlation between the vocabulary test and the ACL raises another interesting issue. Many subjects in the college

sample, with relatively low scores on the vocabulary instrument (less than 60% correct) still checked a large number of words on the ACL; fourteen of these low scorers checked in excess of 100 ACL items. If such subjects do not have a good understanding of the definitions of these words, one questions on what basis their responses are made. It could be on the basis of word recognition, popular connotation, or numerous other personal bases. At any rate, in scoring of the ACL one has no way of determining on what basis these responses are made. One wonders, then, how determination of needs and fine personality discriminations can be evaluated for individuals whose responses do not necessarily derive from a clear understanding of the items.

It should be noted that more complete and interpretable results from this study could have been obtained if the multiple-choice test had consisted of at least 100 of the adjectives randomly sampled from the instrument. The judgmental sample was clearly not as satisfactory a choice. However, even the results obtained in this manner, raise serious questions as to the applicability of this self-report inventory to any subjects other than those demonstrating an extensive vocabulary, and specifically raise questions concerning the use of this instrument with the general population.

APPENDIX A

VOCABULARY TEST

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TEST

On the following pages are 50 multiple-choice vocabulary questions. Each of these words might be used to describe a person. Following each word in capital letters are four choices; from those choices please circle the word which you think comes closest to the meaning of the capitalized word.

Please place your matriculation number on the top of the first page. We are not concerned with individual scores, but only with the group performance. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. WEAK

- a. timid
- b. cowardly
- c. feeble
- d. stupid

2. WISE

- a. knowledgeable
- b. aged
- c. clear-headed
- d. judgmental

3. JOLLY

- a. witty
- b. clever
- c. teasing
- d. gay

4. DULL

- a. ugly
- b. stupid
- c. sad
- d. bored

5. FOOLISH

- a. rash
- b. unwise
- c. stupid
- d. dull

6. RESERVED

- a. silent
- b. proper
- c. formal
- d. expensive

7. INDIFFERENT

- a. neutral
- b. conforming
- c. unclear
- d. angry

8. HEADSTRONG

- a. intelligent
- b. reckless
- c. self-willed
- d. bossy

9. DEPENDENT

- a. needing support
- b. accused
- c. reliable
- d. trustworthy

10. AMBITIOUS

- a. full of conflict
- b. successful
- c. desiring success
- d. ruthless

11. DISTRACTIBLE

- a. unmovable
- b. confusable
- c. breakable
- d. distorted

12. APATHETIC

- a. boring
- b. emotional
- c. pitiful
- d. uninterested

13. AUTOCRATIC

- a. dictatorial
- b. controlled
- c. upper-class
- d. mechanical

14. AFFECTED

- a. affectionate
- b. effective
- c. artificial
- d. upsetting

15. FRIVOLOUS

- a. unsteady
- b. exciting
- c. free
- d. silly

16. INGENIOUS

- a. clever
- b. naive
- c. not authentic
- d. not generous

17. PERSEVERING

- a. determined
- b. perverted
- c. harsh
- d. stubborn

18. SHREWD

- a. rude
- b. evil-tempered
- c. unethical
- d. clever

19. UNASSUMING

- a. pretending
- b. modest
- c. unsure
- d. lazy

20. VINDICTIVE

- a. justified
- b. revengeful
- c. nasty
- d. conquerable

21. ARROGANT

- a. rich
- b. irregular
- c. proud
- d. bossy

22. BLUSTERY

- a. noisy
- b. fussy
- c. easily embarrassed
- d. brusque

23. DESPONDENT

- a. hopeless
- b. hated
- c. unresponsive
- d. dependable

24. EVASIVE

- a. avoidable
- b. obvious
- c. efficient
- d. tricky

25. INTOLERANT

- a. unbearable
- b. ignorant
- c. bigoted
- d. threatening

26. METHODICAL

- a. scientific
- b. logical
- c. orderly
- d. thoughtful

27. REFLECTIVE

- a. thoughtful
- b. religious
- c. withdrawn
- d. smart

28. STOLID

- a. solid
- b. unexcitable
- c. rigid
- d. stupid

29. INHIBITED

- a. ungrateful
- b. unfriendly
- c. empty
- d. restrained

30. ZANY

- a. unpredictable
- b. insane
- c. witty
- d. comical

31. ASSERTIVE

- a. talkative
- b. correct
- c. insistent
- d. persuasive

32. CYNICAL

- a. spiteful
- b. thoughtless
- c. pessimistic
- d. angry

33. DISCREET

- a. sneaky
- b. careful
- c. distinctive
- d. immoral

34. FICKLE

- a. deceitful
- b. silly
- c. factual
- d. changeable

35. RETIRING

- a. retarded
- b. old
- c. sheltered
- d. shy

36. OBLIGING

- a. offensive
- b. helpful
- c. forgetful
- d. indebted

37. SARCASTIC

- a. humorous
- b. cutting
- c. cruel
- d. wicked

38. SUBMISSIVE

- a. promiscuous
- b. docile
- c. not objective
- d. conquered

39. UNSCRUPULOUS

- a. dangerous
- b. violent
- c. unmanageable
- d. immoral

40. IDEALISTIC

- a. moral
- b. perfect
- c. creative
- d. visionary

41. SHIFTLESS

- a. stable
- b. lazy
- c. sneaky
- d. unchanging

42. PREOCCUPIED

- a. self-centered
- b. inattentive
- c. prominent
- d. busy

43. IMPULSIVE

- a. overly neat
- b. disgusting
- c. impressive
- d. spontaneous

44. EFFICIENT

- a. hard-working
- b. timely
- c. emotional
- d. capable

45. DEFENSIVE

- a. aggressive
- b. faulty
- c. guarded
- d. unpleasant

46. SELFISH

- a. detached
- b. ungenerous
- c. careful
- d. unfeeling

47. LOUD

- a. talkative
- b. disobedient
- c. noisy
- d. forward

48. KIND

- a. silly
- b. sympathetic
- c. sacrificing
- d. uninteresting

49. FRIENDLY

- a. popular
- b. hospitable
- c. gentle
- d. forward

50. COLD

- a. cruel
- b. calculating
- c. rational
- d. unfeeling

APPENDIX B

THE ADJECTIVE CHECK LIST

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TEST

On the following pages are a list of 300 adjectives. Please check those that you feel apply to the way you think you are most of the time. Check as many words as you wish and do not worry about duplications or repetitions; do not spend too much time on any one item. At the top of the page please put your matriculation number. We are not concerned with individual scores but with the group performance. Thank you for your cooperation.

- | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1. absent-minded | 31. cheerful | 61. dependent |
| 2. active | 32. civilized | 62. despondent |
| 3. adaptable | 33. clear-thinking | 63. determined |
| 4. adventurous | 34. clever | 64. dignified |
| 5. affected | 35. coarse | 65. discreet |
| 6. affectionate | 36. cold | 66. disorderly |
| 7. aggressive | 37. commonplace | 67. dissatisfied |
| 8. alert | 38. complaining | 68. distractible |
| 9. aloof | 39. complicated | 69. distrustful |
| 10. ambitious | 40. conceited | 70. dominant |
| 11. anxious | 41. confident | 71. dreamy |
| 12. apathetic | 42. confused | 72. dull |
| 13. appreciative | 43. conscientious | 73. easy going |
| 14. argumentative | 44. conservative | 74. effeminate |
| 15. arrogant | 45. considerate | 75. efficient |
| 16. artistic | 46. contented | 76. egotistical |
| 17. assertive | 47. conventional | 77. emotional |
| 18. attractive | 48. cool | 78. energetic |
| 19. autocratic | 49. cooperative | 79. enterprising |
| 20. awkward | 50. courageous | 80. enthusiastic |
| 21. bitter | 51. cowardly | 81. evasive |
| 22. blustery | 52. cruel | 82. excitable |
| 23. boastful | 53. curious | 83. fair-minded |
| 24. bossy | 54. cynical | 84. fault-finding |
| 25. calm | 55. daring | 85. fearful |
| 26. capable | 56. deceitful | 86. feminine |
| 27. careless | 57. defensive | 87. fickle |
| 28. cautious | 58. deliberate | 88. flirtatious |
| 29. changeable | 59. demanding | 89. foolish |
| 30. charming | 60. dependable | 90. forceful |

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 91. foresighted | 141. lazy | 193. rational |
| 92. forgetful | 142. leisurely | 194. rattlebrained |
| 93. forgiving | 143. logical | 195. realistic |
| 94. formal | 144. loud | 196. reasonable |
| 95. frank | 145. loyal | 197. rebellious |
| 96. friendly | 146. mannerly | 198. reckless |
| 97. frivolous | 147. masculine | 200. relaxed |
| 98. fussy | 148. mature | 201. reliable |
| 99. generous | 149. meek | 202. resentful |
| 100. gentle | 150. methodical | 203. reserved |
| 101. gloomy | 151. mild | 204. resourceful |
| 102. good-looking | 152. mischievous | 205. responsible |
| 103. good-natured | 153. moderate | 206. restless |
| 104. greedy | 154. modest | 207. retiring |
| 105. handsome | 155. moody | 208. rigid |
| 106. hard-headed | 156. nagging | 209. robust |
| 107. hard-hearted | 157. natural | 210. rude |
| 108. hasty | 158. nervous | 211. sarcastic |
| 109. headstrong | 159. noisy | 212. self-centered |
| 110. healthy | 160. obliging | 213. self-confident |
| 111. helpful | 161. obnoxious | 214. self-controlled |
| 112. high-strung | 162. opinionated | 215. self-denying |
| 113. honest | 163. opportunistic | 216. self-pitying |
| 114. hostile | 164. optimistic | 217. self-punishing |
| 115. humorous | 165. organized | 218. self-seeking |
| 116. hurried | 166. original | 219. selfish |
| 117. idealistic | 167. outgoing | 220. sensitive |
| 118. imaginative | 168. outspoken | 221. sentimental |
| 119. immature | 169. painstaking | 222. serious |
| 120. impatient | 170. patient | 223. severe |
| 121. impulsive | 171. peaceable | 224. sexy |
| 122. independent | 172. peculiar | 225. shallow |
| 123. indifferent | 173. persevering | 226. sharp-witted |
| 124. individualistic | 174. persistent | 227. shiftless |
| 125. industrious | 175. pessimistic | 228. show-off |
| 126. infantile | 176. planful | 229. shrewd |
| 127. informal | 178. pleasure-seeking | 230. shy |
| 128. ingenious | 179. poised | 231. silent |
| 129. inhibited | 180. polished | 232. simple |
| 130. initiative | 181. praising | 233. sincere |
| 131. insightful | 182. precise | 234. slipshod |
| 132. intelligent | 183. prejudiced | 235. slow |
| 133. interests narrow | 184. preoccupied | 236. sly |
| 134. interests wide | 185. progressive | 237. smug |
| 135. intolerant | 187. prudish | 238. snobbish |
| 136. inventive | 189. queer | 239. sociable |
| 137. irresponsible | 190. quick | 240. soft-hearted |
| 138. irritable | 191. quiet | 241. sophisticated |
| 139. jolly | 192. quitting | 242. spendthrift |
| 140. kind | | 243. spineless |

244.	spontaneous	263.	tense	282.	uninhibited
245.	spunky	264.	thankless	283.	unintelligent
246.	stable	265.	thorough	284.	unkind
247.	steady	266.	thoughtful	285.	unrealistic
248.	stern	267.	thrifty	286.	unscrupulous
249.	stingy	268.	timid	287.	unselfish
250.	stolid	269.	tolerant	288.	unstable
251.	strong	270.	touchy	289.	vindictive
252.	stubborn	271.	tough	290.	versatile
253.	submissive	272.	trusting	291.	warm
254.	suggestible	273.	unaffected	292.	wary
255.	sulky	274.	unambitious	293.	weak
256.	superstitious	275.	unassuming	294.	whiny
257.	suspicious	276.	unconventional	295.	wholesome
258.	sympathetic	277.	undependable	296.	wise
259.	tactful	278.	understanding	297.	withdrawn
260.	tactless	279.	unemotional	298.	witty
261.	talkative	280.	unexcitable	299.	worrying
262.	temperamental	281.	unfriendly	300.	zany

APPENDIX C

RESULTS OF ITEM ANALYSIS OF VOCABULARY TEST

Easy Items

Item	\bar{X}	S. D.	R (total)
1	.51	.500	.0271
2	.61	.489	-.0877
3	.87	.341	.2725
4	.21	.408	.4645
5	.54	.499	.1205
46	.67	.469	.1514
47	.80	.401	.1487
48	.80	.401	.0684
49	.77	.421	.2329
50	.84	.370	.2921

Medium Items

6	.49	.500	.0067
7	.71	.453	.2538
8	.67	.469	.3357
9	.82	.386	.3876
10	.93	.251	.3464
41	.53	.499	.3455
42	.49	.500	.2776
43	.83	.378	.4201
44	.64	.479	.2777
45	.90	.295	.2112

Difficult Items

11	.70	.457	.3050
12	.80	.401	.4880
13	.63	.484	.3275
14	.37	.482	.5551
15	.53	.499	.2986
16	.91	.281	.2696
17	.91	.281	.3269
18	.76	.427	.3282
19	.56	.497	.4999

Item	\bar{X}	S. D.	R (total)
Difficult Items (continued)			
20	.76	.427	.4242
21	.71	.453	.3411
22	.53	.499	.2164
23	.34	.473	.3247
24	.24	.427	.2067
25	.30	.457	.4988
26	.63	.482	.2875
27	.90	.295	.3304
28	.23	.421	.0382
29	.90	.295	.4695
30	.35	.476	.0985
31	.53	.499	.3044
32	.49	.500	.3069
33	.73	.444	.4425
34	.71	.453	.3734
35	.55	.498	.5776
36	.77	.421	.2016
37	.83	.378	.4395
38	.49	.500	.3069
39	.49	.500	.4886
40	.48	.500	.5087

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