

Why Does Proximity to Vermilion Make One Red and Proximity to Ink Make One Black? The Genesis, Current Status, and Future of Trait Activation Theory

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Abstract

Trait Activation Theory aims to elucidate how appropriate external situations activate individuals' internal traits, and how such activation prompts latent implicit traits to manifest as explicit behaviors. This article provides a comprehensive review of Trait Activation Theory, analyzing its two major leaps from conceptual origins to the baseline model and subsequently to the expanded model, with particular emphasis on elucidating systems such as situation stratification, situational characteristics, and feedback concerning activation consequences. It distinguishes and analyzes the essence of trait activation and its similarities and differences with Person-Environment Fit Theory and Situational Strength Theory, and proposes future research directions from perspectives including deepening empirical validation and expanding existing theoretical models.

Full Text

Preamble

How Does One Take on the Attributes of One's Associates? The Origins, Current State, and Future of Trait Activation Theory

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Abstract: Trait Activation Theory aims to elucidate how appropriate external situations activate individuals' internal traits, and how such activation transforms latent, implicit traits into explicit behavioral expressions. This article

provides a comprehensive review of Trait Activation Theory, analyzing its evolution from conceptual origins to baseline and extended models. We systematically explain the situational taxonomy, situational characteristics, and feedback mechanisms of activation consequences, while clarifying the essence of trait activation and its distinctions from Person-Environment Fit Theory and Situational Strength Theory. Future research directions are proposed from perspectives of deepening empirical validation and expanding the current theoretical model.

Keywords: trait activation; Trait Activation Theory; trait-expressive behavior; trait-relevant cues; situational taxonomy

1. Introduction

The “nature versus nurture” and “heredity versus environment” debates represent classic, century-spanning propositions in psychology (Blazer & Hernandez, 2006; Loehlin, 1992). The 21st-century emergence of Trait Activation Theory (TAT) (Tett & Guterman, 2000; Tett & Burnett, 2003) not only continues this timeless discourse but also imbues it with new meaning and vitality through the lens of “activation” and “interaction.” From the distinctive perspective of interactionist psychology, Trait Activation Theory explores the organic connections between external situations and internal traits, as well as how these connections predict individual behavior (Tett & Burnett, 2003). It offers a novel interpretive framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between “person” and “situation,” particularly in workplace contexts. Since its inception, the theory has rapidly become a prominent framework in industrial and organizational psychology for examining interactions between external situations and individuals.

Using Google Scholar as the search engine and “Trait Activation” and “Trait Activation Theory” as keywords, we identified 2,190 and 1,260 publications respectively prior to August 2019. As shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper], research on trait activation and Trait Activation Theory has exhibited fluctuating yet consistent growth over the 15 years since the theory’s birth, with particularly rapid development after 2012. Theoretically, numerous studies have focused on person-situation interactions, situational specificity, and cross-situational consistency (Tett, Simonet, Walser, & Brown, 2013). In terms of applications, the theory’s principles have been employed to varying degrees in research on employee and leader job performance (Lan, Cai, Huo, Law, & Chang, 2016), innovative work behavior (Woods, Mustafa, Anderson, & Sayer, 2018), organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Phipps, Prieto, Deis, & Conflict, 2015), and assessment center performance simulations (Oliver, Hausdorf, Lievens, & Conlon, 2016).

However, a comprehensive review reveals several persistent issues. First, the majority of studies, particularly domestic research, remain at a preliminary stage of theoretical application. They typically invoke Trait Activation Theory superficially from a person-situation interaction perspective without delving into the intrinsic connections between situational variables and personality traits. In

other words, current “trait activation” research largely treats the theory merely as a variant of person-situation interaction theory, failing to explore precisely how external situational variables organically connect with internal traits to “activate” them. Consequently, a substantial portion of research based on Trait Activation Theory suffers from unclear theoretical foundations. While existing reviews have examined the theory (see: Zhou, Duan, & Tian, 2011), they have focused primarily on classifying trait-relevant cues in the baseline model and their moderating effects on “trait-work behavior/performance” relationships, without elaborating on the essence of “trait activation” and the specific activation process. Second, compared with its nascent stage, Trait Activation Theory has undergone significant development. For instance, the attributes subject to activation have expanded from traits alone to include knowledge, abilities, and skills, while trait-relevant cues have been extended through the addition of a discretionary cues layer to the original situational stratification system (Tett et al., 2013).

This paper first traces the conceptual origins of “trait activation” to interactionist psychology (Tett & Guterman, 2000). It then reviews and summarizes the theory’s two major evolutionary leaps: the baseline and extended models. In the baseline model, we systematically analyze and clarify the conceptual connotations of traits and trait activation, elaborate on the situational stratification system, the classification system of situational features, and research on activation consequences. In the extended model, we summarize the latest theoretical developments. Subsequently, we provide an in-depth comparative analysis between Trait Activation Theory and similar theories (Person-Environment Fit Theory and Situational Strength Theory). Finally, based on existing empirical research and the latest theoretical developments in the field, we propose future research directions for Trait Activation Theory.

2. The Conceptual Origins of “Trait Activation” : Interactionist Psychology

The birth of any new theory is inextricably linked to predecessor theories. Even before Tett and Guterman (2000) formally introduced the concept of “trait activation,” the term had appeared in cognitive psychology experiments (see Figure 1). In such research, individuals’ cognitive sensitivity to textual materials served as the criterion for whether traits could be activated (e.g., D’Agostino & Beegle, 1996; Whitney, Davis, & Waring, 1994). However, early trait activation studies overlooked the influence of rich external social situations on internal traits. In fact, interactionism—the principle that internal traits and external situations jointly determine behavior—has long been a consensus in modern psychology (Larsen, Buss, Wismeijer, Song, & Van den Berg, 2010; Robbins & Judge, 2015). Consequently, interactionist psychology, which emphasizes the dual importance of personality traits and situational factors, became the theoretical foundation for trait activation (Tett & Guterman, 2000).

Interactionist Psychology, particularly Murray’s (1938) conceptualization of

“Press,” provided crucial theoretical grounding for trait activation (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Interactionist psychology posits that human behavior is a function of personality traits and the immediate situation, co-triggered through continuous person-environment interactions (Murray, 1938). It acknowledges both cross-situational consistency within individuals and inter-individual similarity within identical situations. There exists a deep, intrinsic connection between person and situation: on one hand, individuals are inherently predisposed to select situations that affect them; on the other hand, individuals with particular traits must first be influenced by situationally congruent circumstances before manifesting corresponding behaviors (Tett & Guterman, 2000). For example, although individuals possess innate differences in prosocial behavioral tendencies, these differences become particularly salient in poor coworker relationships. In supportive interpersonal contexts, all individuals tend to exhibit prosocial behavior, whereas in dysfunctional interpersonal environments, variations in prosocial personality traits produce markedly different behavioral outcomes (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011). This intrinsic person-situation connection laid the essential conceptual foundation for Trait Activation Theory.

Based on interactionist psychology, Tett and colleagues proposed the conceptual framework and theoretical model of trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). Although the concept of trait activation preceded the formal theoretical model, its essence is embedded within the model itself. The theoretical model has undergone two qualitative transformations: the baseline model (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and the extended model (Tett et al., 2013). The baseline model not only grounded trait activation concepts in organizational management practice but also incorporated research on the consequences of trait activation processes. The extended model encompasses all elements of the baseline model while significantly expanding its scope.

3. The Baseline Model of Trait Activation Theory

The baseline model of Trait Activation Theory primarily explores how personality traits in the workplace interact organically with contingent organizational situations to elicit corresponding work behaviors and performance (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The baseline model comprises four components: a definitional system for “trait activation,” a situational stratification system, a classification system for trait-expressive situational features, and a feedback system for activation consequences. As illustrated in the model diagram (see Figure 2, paths 1-11), the trait activation process (encompassing paths 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8) constitutes the core of the baseline model: first, traits latent within individuals can be activated under appropriate work situations; second, these activated traits stimulate individuals to express corresponding work behaviors; third, throughout this process, individuals obtain intrinsic rewards—a sense of internal satisfaction generated during trait activation. This intrinsic satisfaction, together with extrinsic rewards derived from work performance (path 9), reshapes individuals’ work behaviors (path 10). These modified behaviors subsequently feed back into

the surrounding work situation (path 11), thereby enhancing or diminishing the situational activation of traits (paths 3-5) and the relationship between traits and work behaviors (path 1).

3.1 The Definitional System of “Trait Activation”

In Trait Activation Theory, traits refer to individuals’ internal attributes—stable characteristics that describe behavioral patterns (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Traits exhibit both within-person consistency and between-person differences. Within-person consistency reflects the internal stability of psychological characteristics; although a trait may vary in intensity across time and space, it remains present. The more frequently a trait manifests across different situations, the more central it is to the individual’ s personality (Buss, 1989). Between-person differences determine the unique configuration and composition of traits across individuals. Each person represents a unique aggregation of multiple traits, possessing a singular combination of trait categories and proportional weights (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Tett and Guterman (2000) define trait activation as the process whereby dormant traits hidden within individuals are awakened in appropriate situations and expressed as specific behaviors. The behaviors produced through this process are termed “trait-expressive behaviors.” Specifically, various traits exist as latent variables within individuals, possessing an inherent “desire” to transition from implicit to explicit states. Only when situational features align with a particular trait will that dormant trait be awakened. The activated trait then stimulates individuals to manifest corresponding “explicit” behavioral intentions or actions (i.e., trait-expressive behaviors). In other words, placing an individual with trait X in environment S that can influence X makes that individual more likely to exhibit behavior R compared to individuals without trait X (Alston, 1975). Due to within-person consistency, the same trait shows varying activation levels across situations; due to between-person differences, the same trait exhibits differential activation levels across individuals in identical situations. Thus, situational factors activate traits only when conducive to trait expression, and this activation occurs because situations provide sufficient trait-relevant cues (see section 3.3), thereby addressing the questions of “when” and “why” situations activate traits.

For example, Machiavellianism, as a negative trait, correlates with lower job satisfaction (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015), higher turnover intentions (Belschak, Jacobs, Giessner, Horton, & Bayerl, 2017), more unethical behavior (Castille, Buckner, & Thoroughgood, 2018), and counterproductive work behavior (Palmer, Komarraju, Carter, & Karau, 2017). However, Machiavellianism manifests only in environments where deception and exploitation yield personal benefits and where such behaviors are feasible (Dahling, Whitaker, & Levy, 2009; Kessler et al., 2010). In other words, environments conducive to deception or exploitation constitute the prerequisite for Machiavellianism to develop from implicit to explicit expression. Environments that curtail such opportunities

reduce the likelihood of Machiavellianism's explicit expression. In a study examining the moderating effect of abusive supervision on the relationship between Machiavellianism and unethical behavior, abusive leadership provided necessary conditions for activating Machiavellian traits (Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2017). Higher levels of abusive supervision intensified Machiavellianism, strengthening its association with unethical behavior.

Situational factors appropriate for trait activation are termed trait-relevant cues (Tett & Burnett, 2003). As a general term for external situations with the potential to activate individual traits, trait-relevant cues serve as the “adhesive” that systematically connects internal traits, external situations, work behaviors, and job performance (Tett & Burnett, 2003). They can indirectly prompt work behaviors through trait activation, directly influence behavior (path 2), or moderate the relationship between work behavior and performance (path 7). Recognizing the importance of trait-relevant cues, Tett and Burnett (2003) applied them to organizational management, specifying the activation process from “trait → trait-expressive behavior” as “trait → work behavior.” To more precisely reveal the functions of organizational situations in “activating” traits, Tett and Burnett (2003) proposed the situational stratification system and the situational features classification system.

3.2 The Situational Stratification System

The situational stratification system categorizes trait-relevant cues into three hierarchical subsystems based on their origin: task, social, and organizational layers (Tett & Burnett, 2003). The task layer originates from the work itself (path 3); the social layer stems from work-related communication processes (path 4); and the organizational layer derives from organizational culture and climate (path 5). Zhou et al. (2011) summarized early research on the situational stratification system, including job characteristics, job embeddedness, and deadlines in the task layer; group satisfaction, leadership behavior, and team learning in the social layer; and interpersonal interaction, organizational support, and organizational climate in the organizational layer. Recent research has expanded these categories. For instance, work stress (Byrne, Silasi-Mansat, & Worthy, 2015), workplace learning (Klemm, 2017), and job involvement (Zhou, Hirst, & Shipton, 2012) have been incorporated into the task layer. Various leadership styles—including conflict avoidance (Park & Nawakitphaitoon, 2018), empowering leadership (Ryan, 2017), transformational leadership (Phaneuf, Boudrias, Rousseau, & Brunelle, 2016), and charismatic leadership (Oreg & Berson, 2015)—constitute new social layer subsystems. Additionally, numerous studies have examined negative social layer cues, such as abusive supervision (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Liao, Li, De Pater, Liu, & Wang, 2015), perceived injustice (Liu, Chiang, Fehr, Xu, & Wang, 2017), and leader monitoring (J. Lee, Yun, S. Lee, & H. J. Lee, 2018). At the organizational level, centralization versus decentralization (Hirst, Van Knippenberg, Chen, & Sacramento, 2011), power distance (Lam & Xu, 2019; Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018), and political climate (De

Clercq, Haq, & Azeem, 2018; Wiltshire, Bourdage, & Lee, 2014) have emerged as new research interests.

3.3 The Situational Features Classification System

To more clearly reveal functional differences among situational features during trait expression, the classification system divides situational features into five categories: “Demand,” “Distractor,” “Constraint,” “Releaser,” and “Facilitator” (Tett & Burnett, 2003). “Demand” refers to trait-relevant situations that facilitate engagement in positive, valuable activities, including formally defined job tasks and responsibilities as well as informal group norms or organizational characteristics. “Distractor” denotes trait-relevant situations that negatively impact work behavior. “Constraint” describes situations that suppress trait expression or activation effects. Conversely, “Releaser” refers to occasional work events that counteract constraint effects. “Facilitator” represents situational factors that enhance or amplify existing activation effects.

3.3.1 Classification Criteria for Situational Features and Their Effects on “Trait-Behavior/Performance” Relationships The five situational features derive from three classification criteria or dimensions: Frequency, Activation Status, and Behavioral Value (Tett & Burnett, 2003) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classification Criteria for Five Situational Features and Their Effects on “Trait-Behavior/Performance” Relationships

Situational Feature Classification	Direct Enhancement	Indirect Effect ¹	Relationship Stability
Demand			High
Distractor			High
Constraint			High
Releaser			Low
Facilitator			Low

Note: ¹Indirect effect means the situation’s impact is not direct but rather enhances other situational features’ effects on “trait-performance” relationships.

Source: Tett, R. P., & Burnett, D. D. (2003). A personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance. Journal of Applied Psychology, 88(3), 500-517.

Frequency refers to how often a situational feature occurs or its stability. Frequency determines the stability of “trait-behavior/performance” relationships. “Demand,” “Distractor,” and “Constraint” are routinely occurring, regular situations, such as work stress (Byrne et al., 2015), diverse leadership styles (Greenbaum et al., 2017; Phaneuf et al., 2016), and organizational support (Palmer et al., 2017; Wang, Zhang, Thomas, Yu, & Spitzmueller, 2017). “Releaser”

and “Facilitator” are occasional, irregular situations, such as annual gatherings in boundaryless organizations like virtual communities (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Current research predominantly focuses on regular situational features.

Activation Status refers to the degree to which a situational feature activates a trait and strengthens the “trait-behavior/performance” relationship. “Demand,” “Distractor,” “Constraint,” and “Releaser” directly influence activation status, whereas “Facilitator” only indirectly affects it. “Demand” and “Distractor” both promote trait activation and strengthen “trait-behavior/performance” relationships. Higher activation status yields greater trait activation and more robust trait-behavior/performance linkages. Research shows that leader unfairness perception functions as a “demand” in the relationship between leader narcissism and self-interested behavior: higher perceived unfairness intensifies narcissism activation, strengthening the narcissism-self-interest relationship (Liu et al., 2017). Employee empowerment acts as a “distractor” in the relationship between conscientiousness and cyberloafing: empowerment activates conscientiousness to reduce cyberloafing, with stronger empowerment yielding a more robust conscientiousness-cyberloafing relationship (Kim, del Carmen Triana, Chung, & Oh, 2016).

“Constraint” reduces trait activation and weakens “trait-behavior/performance” relationships. “Releaser” aims to alleviate constraints’ inhibitory effects on trait expression. Research indicates that centralization “constrains” the relationship between learning orientation and creativity (Hirst et al., 2011). Higher centralization reduces learning orientation activation, weakening its relationship with creativity; lower centralization enables learning orientation to positively influence creativity. Organizational boundarylessness “constrains” leader extraversion activation (Lamond, Daniels, & Standen, 2003; Min, Liu, & Ji, 2010), while informal, irregular annual company gatherings “release” leader extraversion (Zheng et al., 2015), providing opportunities for constrained extraverted traits to be expressed.

“Facilitator” indirectly influences activation status by enhancing existing trait-relevant cues. Research demonstrates that leader core self-evaluation and leader-member exchange “facilitate” the relationship between follower core self-evaluation and job performance (Soane, Booth, Alfes, Shantz, & Bailey, 2018). Higher leader core self-evaluation and better leader-member exchange help followers integrate existing work resources, thereby activating follower core self-evaluation and strengthening its relationship with performance.

Behavioral Value refers to the direction of influence that activated traits exert on work behavior or performance. “Demand” positively predicts this influence, while “Distractor” negatively predicts it. Research shows that individual participation and intellectual stimulation both function as “demands” in promoting the relationship between regulatory focus and creativity: higher levels strengthen creativity enhancement (Zhou, Hirst, & Shipton, 2012). Stress acts as a “distractor” in relationships between conscientiousness/neuroticism and decision-making performance: higher stress levels intensify the negative

impact of conscientiousness and neuroticism on decision quality (Byrne et al., 2015). Managerial psychological contract breach functions as both a “demand” (in the neuroticism-abusive supervision relationship) and a “distractor” (in the agreeableness-abusive supervision relationship): higher breach levels strengthen both the positive neuroticism-abuse relationship and the negative agreeableness-abuse relationship (Tang, Wu, Wu, & Li, 2016).

“Constraint,” “Releaser,” and “Facilitator” do not produce fixed directional effects on work performance. Research indicates that leader performance avoidance orientation simultaneously “constrains” the positive relationship between follower learning orientation and knowledge sharing, and the negative relationship between follower performance approach orientation and knowledge sharing. Lower leader performance avoidance strengthens both relationships (Zhang, Wang, & Zhang, 2018). Rigid organizational rules and regulations typically “constrain” Big Five personality expression, yet enhanced situational factors like job autonomy can “release” the positive Big Five-performance relationship (Christian & Ellis, 2014). Leader learning orientation, performance approach, and performance avoidance can respectively “facilitate” the positive learning orientation-knowledge sharing relationship, the positive performance approach-knowledge sharing relationship, and the negative performance avoidance-knowledge sharing relationship (Zhang et al., 2018).

In summary, the five situational features reflect different influences on “trait-behavior/performance” relationships. “Demand,” “Distractor,” “Constraint,” and “Releaser” directly moderate the relationship by activating traits, whereas “Facilitator” indirectly moderates by enhancing existing trait-relevant cues. Although both “Demand” and “Distractor” promote trait activation, “Demand” yields positive performance effects while “Distractor” produces negative effects. “Constraint,” “Releaser,” and “Facilitator” have no fixed directional impact on performance.

3.3.2 Examples of Situational Features Activating Big Five Traits To systematically illustrate situational features, Tett and Guterman (2003) mapped “Demand,” “Distractor,” “Constraint,” and “Releaser” features across the three situational layers (task/social/organizational) to activate Big Five personality traits (see Table 2). As shown, different Big Five traits correspond to different layer-specific situational factors that facilitate activation. For instance, innovative task demands at the task layer activate openness—a “demand” feature. However, when organizations require employees to focus on specific tasks, excessive learning opportunities become a “distractor” for performance. At the social layer, working with introverted colleagues “constrains” extraverted employees’ task completion, while occasional office gatherings with lighthearted banter help “release” extraverted traits.

Table 2: Three-Dimensional Mapping of Situational Layers, Situational Features, and Personality Traits

Situational Layer	Conscientiousness	Extraversion	Openness
Task	Conventional, enterprising, non-artistic work; deadlines; high demands	Enterprising, social work; high energy demands	Artistic, social, unconventional work; innovative task demands
Social	Production-oriented teams; highly interdependent colleagues; frequent communication	High-cohesion teams; energetic teams	Inclusive team climate
Organizational	Detail/achievement-oriented climate; organizational competition; loyalty	Extensive interpersonal interaction; diverse company activities	Diverse, cutting-edge organizational development
Constraint	Rigid rules; complex tasks	Power; socializing unrelated to work	Deadlock regulations
Distractor	Automatic detail management; close monitoring	Isolation/exclusion	Repetitive, simple work
Releaser	Detailed goals; specific short-term objectives	Communication with introverted colleagues Office parties; harmless jokes among colleagues	Conservative, outdated group norms Annual trips; job rotation

Note: Since “Facilitator” features do not involve direct activation of personality traits by situational layers, Table 2 does not include three-dimensional relationships among “Facilitator,” situational layers, and personality traits.

Source: Adapted from Tett, R. P., & Burnett, D. D. (2003). A personality trait-based interactionist model of job performance. Journal of Applied Psychology, 88(3), 500–517.

3.4 The Feedback System of Activation Consequences

The feedback system encompasses the consequences of trait activation—work performance—and the relationship between work performance and the trait activation process (Tett & Burnett, 2003). As shown in the model diagram (see Figure 2), first, the trait activation process is the primary cause of work performance (path 6). This perspective has been validated by numerous studies. For example, activation of extraversion through social competence and climate for initiative enhances adaptive performance (Wihler, Meurs, Wiesmann, Troll, & Blickle, 2017). Activation of Machiavellianism through social undermining and activation of envy through perceived political climate reduce job performance among individuals possessing these traits (De Clercq et al., 2018; Smith & Webster, 2017). Second, the value of individual work depends not only on the trait activation process but also on others' evaluations of work behavior (path 7). Third, work performance results from the interaction between work behavior and external situations, and generates extrinsic rewards such as material compensation and promotions (path 9). These extrinsic rewards, combined with intrinsic satisfaction from trait activation, reshape work behaviors (path 10). These modified behaviors subsequently influence surrounding trait-relevant cues (path 11), adjusting the degree and type of trait activation. Thus, the feedback system transforms Trait Activation Theory from a static framework examining “situation-trait” relationships into a dynamic, cyclical theory that explains “situation-trait” relationships, individual work behavior and performance, and subsequent feedback to “situation-trait” relationships.

4. The Extended Model of Trait Activation Theory

In recent years, academic interest in Trait Activation Theory has rendered the baseline model increasingly inadequate for research needs. Notably, numerous studies have applied the theory to “non-trait” attributes such as social skills (Hochwarter, Witt, Treadway, & Ferris, 2006), emotional intelligence (Farh, Seo, & Tesluk, 2012), and core self-evaluations (Kacmar, Collins, Harris, & Judge, 2009). Moreover, research indicates that traits directly influence relationships between internal/external incentives and work behavior or performance (Spurk & Abele, 2011; Sung & Choi, 2009), yet the baseline model inadequately addresses trait-incentive interactions.

These theoretical and empirical inconsistencies prompted Tett et al. (2013) to propose the extended model of Trait Activation Theory (Figure 2, paths 12-20), which comprehensively incorporates the baseline model while expanding its scope. The extended model includes Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) as activatable individual attributes (see section 4.1) and expands trait-relevant cues by adding a discretionary cues layer (see section 4.2). Furthermore, it provides more nuanced classification of activation consequences, differentiating work results from result feedback and explicitly highlighting the important role of “other” factors in individuals' result feedback.

4.1 Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA)

KSA represents the collective term for individuals' Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. The extended model posits that knowledge, skills, and abilities can all be activated by trait-relevant cues to produce work behaviors. Research shows that delivering bad news functions as a “distractor” in the relationship between “economic schema” and compassion (Molinsky, Grant, & Margolis, 2012). Economic schema refers to a knowledge structure emphasizing rationality, efficiency, and self-interest (Wang, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2011). More frequent economic bad news intensifies economic schema activation, strengthening its negative relationship with compassion; less frequent bad news weakens this relationship. Job demands function as a “demand” in the relationship between managers' political skill and job performance (Gansen-Ammann, Meurs, Wihler, & Blickle, 2019). Higher job demands increase political skill activation, leading to exponential performance gains; lower demands reduce activation, resulting in only a weak, stable positive relationship between political skill and performance.

The KSA activation process encompasses the area formed by paths 12 and 3-5. While similar to trait activation, KSA activation differs fundamentally because KSA represent separable external attributes rather than fundamental individual needs, and thus does not generate intrinsic satisfaction (Tett et al., 2013). Additionally, KSA are associated with personality traits (path 13): individuals' knowledge accumulation, skill development, and ability training are both governed by and reshape personality traits.

4.2 The Expanded Situational System—The “Discretionary Cues” Layer

The extended model' s situational stratification system adds a “discretionary cues” layer. Discretionary cues represent individuals' autonomy in determining work content and processes (Grant, Fried, & Juillerat, 2010). Higher levels of discretionary cues grant individuals greater authority to decide their work time, location, content, partners, and procedures. The discretionary cues activation process involves only the “trait/KSA-work behavior” relationship (encompassing paths 1, 15, 8, 10, 12, and 13), meaning the entire process relates solely to individual volition and work behavior, independent of valuable work outcomes and tangible result feedback. Employees in this process obtain and focus only on intrinsic satisfaction from work itself. Conversely, this intrinsic satisfaction feeds back into work behavior. Thus, the discretionary cues activation process represents a “pure” pursuit of intrinsic satisfaction, with no direct connection between work behavior and external rewards. Discretionary cues can be considered a purely internal “facilitator.”

Similar to achievement needs in Three-needs Theory (McClelland, 2005), discretionary cues apply primarily to middle and senior managers (Tett et al., 2013). Individuals activated by discretionary cues care more about personally important and valuable work, pursuing their own sense of accomplishment rather than external glory or rewards.

4.3 The Expanded Feedback System

The extended model differentiates work performance into valued work behavior (pre-reward) and performance outcomes (post-reward). Before receiving tangible rewards, individuals experience secondary intrinsic rewards from satisfactory work results—a sense of achievement, pride, and fulfillment from task completion itself. This differs fundamentally from the primary intrinsic satisfaction generated during trait activation (path 8). Primary intrinsic satisfaction and secondary intrinsic rewards correspond respectively to intrinsic regulation and integrated regulation in Organismic Integration Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The former emphasizes satisfaction from the work process itself, while the latter emphasizes achievement related to self-actualization or work goals. Correspondingly, secondary personality traits refer only to traits associated with achievement and utilitarian factors (Tett et al., 2013). Both the secondary intrinsic reward process from valued work results (path 18) and the extrinsic reward process from performance outcomes (path 9) are influenced by individuals' secondary traits (paths 19 and 20).

4.4 The “Others” Module

The “Others” module (paths 14 and 17) represents the influence of colleagues, supervisors, and other organizational members on individual work performance. The extended model makes explicit the baseline model's implicit condition—that evaluation processes affect the direction and strength of “trait-performance” relationships—by emphasizing how “others” moderate valued work results and differentiated performance feedback. On one hand, the “others” factor importantly moderates the evaluation process based on work behavior (paths 6 and 7). On the other hand, it influences utilitarian result feedback such as compensation and promotions (paths 16 and 17).

5. Distinguishing Trait Activation Theory from Related Theories

Similar to Trait Activation Theory, both Person-Environment (P-E) Fit Theory and Situational Strength Theory explain “trait \times situation \rightarrow behavior” relationships from situational perspectives. To further clarify Trait Activation Theory's unique contributions, this section compares its core tenets with these two theories.

5.1 Comparison with Person-Environment Fit Theory

P-E Fit Theory posits that both person and environment directly influence behavior, and their interaction powerfully affects behavior (Edwards, 2008). P-E Fit Theory and Trait Activation Theory are both connected and distinct. Conceptually, both examine person-situation interactions, but differ in that P-E Fit Theory treats environmental factors as both “supplies” and “demands” (Kristof, 1996), whereas Trait Activation Theory treats situational factors only

as “supplies” (Tett et al., 2013). In P-E Fit Theory, when the environment serves as supplier, fit represents the degree to which situational resources satisfy individual needs; when the environment serves as demander, fit becomes the match between required and possessed abilities. Personality traits, as components of individual qualities, can examine both resource-trait matching and whether traits meet environmental demands (Tett et al., 2013). In Trait Activation Theory, situational provision of trait-relevant cues forms the foundation of the activation process (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

In terms of scope, both theories encompass situational factors from narrow to broad and low to high levels. However, P-E Fit Theory has spawned sub-theories like person-organization, person-job, and person-group fit to address complex situational demands (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006), whereas Trait Activation Theory classifies complex situations into three hierarchical layers based on origin (Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Formally, P-E Fit Theory views person-environment relations as mechanical interactions between independent entities, while Trait Activation Theory provides an organic rather than mechanical explanation for “trait \times situation \rightarrow behavior.” In fit theory, traits are explicit variables independent of situations, with person and situation as equal partners jointly influencing behavior. In trait activation, the person-situation relationship is an organic interaction centered on traits. Traits as latent variables have a unidirectional dependence on situations, which provide trait-relevant cues throughout the activation process (Tett & Burnett, 2003). For example, Bergman, Benzer, Kabins, Bhupatkar, and Panina (2013) simultaneously applied both theories to study events and commitment. Events referred to short-term workplace occurrences like meetings, supervisor praise, or missed deadlines. From P-E Fit Theory, events matching individual values enhanced commitment while mismatched events hindered it. From Trait Activation Theory, only value-congruent events could activate corresponding values to influence commitment.

5.2 Comparison with Situational Strength Theory

Like Trait Activation Theory, Situational Strength Theory (SST) emphasizes that how traits translate into behavior depends on situational strength, but the theories define strength differently. First, SST defines situational strength broadly as the degree of situational constraints the environment provides (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993). Clearer behavioral rules, norms, and standards produce higher situational strength; conversely, strength is lower (Meyer et al., 2014). Situational influence on traits is unidirectional: external situations always suppress trait expression, with suppression degree depending on strength. Higher situational strength more strongly inhibits traits, weakening trait-behavior relationships; lower strength allows traits to better predict behavior (Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010; Meyer et al., 2014). A study using safety climate as situational strength found it significantly moderated the conscientiousness-safety behavior relationship (Lee & Dalal, 2016). Stronger safety climate ensured safe

production, reducing employees' reliance on conscientiousness and weakening the trait-behavior link. Weaker safety climate increased reliance on conscientiousness, strengthening the relationship.

Trait Activation Theory defines situational strength specifically as trait-relevant cue intensity (Tett, 2000; Zhou et al., 2011). For trait activation, whether dormant traits can be activated depends on the presence of trait-relevant cues, while the strength of the activated trait-behavior relationship depends on situational strength. Situational strength in Trait Activation Theory bidirectionally influences trait expression. On one hand, when situations provide sufficient activation cues, trait importance increases with situational strength. Higher strength yields more active traits and stronger, more stable trait-behavior relationships; lower strength reduces activation and weakens relationships. On the other hand, when situations lack necessary activation cues, trait activation is impossible regardless of strength. High strength makes situational effects more salient, potentially directly influencing behavior and rendering trait-behavior relationships weak. Low strength makes situations insufficient to elicit behavior, increasing trait relevance and strengthening trait-behavior relationships. For example, a study examining how job autonomy and job demands moderate relationships between leader neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness, and self-efficacy found that autonomy provided sufficient activation cues while demands did not (Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008). Higher autonomy strengthened the three traits' relationships with self-efficacy, while lower autonomy weakened them. In contrast, higher job demands directly stimulated leaders to enhance self-efficacy to handle heavy workloads, making trait reliance unnecessary. Lower demands reduced situational impetus, requiring leaders to draw upon their conscientiousness and other traits, thereby restoring trait-self-efficacy relationships.

Judge and Zapata (2015) simultaneously applied SST and Trait Activation Theory to examine Big Five personality-work performance relationships. From SST, situational strength negatively moderated the relationship between the unified Big Five construct and performance: lower strength (less structured, more autonomous work) strengthened the relationship. From Trait Activation Theory, each personality trait produced performance only when activated by appropriate situations: high social and innovative demand situations positively activated extraversion and openness, while competitive situations negatively activated agreeableness. Thus, higher social/innovative demands and lower competitive demands strengthened extraversion, openness, and agreeableness relationships with performance.

In summary, although Fit Theory, Situational Strength Theory, and Trait Activation Theory all address person-situation-behavior relationships and acknowledge joint trait-situation effects on behavior, each emphasizes different aspects. Fit Theory focuses on dual-agent interactions and bidirectional situational influences on persons; SST emphasizes situational unidirectional suppression of person-behavior relationships; Trait Activation Theory synthesizes these perspectives, proposing that trait-relevant cues and situational strength jointly

constitute complete trait activation (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Thus, Trait Activation Theory advances both theories: it evolves the mechanical combinatorial person-situation relationship from Fit Theory into a dialectical, organic relationship, and transforms SST's unidirectional "press-down" situational influence into a bidirectional relationship. Trait Activation Theory thus complements and extends both theories.

6. Future Directions for Trait Activation Theory

The emergence of Trait Activation Theory marks a new stage in academic understanding of person-situation relationships, evolving from traditional mechanical combinatorial views to organic, internal interaction perspectives. Originating from interactionist psychology, the successive development of trait activation concepts, the baseline model, and the extended model signals continuous theoretical refinement. Nevertheless, Trait Activation Theory requires further development in both research depth and theoretical expansion.

6.1 Systematic Empirical Validation Requires Strengthening

Although Trait Activation Theory has developed a rich theoretical model with extensive empirical validation of the "trait/KSA \times situation \rightarrow behavior" chain, the model itself requires substantial systematic verification. First, comparative studies of "trait activation" versus "KSA activation" effects are needed. While Tett et al. (2013) theoretically proposed that KSA activation does not generate intrinsic satisfaction, this awaits empirical verification. Additionally, whether and how these two activation processes differentially affect attitudinal, behavioral, and performance outcomes represents a valuable research direction. Second, comparative studies of situational features ("Demand," "Distractor," "Constraint," "Releaser," and "Facilitator") constitute another important frontier. Current empirical research predominantly focuses on "Demand," "Distractor," and "Constraint" (e.g., Duan & Cao, 2015; Peng, Wang, Ran, & Han, 2016; Kim et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2017), but comparative studies remain scarce. Key questions include: Does "Releaser" truly compensate for "Constraint" effects, and how? How does "Facilitator" strengthen or weaken other trait-relevant cues? How does "Facilitator" interact with "Demand," "Distractor," and "Constraint" to influence "trait \rightarrow behavior/performance" relationships? Third, the extended model requires extensive validation. Does the discretionary cues layer truly moderate executive trait-behavior relationships, and to what degree? How does the "Others" module moderate the "work behavior \rightarrow work outcomes" and "work outcomes \rightarrow result feedback" chains? These represent important future research directions. Finally, validation studies examining the dynamic cyclical nature of trait activation are warranted. Most existing research examines how trait-relevant cues moderate trait/KSA-behavior relationships, but few investigate from a dynamic cyclical perspective how work behavior reshaped by internal and external incentives feeds back to affect trait-relevant cues, and how modified situational cues differentially influence subsequent "trait/KSA \rightarrow work

behavior” relationships.

6.2 Expanding the Trait Activation Model to a “Quality Activation” Model

Although the extended model includes KSA alongside traits as activatable attributes (Tett et al., 2013), recent research continues to apply Trait Activation Theory to various “non-trait” attributes such as psychological capital (Cai, Lysova, Bossink, Khapova, & Wang, 2019), individual beliefs (Stiglbauer, 2017), and psychological empowerment (To, Fisher, & Ashkanasy, 2015). Based on this trend and integrating McClelland’s (1973) competency iceberg model, we propose that a “Quality Activation Model” represents an important future direction (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]).

The competency iceberg model uses the metaphor of an iceberg floating in the ocean to depict individual quality systems (McClelland, 1973). Individual qualities encompass both surface-level qualities above water—knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA)—and deep-level qualities below the surface, including social roles/values, self-concept, traits, and motivation. Compared with easily identifiable and measurable surface qualities, less observable deep-level qualities exert more enduring and profound influences. Traits constitute an essential component of the comprehensive quality system. The Quality Activation Model expands activation targets from single traits to the complete quality system. Notably, Tett et al. (2013) already recognized the limitation of focusing solely on traits and incorporated KSA. Following this expansion logic, the proposed Quality Activation Model enriches the range of activatable attributes.

Regarding the activation process itself, the Quality Activation Model aligns closely with the extended Trait Activation Theory. First, possessing work-relevant qualities does not directly determine work behavior and performance; rather, whether organizational situations can activate these qualities constitutes the critical condition. Second, activation of surface versus deep qualities differs fundamentally. Surface quality activation parallels KSA activation in the extended model: activated surface qualities prompt specific work behaviors without generating intrinsic satisfaction. Deep quality activation, like trait activation, produces both specific behaviors and intrinsic satisfaction. Third, analogous to situational feature classification in Trait Activation Theory, quality-relevant cues can also be categorized as “Demand,” “Distractor,” “Constraint,” “Releaser,” and “Facilitator.”

The Quality Activation Model has received partial empirical support. At the deepest motivational level, research shows that internal drives can be activated by quality-relevant cues (Wu, Guan, & Ma, 2015; Chen, Kirkman, Kim, Farh, & Tangirala, 2010; Kim, Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Johnson, 2013). For example, Kim et al. (2013) found that social support functions as a “constraint” in relationships between prosocial values motives, impression management motives, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Lower coworker support strength-

ens how both prosocial and impression management motives promote helping OCB. Conversely, organizational support functions as a “demand” between organizational concern motives and voice OCB: higher support strengthens the positive relationship. Research has also explored other deep qualities. Leader close monitoring “constrains” the relationship between self-efficacy and performance: less monitoring strengthens the self-efficacy-performance relationship (Lee et al., 2018). Empowerment “demands” the relationship between learning orientation and absorption capacity: higher empowerment strengthens this relationship (Li, Sun, & Dong, 2018). Political climate “distracts” the relationship between informational unfairness beliefs and performance: stronger political climate intensifies the negative relationship (De Clercq et al., 2018).

6.3 Incorporating “Omnibus Context” into the Situational System

Over the past decade, “contextualization” has become a trend in organizational behavior research (Bamberger, 2008; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Zhang, 2010). Particularly, Johns’ “context theory” has played a milestone role in advancing situational research (Johns, 2006, 2017, 2018). Context theory has become foundational for constructing contextualized theories (e.g., Bell, Fisher, Brown, & Mann, 2018; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Oc, 2018) and empirical studies (e.g., Daniels, Beesley, Cheyne, & Wimalasiri, 2016; Poppleton, Briner, & Kiefer, 2008; Wegman, Hoffman, Carter, Twenge, & Guenole, 2018). Context theory distinguishes between broad “omnibus context” and narrow “discrete context” (Johns, 2006). Omnibus context provides rich, detailed background for behavior—addressing when, where, who, and how behaviors occur (Bell et al., 2018). Discrete context refers to specific situational variables like autonomy or uncertainty that directly affect behavior or moderate variable relationships. Both contexts are essential and inseparable, with discrete context nested within omnibus context, which typically influences behavior through discrete context or their interaction (Rousseau et al., 2001; Johns, 2006).

Recent methodological advances, particularly the development of event intensity scales (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015), enable event intensity to be measured and analyzed as continuous variables. This makes examining omnibus context’ s independent effects possible (e.g., Burt & Oppen, 2017).

Reviewing Trait Activation Theory research reveals that both baseline and extended models’ situational stratification systems remain confined to “discrete context.” To more comprehensively, accurately, and deeply evaluate the applicability of Trait Activation Theory and our proposed Quality Activation Model, “omnibus context” should be incorporated into trait (quality)-relevant cues (see Figure 2, “Quality-relevant Cues” section). Future research could examine omnibus context’ s activation processes and effects from multiple angles: investigating three-dimensional (temporal, spatial, intensity) independent activation effects of critical events on relevant traits, or examining interactions between omnibus and discrete contexts. Additionally, omnibus context research facilitates selecting appropriate discrete variables for specific contexts, thereby improving

theory construction (Johns, 2006).

6.4 Integrating Trait Activation Theory with Other Psychological Theories

Recent integration with other psychological theories has become an important trend. Studies have combined Trait Activation Theory with attachment theory (Harms, Bai, & Han, 2016), similarity-attraction theory (Van Hove & Turban, 2015), and Situational Strength Theory (Judge & Zapata, 2015; Lu, 2018). Such integration serves two purposes. First, Trait Activation Theory as a “theory catalyst” helps construct new theories or models, as evidenced in psychological ownership antecedent models (Dawkins, Tian, Newman, & Martin, 2017), personality change models (Tasselli, Kilduff, & Landis, 2018), and psychological safety models (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). Second, theoretical integration enables innovative findings impossible with single theories. For example, Hochwarter et al. (2006) combined Conservation of Resources Theory with Trait Activation Theory to examine organizational support’s moderating effect on social skill-performance relationships. From Trait Activation Theory alone, organizational support functions as a “demand” for social skills: higher support facilitates social skill deployment and strengthens skill-performance relationships. However, Conservation of Resources Theory views social skills as scarce, protected resources (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014), meaning individuals are reluctant to expend them unless necessary. Therefore, higher organizational support provides knowledge, information, and skills needed for task completion (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), leading individuals to “conserve” their social skill resources. At very high support levels, organizational support may bypass trait activation and directly affect performance. Conversely, low support prevents individuals from obtaining needed resources from the organization, forcing them to activate their own social skills. Thus, lower support enables fuller social skill expression and stronger positive effects on performance. This analysis demonstrates that integrating multiple theories better explains complex, dynamic relationships among variables in organizational contexts and promotes theoretical innovation.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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