



Higher-order factors of the Big Five predict conformity: Are there neuroses of health?

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Abstract

In a university sample ($n=245$) and a community sample ($n=222$), we replicate the higher-order factor solution for the Five Factor Model (Big Five) reported by Digman (Digman, J. M. (1997). Higher-order factors of the Big Five. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 1246–1256). We present a biologically predicated model of these two personality factors, relating them to serotonergic and dopaminergic function, and we label them *Stability* (Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) and *Plasticity* (Extraversion and Openness). Based on this model, we hypothesize that Stability will positively predict conformity (as indicated by socially desirable responding) and that Plasticity will negatively predict conformity. A structural equation model indicates that conformity is indeed positively related to Stability (university sample: $\beta=0.98$; community sample: $\beta=0.69$; $P<0.01$ for both) and negatively related to Plasticity (university sample: $\beta=-0.48$, $P<0.07$; community sample: $\beta=-0.42$, $P<0.05$). These findings suggest that there are pros and cons of conformity, such that the most thorough conformists will tend to be stable but also rigid, less able to adjust to novelty or change. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Are there perhaps—a question for psychiatrists—neuroses of health? (Nietzsche, 1886/1966a, p. 26).

1. Introduction

The reliability and validity of the standard Five Factor Model of personality (commonly known as the Big Five) have been reasonably established (Costa & McCrae, 1992a; Digman, 1990;

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McCrae & John, 1992). However, it is not yet obvious that five factors constitute the simplest and broadest possible level of personality description (Becker, 1999; Digman, 1997), in part because the five traits have consistently been found to be intercorrelated (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1992b; Goldberg, 1993; Norman, 1963). Digman (1997) assessed the pattern of correlations reported in 14 studies employing various Big Five instruments and both self- and observer-ratings, and he demonstrated the emergence of two consistent higher-order factors, which he labelled *Alpha* and *Beta*. Digman suggested that Alpha, incorporating Emotional Stability, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, might be regarded as a socialization factor, while Beta, consisting of Extraversion and Openness, might be considered a factor of personal growth. Following Becker (1999), we will refer to the higher-order factors, or metatraits, as the *Big Two*.¹

The discovery of a consistent higher-order factor solution for the Big Five is an important observation of statistical regularity. Two relevant questions, following this discovery, are how these higher-order factors should be interpreted and whether consideration of them can advance our understanding of personality. To address these questions, we first offer a theoretical model of the Big Two, informed by neuropsychology, neural network modelling theory, and psychology of myth and religion. Then we present two studies, designed (1) to assess the replicability of the Big Two factor structure, and (2) to determine if this structure is meaningfully related to social conformity, as our theoretical model suggests.

1.1. *What might the Big Two represent?*

Digman's interpretation of the Big Two as socialization and personal growth allows him to associate these factors intelligibly with constructs drawn from classic theories of personality. However, the terms "socialization" and "personal growth" suggest outcomes rather than basic tendencies or traits. This connotation is problematic, first, because the heritability of the Big Five traits ranges from approximately 0.40 to 0.50 (Bouchard, 1994; Reimann, Angleitner, & Strelau, 1997) and second, because aspects of the Big Two structure appear very early in life.

Digman himself observed that there are almost certainly individual differences in the ease with which people are socialized, resulting from "genetic endowment, prenatal, or early life circumstances" (Digman, 1997, p. 1250), and the tendency to undergo personal growth seems likely to be similarly influenced. Abe and Izard (1999) recently demonstrated that 18-month-olds' facial expressions of emotion in the strange situation paradigm (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) predicted parent-ratings of Big Five traits at 3.5 years, in a manner entirely consistent with the Big Two model. Negative emotional expression predicted Emotional Stability, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, while strong positive emotional expression predicted Extraversion and Openness. Because the Big Two appear to reflect traits that are inherited or instantiated very early in ontogeny, we feel that a more basic, biologically predicated, interpretation of the Big Two might be justified.

¹ Though Becker's Big Two factors of *mental health* and *behavior control* at first glance appear theoretically distinct from Digman's *socialization* and *personal growth*, an examination of his circumplex model of personality (Becker, 1999) reveals that factors of *social adaptation* and *self actualization*, bearing obvious similarity to Digman's constructs, appear obliquely in his model, and he notes specifically that he rotated the results of his initial factor analysis 45° to obtain the mental health and behavior control factors.

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