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Associations among the Big Five, emotional responses, and coping with acute stress

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Abstract

This study examined whether and how McCrae and Costa's Big Five personality dimensions (N, E, O, A, and C) are associated with stress and coping processes, including cognitive appraisals, subjective reactions, use of coping strategies, and task performance. Participants were 97 male and female university undergraduates who completed an abbreviated version of the NEO-PI prior to preparing and presenting a speech to an audience. Immediately after their speeches, participants reported their emotional reactions and the coping strategies used during the task. Two independent coders rated participants' speech task performances. Correlational analyses indicated reliable associations between the five personality dimensions and many of the study's variables. Findings generally support previous research into the association between the Big Five and stress and coping, and provide new information about the association between the Big Five and both appraisal and performance variables. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Personality variables have a long history of influencing stress, coping, and health. Specifically, research has linked personality variables such as Type A (e.g. Friedman, 1991), hostility (e.g. Suls & Wan, 1993), personal or perceived control (e.g. Lefcourt, 1992), optimism (e.g. Scheier & Carver, 1992), repressive coping (e.g. Baggett, Saab, & Carver, 1996), and belief in a just world (e.g. Lerner & Miller 1978; Tomaka & Blascovich, 1994) to stress- and health-related outcomes.

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Researchers have also found associations between personality and longevity. For example, several researchers have linked Type A behavior to death from coronary heart disease (e.g. Friedman & Rosenman, 1974; Glass, 1977; Smith & Williams, 1992).

Another personality variable that has predicted longevity is conscientiousness. Specifically, Friedman et al. (1995a, 1995b) found that high-conscientious children, especially males, were approximately 30% less likely to die annually (all cause mortality) than low-conscientious children. Analyses of potential mediators of this effect revealed that injury risk, smoking, drinking, and obesity did not account for conscientiousness' effect on longevity. The authors have suggested that other psychosocial factors (e.g. the individual's ability to maintain social support networks), may account for conscientiousness' effect on health and longevity. Surprisingly, the authors found cheerfulness (i.e. optimism), which shares many characteristics with both extraversion and agreeableness, to be *inversely* related to longevity in this sample.

Friedman et al.'s research represents a shift in research emphasis from narrow, unidimensional personality traits to broader, more comprehensive conceptualisations that frequently suggest five major personality dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Hershberger, Plomin, & Pedersen, 1995; Tellegen, 1985; Watson, Clark, & Harkness, 1994). A consequence of the traditional focus on narrower traits is that only a handful of studies have examined how the 'Big Five' relate to stress- and emotion-related reactions (Gallagher, 1990)—reactions that could help explain the association between these dimensions and health outcomes (Suls & Rittenhouse, 1990). Accordingly, the present study examined how McCrae and Costa's (1986) Big Five personality dimensions relate to stress- and emotion-related reactions during an acute stressor.

McCrae and Costa conceptualise personality along five broad dimensions, including emotional stability or neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. *Neuroticism* (N) refers to a tendency to experience anxiety, tension, self-pity, hostility, impulsivity, self-consciousness, irrational thinking, depression, and low self-esteem (John, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992), whereas *extraversion* (E) refers to a tendency to be positive, assertive, energetic, social, talkative, and warm (John, 1989; McCrae & John, 1992; Watson & Clark, 1997). *Openness* (O) refers to a tendency to be curious, artistic, insightful, flexible, intellectual, and original (John, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992), whereas *agreeableness* (A) refers to the tendency to be forgiving, kind, generous, trusting, sympathetic, compliant, altruistic, and trustworthy (John, 1989; McCrae & John, 1992). Finally, *conscientiousness* (C) refers to a tendency to be organized, efficient, reliable, self-disciplined, achievement-oriented, rational, and deliberate (John, 1989; McCrae & John, 1992).

1.1. *The Big Five and coping*

Investigations of the links between the Big Five and stress-related processes (e.g. Hooker, Frazier, & Monahan, 1994; McCrae & Costa, 1986) have traditionally focused on how these dimensions relate to the use of various coping strategies. In general, coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to prevent, manage, or alleviate stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although it includes many activities, most coping strategies reflect efforts to improve a troubled situation, such as making a plan or taking action (i.e. problem-focused coping), or efforts to regulate emotional distress, such as seeking out others for emotional support or cognitively minimizing a situation's severity (i.e. emotion-focused coping).

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