

**A Comparison Between
The Birkman Method[®]
And the
Clifton StrengthsFinder[®] 2.0**

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	2
II.	Development	2
III.	Measurement	3
IV.	Reliability	4
V.	Validity	4
	A. Construct Validity (Factor Structure)	4
	B. Content / Face Validity	5
	C. Criterion-Related Validity	5
VI.	Norms	6
VII.	Applications	6
VIII.	Behavioral Insights	7
IX.	Supporting Research	7
X.	Adherence to Professional Standards	8
XI.	Summary	8
XII.	References	9
XIII.	Author Bio	11

I. Introduction

The Birkman Method[®] and the Clifton StrengthsFinder[®] 2.0 are self-report online assessments. While The Birkman Method[®] is available directly, through a consultant, or through a company; the Clifton StrengthsFinder[®] is available using a unique access code provided within one of the two popular self-help books published by Gallup. The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with information about the similarities and differences between the two assessments.

II. Development

The Birkman Method[®]

The Birkman Method[®] (hereinafter “TBM”) was developed by organizational psychologist Roger Birkman and statistician Roy Mefferd. Mefferd was a professional colleague of H. J. Eysenck and also worked closely with Raymond Cattell, creator of the 16PF. Roger Birkman based the personality aspect of his instrument on the 16PF. The development of TBM took place within the workplace context and was conducted with psychometric rigor (reliability, validity). The history, development, reliability, and validity of TBM are publically available within the technical documentations and technical manual from Birkman International, Inc. (hereinafter “BI”; Birkman, Elizondo, Lee, Wadlington, & Zamzow, 2008; Larkey, 2002; Mefferd, 1972).

TBM was created from original research conducted in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Hundreds of structured employee interviews across various levels of work responsibility were conducted. Development was based on a variety of theoretical approaches, including: personality (i.e., Cattell, 1946), interests (i.e., Mosier & Kuder, 1949), and social perception (i.e., Birkman, 1951). Since its original development, Birkman’s research has continued to focus on understanding and improving interpersonal and organizational dynamics. As a result, TBM continues to address the complexities of the real workplace and the individuals who work within them. Extensive and detailed research is available to the public through BI (e.g., Birkman et al., 2008).

Birkman's unique contribution to assessment was to integrate "dual perceptions" into one assessment – *perception of others* and *perception of self*. Through this unique integration Birkman was able to describe key aspects of the interactions between individuals and groups. Continued research revealed behaviors that could be organized in such a way that prescriptive actions could be determined. The resulting output can be applied for coaching, team building, selection, leadership, and career management (Birkman et al., 2008).

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According to Gallup, publisher of the Clifton StrengthsFinder[®] 2.0 (hereinafter “CSF”), the CSF is based on a “40-year study on human strengths” (Rath, 2007). Gallup states that the development of the CSF was empirically done through a meta-analytic review of thousands of semi-structured interviews (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007). However, while referencing many large-scale studies (e.g., Harter, Hayes, & Schmidt, 2004), Gallup provides no documentation of these studies’ empirical findings that would support their claim of a 40-year study resulting in a concise taxonomy of 34 distinct “Signature Themes.”

The theory of CSF is based on a theory more commonly known as “Strength Theory” (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Clifton & Nelson, 1992; Hodges & Clifton, 2004). This theory is oriented toward positive psychology and is most well known for its link to two self-help bestselling books from Gallup. An individual is required to purchase one of these books before gaining access to the CSF. Strengths Theory purports “maximizing one’s strengths rather than trying to improve on one’s weaknesses” (Rath, 2007). While positive psychology itself has some quality research and the intentions are good in terms of contributing to the field of humanistic psychology, limited scope and support exist for Strengths Theory and that small amount lies primarily within the clinical arena. Upon an exhaustive literature review, no specific scientific evidence could be found for the utility of Strengths Theory within the workplace. After multiple requests to the publisher of the CSF, no specific referenced material on the theoretical basis of the CSF was made available.

III. Measurement

The Birkman Method[®]

TBM measures an individual’s personality, social perceptions, and occupational interests. Through empirical comparison studies, BI has established the convergent and divergent validity of TBM. In lay terms, this means TBM measures what it states it can measure. TBM’s personality scales are highly correlated with other assessments measure of the Big Five Factor Model of Personality (e.g., NEO; Costa & McCrae, 1985), and TBM’s interest scales are highly correlated with the scales of other occupational interest assessments (e.g., Self-Directed Search; Holland, 1994). TBM’s scales measuring the social perception of others are not directly comparable to similar assessments, because no such measure is found within other assessments.

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The CSF does not measure what Gallup states it measures. The authors of the CSF state that it measures strengths and talents. However, the CSF scales correlate with personality traits and have no relationship to specific abilities or skills (Asplund et al., 2007; Harter & Hodges, 2003; Rath, 2007; Schreiner, 2006). Further, the content of the CSF is specific to personality, values, and interests and has no relationship to abilities or skills. Through several meta-analytic studies (Barrick & Ryan, 2003), it has been established that the variance accounted for in work-related criteria (e.g., job performance, work satisfaction, retention) by personality, values, and interests is distinct from the variance accounted for by abilities or skills (e.g., reasoning, mechanical skill, physical skills). Therefore, Gallup including the name “Strengths” within the name of the CSF itself is a misnomer.

IV. Reliability

Both TBM and CSF demonstrate industry accepted internal consistency and test-retest reliabilities across all their respective scales (Asplund et al., 2007; Birkman et al., 2008). Thus, neither instrument has any issues to discuss as far as reliability is concerned.

V. Validity

A. Construct Validity (Factor Structure)

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The Five Factor Model of Personality, commonly known as the “Big Five,” is the most widely accepted personality factor structure among personality psychologists (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 2008). TBM’s personality scales align strongly with the personality concept of the Big Five. BI has empirically demonstrated TBM’s theoretical alignment through item response test theory analyses, classical test theory analyses, and cross-validated exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses at the item level. TBM also empirically aligns with sub-factors of the Big Five. Further, TBM directly measures occupational interests and links these to career choices along with management and leadership styles. Empirically, research from Birkman demonstrates TBM’s link to occupational interest constructs through correlation studies with stand-alone occupational interest instruments (e.g., Self-Directed Search; Holland, 1994).

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The CSF has not been subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis (hereinafter “CFA”). A CFA is a psychometric requirement when validating any construct model, or resulting theoretically based taxonomy of scales (Brown, 2006). Without a CFA, the claim of 34 distinct Signature Themes within the CSF is questionable, particularly when the assessment allows for its items to load on multiple themes/scales. Having items load on multiple scales is an ill-advised test development practice. Additionally Gallup claims that “the descriptors at the end of each item anchor opposite ends of a continuum” (Asplund et al., 2007) which would convey each item being uni-dimensional; yet, Gallup treats these items as multidimensional by using items on multiple scales. This inconsistency is cause for skepticism. If the items are one-dimensional, loading them on multiple scales is not appropriate; however, if the items are multidimensional, using a Likert-type response format is not appropriate.

Gallup claims 1) “the multiple use of some items does mean that a traditional CFA is problematic” and 2) “using a pair-wise hierarchical cluster analysis is a suitable alternative approach” (Asplund et al., 2007; Schreiner, 2006).

The facts are 1) a CFA can be conducted using a complex structure, and 2) a cluster analysis is no less problematic with items being used on multiple scales. A pair-wise cluster analysis only allows for the items of two scales to be compared at a time. These dyad factor comparisons cannot substitute for the CFA which examines the relationship of all the factors in a model at once through fitting the factor structure to the existing covariance matrix of the collected data (Child, 2006).

“Over-saturating” the underlying factor structure is accompanied by concern for multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007). Multicollinearity is over-fitting a model to data. Multicollinearity causes large standard errors and reduces the generalizability, stability, and predictive qualities of the respective model. Gallup claims that “multicollinearity is not a problem for the CSF instrument” (Asplund et al., 2007). Unfortunately, Gallup’s supporting internal study (Plake, 1999) is vaguely referenced and is no longer available nor are its empirical results. This lack of structural support creates skepticism around the CSF actually having 34 distinct one-dimensional themes, especially with theme-scale intercorrelations as high as 0.71 (Lopez, Hodges, Harter, 2005). This information is not reported in their most recent technical report (i.e., Asplund et al., 2007).

B. Content/Face Validity

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TBM has content and face validity because the items used in the assessment appear as measures of personality, social perception, and occupational interests. Additionally, through participant feedback surveys, individuals find TBM results to be very-to-extremely accurate over 80 percent of the time. The specific empirical results from these surveys are available to the public upon request.

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The CSF lacks content validity because its content resembles personality, values, and interests constructs as opposed to the strengths and talents that Gallup states the CSF measures. The CSF does contain a level of face validity, because participants can identify with the results as accurate in so far as the rank-order of their top strengths. However, this face validity has limited value considering the CSF theme rankings have no comparison or benchmark to other people. Additionally, while the two descriptors of each item are stated to be continuum opposites (Asplund et al., 2007), many items’ descriptor pairs appear to have no relation or a non-polar opposite relationship.

C. Criterion-Related Validity

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Until recent years Birkman did not place an emphasis on having documented criterion-related validity studies. There are multiple recent studies which are well-documented. The findings from these studies are favorable and available to the public through BI.

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Gallup discusses several criterion-related validity studies (i.e., Black, 2001; Connelly, 2002; Krueger, 2004) in their self-published trade magazine *Gallup Management Journal* in support for the CSF. Their specific empirical results are not readily available. Results are only discussed in general summary statements. The majority of these studies are based on case studies within organizations citing pre- and post-interventions with changes in percentages for turnover and employment engagement, which may or may not be due to the use of the CSF.

VI. Norms

The Birkman Method[®]

BI has up-to-date (2007) US norms stratified by age, gender, ethnicity, and occupation. Additionally, Birkman currently has country norms for 10 non-US nations. Specific normative studies are available to the public from BI (e.g., Birkman et al., 2008).

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The CSF has no norms because norms are not applicable due to the nature of the instrument. CSF results are relative to the individual only and not compared in any way to others. In short, an individual cannot be compared to anyone but him or herself. The most significant shortcoming for using relative information is that the true or absolute strength of the CSF's strengths/talents are not known.

VII. Applications

The Birkman Method[®]

For over 60 years, TBM has been widely used as a diagnostic tool for in-depth descriptive and prescriptive insights into employee behavior. The most extensive use of TBM has been within the workplace for coaching, leadership development, team building, career management, conflict resolution, and selection (Birkman et al., 2008). As a cautionary note, BI recommends that TBM be used for selection in coordination with a localized job-specific criterion-related validity study. Using any assessment for selection without a respective job-specific criterion-related study will, at best, produce modest outcomes and, at worst, result in costly litigation (McPhail, 2007).

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According to Gallup, the CSF is not to be used to compare people. The publisher states "Given that CSF feedback is provided to foster intrapersonal development, comparison across profiles of individuals is discouraged" (Asplund et al., 2007). The CSF is only to be used as interpretive data relative only to the individual taking the CSF. CSF results cannot be viewed in absolute terms, which means CSF interpretation is for intrapersonal applications only and inappropriate for interpersonal applications (e.g., coaching, leadership development, team building, career management, conflict resolution, and selection).

The remaining uses to be considered for the CSF are essentially self-discovery and self-development. The CSF's inability to provide comparative information, rather providing only information relative to that individual, hinders insights into even these applications. For example, an individual could be relatively high on a particular Signature Theme as compared to his/herself; yet, still be low in absolute terms (as compared to others). These relative CSF results provide irrelevant information and often mislead individuals in their pursuit to better understand themselves.

An additional obstacle with using the CSF results for any particular application is that the CSF primary report format includes only the examinee's top five themes ranked with no associated scores. According to Gallup, to obtain the examinee's other 29 themes and/or the scores of relative intensity; an additional fee of \$500 is required. A secondary additional fee of \$1,750 is required to obtain a complete interpretation of the CSF results and to learn how to fully utilize them.

VIII. Behavioral Insights

The Birkman Method[®]

TBM provides in-depth insight into individuals' personality, social perceptions, and interests as well as interpersonal and team insights. Not only do these insights provide deep, accurate description of the situation at hand; they also provide extensive diagnostic measures and prescriptive courses of action (Birkman et al., 2008).

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The CSF provides limited insight into behavior because 1) the CSF measures personality/interest constructs while describing them as talents and strengths, 2) the CSF provides only rank order data without any indication of intensity, and 3) the CSF provides no comparison relative to others that could provide useful interpersonal workplace applications.

IX. Supporting Research

The Birkman Method[®]

With Birkman's emphasis on research and development over its 60+ year history, the organization has been meticulous about saving item level data through the years. The active database has over one million records available which allows for extensive item level analysis in a variety of research areas (organizations, teams, careers, generations, culture, age, longitudinal studies, etc.). To demonstrate transparency and accuracy, Birkman collaborates with outside researchers/institutions, has an open-data research policy, and provides raw scale-level score data to clients upon request.

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The 2007 and most recent CSF technical report (Asplund et al., 2007) references many data sources and cites many other supporting secondary documents that are not readily available to the public. After making requests for this documentation, Gallup stated, "those other papers are regrettably no longer available." With a large portion of the primary CSF technical source for validation and theory referencing older unavailable technical reports and data sets rather than including the findings and results of these studies, a thorough review of the CSF's theoretical basis and psychometric properties is problematic. In summary, much evidence is left to relying on the reputation of the publisher.

X. Adherence to Professional Standards

The Birkman Method[®]

BI documentation provides detailed information describing statistics of TBM in regards to age, gender, ethnicity, occupational category, country, and language. These statistics demonstrate the legal adherence to the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 1978], workplace good practices of the *Principles for the Validation and Use of Personnel Selection Procedures* [Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), 2003] and educational good practices of the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* [American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), 1999]. Additionally, any selection application of TBM is supplemented with documentation that provides adverse impact information (Birkman et al., 2008).

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Gallup states that the CSF adheres to these same documents, excluding SIOP and EEOC; however, no supportive empirical evidence is provided by Gallup. Because the CSF cannot be used for making inter-person comparisons, using it for selection is not appropriate (Asplund, 2007); thus, the CSF does not need to adhere to the SIOP principles or EEOC guidelines. In 2007, Gallup stated that “cultural, age, and gender variables were to be reported in the future but were currently unavailable.” To date, no new information on these variables has been released. In addition, no adverse impact information has been made available to the public (Asplund et al., 2007).

XI. Summary

From a theoretical perspective, TBM and the CSF both have an extensive development history; yet, much of Gallup’s empirical studies justifying the theory behind the CSF are not available to the public. While BI demonstrates empirically that TBM measures personality, social perceptions, and occupational interests, Gallup does not provide sufficient evidence that the CSF measures strengths and/or talents.

From a psychometric standpoint, both BI and the Gallup provide the necessary reliability evidence for their respective assessments. Additionally, BI demonstrates sufficient empirical evidence for TBM as far as construct and content/face validity, yet only exhibits a few criterion-related validity studies. On the other hand, Gallup demonstrates limited content/face validity and exhibits several self-published criterion-related validity studies for the CSF, yet only provides summary statements of these studies’ findings without including specific empirical results. Additionally, the CSF lacks support for its factor structure and has limited support for its content/face validity.

From a utility standpoint, TBM has country-specific normative data, but the CSF does not due to the relative nature of the information it provides. TBM provides in-depth insights that can be used for many applications, yet CSF is not applicable to many applications due to the relative nature of the information it provides. TBM provides detailed documentation to the public; while, the CSF references many supporting studies but does not provide documentation of their empirical results.

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(* indicates that document is **not** publically available)

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XIII. Author Bio

Patrick L Wadlington, Ph.D., serves as the Director of Research and Development at Birkman International focusing on psychological measurement and test development. He leads the R&D staff in psychometric services, research initiatives, and client-specific customized solutions. He researches and develops innovative quantitative methods for cognitive, social perception, occupational interest, and personality test development and validation. Dr. Wadlington specializes in integrating classical, item response, and measurement decision test theory to produce web-based computer-adapted testing instruments for personnel selection and organizational development purposes. Additionally, he is responsible for conducting, presenting, and publishing psychological research for applied and academic audiences.



Peripheral to the workplace arena, his research themes include developing educational instruments to measure learning disabilities within children and adults, to obtain optimal alignment between teachers' teaching styles and children's learning styles, and to increase job satisfaction and retention of teachers in the public school system.

Patrick received his Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology with a minor in Quantitative Psychology/Psychometrics as well as Labor and Industrial Relations from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). He also received his Masters in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at UIUC and his Bachelors in Psychology at Louisiana State University.

Patrick is an active member of numerous professional organizations and a regular presenter at several international conferences each year. These organizations include: Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), American Psychological Association (APA), Association for Psychological Science (APS), Association of Test Publishers (ATP), Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), and Association for Research in Personality (ARP). In addition to presentations and panel discussions, Dr. Wadlington has published numerous white papers and articles in psychological and educational peer-reviewed journals including, but not limited: Academic Exchange Quarterly, Journal of Management Information Systems, and Reading Improvement.