

Chapter 24

Measuring Personality Traits in Context

Four Approaches to Situations in Self-Report Measures of Personality

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“Once upon a time, we had no personalities” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 1), or said another way, once upon a time “highly generalized behavioral consistencies [had] not been demonstrated, and the concept of personality traits as broad response predispositions [was] thus untenable” (Mischel, 1968, p. 146). Fortunately for personality psychologists, this no longer appears to be the case. The last several decades have seen a resurgence in the interest in personality traits (Swann & Seyle, 2005), owing, in part, to the substantial evidence that has been accrued demonstrating that personality traits are robust predictors of behaviors across a variety of situations (e.g., Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009). Nevertheless, if anything can be gleaned from the proclaimed demise of personality psychology, the ensuing person–situation debate, and the prompt resurrection of personality psychology, it is that the expression of personality is dependent upon both traits (i.e., the cross-situationally stable aspects of an individual; Allport, 1931; Funder, 1991) *and* situations (i.e., momentary “happenings” that are primarily external to a person and over which they have little control; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2021; Saucier, 2020). In other words, the interaction of traits and situations matter, and this *interactionism* (see Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006) suggests that, to properly understand personality, we must also be aware of the situation.

Given that many useful resources on the history and assessment of situations already exist (e.g., Rauthmann & Sherman, 2021; Saucier, 2020), we will only briefly discuss such issues here. Instead, we take a more methodological approach, outlining the four ways that researchers can approach situations within self-report measures of personality. Specifically, researchers can take what we call (1) an unsituated approach, (2) a fully crossed approach, (3) an applied approach, or (4) an unsystematic approach. In discussing each approach, we describe its strengths and weaknesses. Our hope is that by explicitly outlining the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, researchers will be more cognizant of how situations are encoded (or, critically, not encoded) within self-report meas-

ures of personality and, as a result, be better able to make informed decisions about what personality measures will best serve their specific goals.

The Unsituated Approach

Imagine there is a planet that is inhabited by a race of extraterrestrial beings. The beings on this planet, for some unknown and completely inexplicable reason, only differ in terms of how manipulative, talkative, and callous they are. For an equally unknown and inexplicable reason, the beings on this planet can also only find themselves in one of two situations: they are always at home or at work. Understandably, the personality psychologists on that planet would not have a lot to work with, but they could come up with a self-report measure of a being's levels of manipulateness, talkativeness, and callousness. For example, they might use the item "I am manipulative" to assess manipulateness, the item "I am talkative" to assess talkativeness, and the item "I am callous" to assess callousness (Table 24.1).

In writing these items, the extraterrestrial personality psychologists have made a decision about how their measure will deal with the fact that the beings on the planet are always at home or at work. In this case, either intentionally or unintentionally, they have decided to ignore the situation entirely, taking an *unsituated* (or what can also be called a *decontextualized*) approach.

Using this approach, researchers present items as general, cross-situational tendencies, rather than contextualizing items within a specific situation or a specific set of situations. This approach may initially strike the reader as quite common, but perfectly unsituated measures (i.e., measures that do not include a single situationally contingent item) are actually quite rare. Some notable examples include the Big Five Inventory – 2 Short Form (Soto & John, 2017a), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and the Markers for the Big Five (Goldberg, 1992). The unabridged version of the Big Five Inventory – 2 (Soto & John, 2017b) is nearly fully unsituated, but it does include the situationally-contingent item "I am some-

Table 24.1. The four approaches to situations in self-report measures of personality

The unsituated approach	The fully crossed approach	The applied approach	The unsystematic approach
I am manipulative	I am manipulative <i>when I am at work</i> I am manipulative <i>when I am at home</i>	I am manipulative <i>when I am at work</i>	I am manipulative <i>when I am at work</i>
I am talkative	I am talkative <i>when I am at work</i> I am talkative <i>when I am at home</i>	I am talkative <i>when I am at work</i>	I am talkative <i>when I am at home</i>
I am callous	I am callous <i>when I am at work</i> I am callous <i>when I am at home</i>	I am callous <i>when I am at work</i>	I am callous

one who stays optimistic *after experiencing a setback*.” Both the unabridged and abridged versions of the scale also include a number of items that *imply* specific situations. For example, the item “I am someone who is relaxed, handles stress well” implies that the person is relaxed *in* stressful situations. Likewise, the latter portion of the item “I am someone who is persistent, works until the task is finished,” implies that a person is persistent *in* an occupational context rather than, say, a romantic context.

On the face of it, the unsituated approach seems quite reasonable. Personality traits are believed to be stable aspects of an individual (Allport, 1931; Funder, 1991), and if a researcher is only interested in these stable differences, they should be less concerned about whether a person talks a lot when they are at home, and more interested in whether a person talks a lot when they are at home *and* at work. By omitting the situation, the hope is that a person will reflect on their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires across all possible situations, and respond to the scale using some sense of their average feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires.

A downside of this approach is that, by ignoring situations altogether, researchers are unable to examine how people (and their underlying traits) interact with situations to modulate personality expression (see Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006). There is some stability in personality expression across situations (Fleeson, 2001; Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009), but this stability is not absolute. As a case in point, endorsement of general personality traits (e.g., extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) do seem to vary across situations (Bedford-Petersen & Saucier, 2020; Conley & Saucier, 2019). Moreover, endorsement of aversive personality traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) also seem to vary across situations (Kay & Saucier, 2020), with people reporting that they are (a) more Machiavellian and psychopathic when they play games, (b) more psychopathic and less narcissistic when they are being dominated or bossed around, and (c) more narcissistic when they are on dates (Figure 24.1). Of course, this research does not tell us whether there are changes in the rank-order levels of the expression of aversive personality traits across situations. For instance, it remains an open question as to

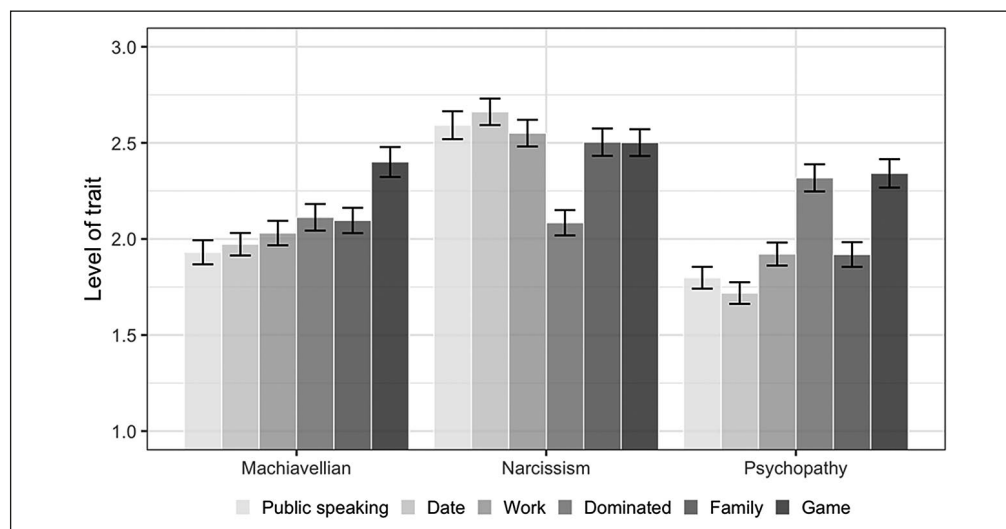


Figure 24.1. Endorsement of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy in six situations.

whether the person who scores highest in psychopathy in the context of being dominated or bossed around is also the same person who scores highest in psychopathy when they are playing a game. Irrespective of whether a researcher's goal is to understand why personality traits manifest in the ways that they do across situations or whether rank-order differences exist in the expression of the Dark Triad traits across situations, an approach other than the unsituated approach is necessary.

A second limitation of the unsituated approach is related to the assumption that, to inform their response to an unsituated item, a participant will reflect upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires across a variety of situations. This may not be the case. One possibility is that, instead of reflecting upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires across a variety of situations, participants will – consistent with context-dependent recall (e.g., Smith et al., 1978) and frame switching (e.g., Ramírez-Esparza et al., 2006) – reflect primarily upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires in the present situation. For example, if a participant is completing a survey at work and is presented with the item “I am talkative,” they may reflect primarily on how talkative they are *when they are at work*. Similarly, if a bicultural participant is completing a survey in Korea, they may be culturally primed to reflect upon how talkative they tend to be when they are in Korea (or, in the very least, when they are speaking Korean).

Another possibility is that, rather than reflecting upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires in the present situation, participants will reflect upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires in the situation that they believe is most relevant to a given item. When presented with the item “I am talkative,” for example, a participant may respond based on how talkative they tend to be at social events rather than how talkative they tend to be across situations. Whatever the exact mechanism, there exists the distinct possibility that unsituated items may inadvertently become situated in the minds of participants.

Moreover, even if a person is reflecting upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires across all possible situations, people often find themselves in different situations. Imagine two people: one who works at a call center, and one who works at a library. If they are both asked to reflect upon how talkative they are, the person who works at the call center may report being more talkative than the person who works at the library just because they can recall more instances of themselves talking. Of course, a person's personality can influence the types of situations they commonly find themselves in (see Schneider, 1987). The person who works at the call center may have taken the job because they enjoy talking, while the person who works at the library may have taken the job because they do not enjoy talking. That said, there are numerous cases where the situations a person most often finds themselves in is not a reflection of their personality traits.

One clear example of this is with culture. Culture can be understood as a sort of aggregate situation that determines the types of narrower situations a person will most often be exposed to (Saucier, 2020). Cross-cultural research has shown that people from different cultures often find themselves in different situations (Guillaume et al., 2016). Consequently, a person who grew up on Bora Bora island, when asked to reflect upon their feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires across a variety of situations, would likely reflect upon a vastly different set of situations than a person who grew up on Manhattan Island. So, if personality expression and behavior is defined by the interaction between a person's underlying traits and the situation, two people who have the same traits but are

from different cultures may respond to unsituated items differently, because they are reflecting upon different sets of situations.

The Fully Crossed Approach

In contrast to the unsituated approach, the fully crossed approach to self-report scales involves systematically matching every item with some representative subset of situations (Jackson, 1971; Saucier & Conley, 2015). Returning to the example from the previous section, the extraterrestrial personality psychologists could adapt their three unsituated items to assess manipulativeness, talkativeness, and callousness both when a person is at work and when a person is at home (see Table 24.1). In doing so, the extraterrestrial personality psychologists would be able to isolate the variance in personality that is the result of (1) a person's traits (e.g., their dispositional level of manipulativeness), (2) the situation (e.g., how much more or less manipulative a person is when they are at work than at home), and (3) the interaction between a person's traits and the situation (e.g., how much more or less manipulative a dispositionally manipulative person is at work than at home). As such, the fully crossed approach is the only approach to self-report measures of personality that is able to address the goals of interactionism by examining how the interaction between traits and situations modulates personality expression and behavior (see Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006). This allows a more thorough accounting of why people feel, behave, think, and desire the way that they do.

The fully crossed approach does, however, require a comprehensive and representative taxonomy of situations to cross the personality traits with. There have been numerous attempts to identify the most important aspects of a situation (for a review, see Forgas & Van Heck, 1992; Rauthmann & Sherman, 2021; or Ten Berge & De Raad, 1999), but unfortunately the field has not yet arrived at a widely accepted and comprehensive taxonomy (Endler, 1993; Funder, 2001; Hogan et al., 2000; Johnson, 1999). This may be one of the reasons that a *conditional approach* to dispositions (Shoda et al., 1994; Wright & Mischel, 1987) has made little headway. Nevertheless, we would be remiss if we did not describe some existing taxonomies of situations and how they can be used in the context of a fully crossed approach.

Although this is not true of every situational taxonomy (e.g., Yang et al., 2006), most situational taxonomies catalogue one of three types of situational information (Rauthmann, 2015; see also Rauthmann & Sherman, 2021). The first type is *cues*, which are the objective elements of a situation (e.g., a lecture hall, whiteboards, fluorescent lighting). As an example, Saucier and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that free-response-nominated situations can be divided into categories that include physical locales (e.g., at work or at home), relational contexts (e.g., with friends or with family), activities (e.g., playing tennis or doing homework), and cognitive states (e.g., reminiscing or thinking ahead). As has been successfully demonstrated (e.g., Bedford-Petersen & Saucier, 2020; Conley & Saucier, 2019), these cues can be crossed with traits to examine how personality expression differs as a function of the interaction between the cues and the traits (e.g., “Let’s say you are around young children, how likely is it that you are cold and aloof?”; “Let’s say you are shopping, how likely is it that you enjoy taking risks?”).

The second type of situational information – *characteristics* – describe the psychological attributes of a situation. As early as the 1930s, researchers were distinguishing between

a more physical accounting of a situation (e.g., a forest at night) and a more psychological accounting of a situation (e.g., it is frightening; Koffka, 1935; Murray, 1936). Most recent taxonomies focus on this more psychological accounting of the situation (e.g., Brown et al., 2015; Parrigon et al., 2017; Rauthmann et al., 2014). For example, one of the most widely used situational taxonomies to date, the situational eight DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al., 2014), distinguishes between situations that involve duty (e.g., involving a job that needs to be done), intellect (e.g., involving the demonstration of one's intellectual capacity), adversity (e.g., involving being criticized), mating (e.g., involving potential romantic partners), positivity (e.g., involving playfulness or humor), negativity (e.g., involving stress or trauma), deception (e.g., involving a person who is hostile or deceitful), and sociality (e.g., involving the possibility of social interaction). As with cues, situational taxonomies that catalogue characteristics can be crossed with personality traits, either by using the broad description of the situation (e.g., "If you are in a social situation, how likely is it that you are outgoing?") or by selecting a subset of situations from each domain (e.g., "If you are in a situation where social interaction is possible, how likely is it that you are outgoing?"; "If you are in a situation where close personal relationships are present or have the potential to develop, how likely is it that you are outgoing?").

The third type of situational information involves grouping situations into *classes*, which describe situations at the broadest and most abstract level. Many older situational taxonomies address this type of information (e.g., Pervin, 1976; Price & Blashfield, 1975; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2001, 2002). As an example, Price and Blashfield (1975) used cluster analysis to group 455 settings identified in a small Midwestern town into 11 classes, including religious settings, high school settings, adult settings, family-oriented settings, and local business settings. As with cues and characteristics, classes can be crossed with personality traits to examine how personality expression is modulated by the class involved (e.g., "When you are in a religious setting, how likely is it that you are quiet?"; "When you are in an adult setting, how likely is it that you use others for your own ends?").

In sum, irrespective of one's preferred situational taxonomy, a fully crossed approach can be employed to examine how situations and traits interact. That said, researchers should keep in mind that a fully crossed approach to self-report items is quite inefficient compared with the other three approaches described here. Specifically, the number of items required to assess a construct of interest using the fully crossed approach is equal to the number of items devoted to assessing the construct multiplied by the number of situations. If one wanted to, for example, cross each item from the fourth edition of the Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2016) with the situational eight DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al., 2014), it would require the administration of 512 items (or approximately 1 hr of administration time). Efficiency is often less discussed in scale development (especially in comparison with validity and reliability), but its importance should not be understated. Not only is the length of a scale inextricably linked to the resources required to administer the scale, but research has suggested that response quality begins to degrade in as little as 10 minutes (Vannette, 2018). As such, for a fully crossed approach, shorter measures – such as the Dirty Dozen (described in Chapter 20) (Jonason & Webster, 2010), Short Dark Triad (Chapter 21) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), or Short Dark Tetrad (Chapter 21) (Paulhus et al., 2021) become invaluable.

The Applied Approach

With an *applied* (or what can also be called a *contextualized*) approach, researchers embed items within a single situation. For instance, imagine that the extraterrestrial personality psychologists discussed above were only interested in how manipulative, talkative, and callous a person is when they are at work. They could contextualize every single item within a work context (see Table 24.1). For reasons that we will discuss shortly, this approach is quite popular even on nonhypothetical planets (e.g., earth). As a matter of fact, three of the measures described in the present volume – the Machiavellian Personality Scale (Dahling et al., 2008; described in Chapter 11 of the present volume), the Corporate Personality Inventory (Fritzon et al., 2017; Chapter 16 of the present volume), and the Hogan Development Survey (Hogan & Hogan, 1997; Chapter 22 of the present volume) – are targeted primarily at organizational contexts.

One way to think about the advantages and disadvantages of the applied approach is in terms of the bandwidth–fidelity tradeoff (Cronbach & Gleser, 1957). A trait that is said to be high in bandwidth (e.g., extraversion) can predict a wide swathe of behaviors but does so with little precision. A trait that is said to be high in fidelity (e.g., talkativeness) can predict only a narrow subset of behaviors but does so with greater precision. The applied approach is essentially a high-fidelity, low-bandwidth approach to contextualizing survey items.

The approach is high fidelity in the sense that it allows researchers to maximize the prediction of personality expression and, by extension, behaviors in a specific situation of interest. It does this by collapsing information about a person’s traits and the situation into a single effect. If a researcher wanted to predict, for example, whether a person will try to manipulate their coworkers, knowing how manipulative the person tends to be at work would likely be more informative than knowing how manipulative they tend to be in general. This is because knowing how manipulative the person tends to be at work captures information about both their dispositional manipulateness and how that dispositional manipulateness is moderated by the situation (in this case, the workplace). In contrast, knowing how manipulative a person is in general only captures information about the person’s dispositional manipulateness.

The primary downside of the applied approach is that it has low situational bandwidth. By collapsing information about traits and situations into a single effect, the measure becomes wedded to a specific situation (or a specific set of situations). As a result, the measure is likely to make worse predictions if it is used in a situation for which it was not designed. By way of illustration, if a researcher wanted to predict whether a person will manipulate their family members, knowing how manipulative they tend to be at work would presumably result in worse predictions than knowing how manipulative they tend to be in general, because the variable is incorporating information about an irrelevant situation. As such, researchers should carefully consider whether their goal is to predict behaviors across a variety of situations or maximize prediction in a narrow set of situations. Only if their goal is the latter should researchers use an applied approach.

The Unsystematic Approach

The fourth approach to incorporating situations into self-report items is the *unsystematic approach* (Saucier & Conley, 2015), which involves tying some items to one situation, other items to a different situation, and some items to no situation at all (Table 24.1). It is, essentially, a mixture of the unsituated and fully crossed approach. Of the four approaches, the unsystematic approach is likely the most popular, being used to measure a wide array of psychological phenomena, including general personality traits (Lee & Ashton, 2018), aversive personality traits (Christie & Geis, 1970; Raskin & Hall, 1979; Paulhus et al., 2016), personality disorders (Krueger et al., 2012; Simms et al., 2011), socially desirable responding (Paulhus, 1991), morality (Graham et al., 2011), and sexism (Swim et al., 1995). A primary word to watch for when looking for situated items is “when” (e.g., “It’s hard to feel good about myself *when* I’m alone”; Pincus et al., 2009), but the words “at” (e.g., “I got in trouble a lot *at* school”; Simms et al., 2011), “in” (e.g., “Discrimination against women is no longer a problem *in* the United States”; Swim et al., 1995), and “with” (e.g., “I like to have sex *with* people I barely know”; Paulhus et al., 2016) are also common among situated items (see Saucier et al., 2007).

The unsystematic approach seems to rest on the assumption that feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires in certain *diagnostic situations* are more indicative of a given personality trait than those same feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and desires in other situations. For example, if the extraterrestrial personality psychologists described above believe being callous at home is more telling of a person’s dispositional levels of callousness than being callous at work (perhaps because people tend to show more compassion to members of their own family), they might want to situate the item measuring callousness within the home. As a nonhypothetical example, take the reverse-coded item “When people compliment me, I sometimes get embarrassed” from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1979; Chapter 3 of the present volume). Presumably, getting embarrassed *when one is complimented* is more telling of low levels of grandiose narcissism than simply being susceptible to embarrassment. Likewise, the reverse-coded item “Even if I were trying very hard to sell something, I wouldn’t lie about it” from the Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale (Levenson et al., 1995; Chapter 14 of the present volume) is presumably more indicative of low psychopathy, because it involves not lying *even when there is an opportunity for personal gain*. Conley and Saucier (2019) have, in fact, shown that items assessing low agreeableness (e.g., finding fault with others; being cold and aloof) are more indicative of low agreeableness when they are couched in situations that allow a person to gratify their desires.

The main issue with the unsystematic approach is that it can create hidden contingencies within measures of personality (Saucier & Conley, 2015). Said another way, the measurement of a trait can become implicitly linked to a given situation, while still being represented as a general measure of that trait. Take, for example, the extraversion domain of the Mini-IPIP (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006). The domain should assess temporally and spatially stable individual differences in extraversion, but fully half of the extraversion items specifically ask about a person’s beliefs and behaviors when they are at a party. It is, therefore, unclear how much of a person’s score reflects global extraversion versus a kind of party-specific extraversion. Not only can hidden contingencies such as this one result in researchers drawing inaccurate conclusions about the traits they are studying, but – as with the applied approach – they can result in measures

that are markedly worse at predicting behaviors in situations other than those encoded within the items.

Conclusions

To be clear, none of the approaches described above are necessarily superior to any other approach. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages that make it well suited for some purposes but not others.

The unsituated approach benefits from trying to have participants reflect upon their broad personality patterns, but it cannot tell us anything about the situation. As such, if a researcher is only interested in stable across-situation differences in personality, an unsituated approach may be useful. That said, researchers should be careful to avoid situation leakage, whereby items inadvertently become tied to specific situations. This requires taking steps to ensure participants are not being influenced by a salient present situation or a past set of situations.

The fully crossed approach, on the other hand, allows researchers to take an interactionist approach to personality (see Fleeson, 2004; Funder, 2006). This approach is, therefore, appropriate for researchers interested in examining how traits and situations interact to modulate personality expression and behavior. In doing so, researchers could answer some as-yet-unanswered questions, including whether there are rank-order differences in the expression of the Dark Triad traits across situations (e.g., are some people more narcissistic when they have been praised or complimented, whereas other people are more narcissistic when they have been criticized?) and whether certain situations are diagnostic of the Dark Triad traits (e.g., is manipulation more telling of a person's underlying levels of Machiavellianism when there is the opportunity for a person to achieve their goals?). The downside of the fully crossed approach is that it is (a) inefficient and (b) requires researchers to choose a situational taxonomy to cross the personality traits with, which is, as noted above, not an easy feat (see the section *The Fully Crossed Approach*).

The applied approach ties personality traits to a single situation. Consequently, this approach is useful for researchers who are only interested in how personality is expressed in a single situation. It is less useful when it comes to accounting for personality expression and behaviors in multiple situations or in situations that the personality items are not situated within. Researchers must therefore decide whether better prediction in the one situation is worth worse prediction in most other situations.

Lastly, by focusing on situations that are diagnostic of an underlying disposition, the unsystematic approach may be better able to assess certain aspects of personality. It may, however, suffer from hidden contingencies. We would urge researchers who adopt this approach to consider carefully whether the benefits of contextualizing the items in different ways outweighs the cost of inadvertently localizing the measure to a single situation.

In developing and choosing self-report measures of personality, researchers are faced with many decisions. There are decisions about content (e.g., whether it will be a personality-based or behavior-based measure; Lilienfeld, 1994), breadth (e.g., whether it will emphasize bandwidth or fidelity; Cronbach & Gleser, 1957), and length (e.g., whether it will prioritize efficiency or accuracy; Burisch, 1997). Here, we wanted to highlight another

choice researchers must make: how will the measure address situations. We hope by highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each option here, researchers will be better able to develop or select measures that serve their specific goals.

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