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A questionnaire for measuring the Big Five in late childhood

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Abstract

A study is presented which aims at measuring the Big Five factors in late childhood through self-report as well as parent and teacher ratings. First, several factor analyses examined self-report and teacher and parent ratings on a 65-item questionnaire developed for assessing the Big Five. Five clear factors emerged from these analyses conducted on self-report and other ratings of elementary and junior high school children. Factors showed a high degree of congruence. Self-reports, parent and teacher ratings resulted moderately although significantly convergent. Second, as a validation step, the Big Five factors were used as concurrent predictors of academic achievement and of Externalizing and Internalizing problematic behavior syndromes. Intellect/Openness and Conscientiousness resulted as important predictors of Academic Achievement. Externalizing problems were associated to low Conscientiousness and low Emotional Stability, Internalizing problems to low Emotional Stability. Finally, also the correlations of the Big Five factors with the dimensions of Sybil Eysenck's Junior Personality Questionnaire further corroborated the construct validity of the questionnaire. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

Keywords: Big Five; Childhood; Questionnaire; Self-report; Teacher ratings; Parent ratings

1. Introduction

1.1. The Big Five model

In recent years, an impressive body of research has accumulated supporting a five-factor structure to describe personality (the so-called "Big Five"), confirming the early structure proposed by Fiske (1949), Tupes and Christal (1961), and Norman (1963). These five robust factors emerged irrespective of factor analytical techniques (Goldberg, 1990), rating procedures

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(Botwin & Buss, 1989; Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981; McCrae & Costa, 1987), language (DeRaad, Perugini, Hrebickova, & Szarota, 1998). Although there are some divergences among various authors regarding the interpretation of each factor (see Block, 1995, Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; John, 1990; John, Angleitner, & Ostendorf, 1988; McCrae, 1990), there is substantial agreement on using the following labels for these five factors: I. Extraversion, II. Agreeableness, III. Conscientiousness, IV. Neuroticism, and V. Intellect (or Openness to Experience).

The Big Five are the meeting point of two traditions of research: the lexicographic and the factorial tradition. While lexical studies, moving from the "sedimentation hypothesis" (e.g. Cattell, 1943), examined the emergence of the five factors through trait terms (adjective, nouns, verbs) extracted from the vocabulary, factorial studies examined the emergence of the same factors through the analysis of the descriptive phrases contained in personality questionnaires. A number of studies suggested the plausibility of reducing to the five factors the dimensions measured by several questionnaires such as Cattell's 16PF, Guilford's GZTS, Eysenck's EPQ, and Comrey's CPS (Krug & Johns, 1986; McCrae, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1985; Ostendorf & Angleitner, 1992).

Notwithstanding the impressive number of research studies that confirmed its validity and replicability, the Five Factor Model (FFM) has recently come under severe criticism (Block, 1995; Church & Burke, 1994; McAdams, 1994; Parker, Bagby, & Summerfeldt, 1993; Pervin, 1994). For some of the critics, the answers are clearly dependent on further research. With regard to other issues, some counterarguments have been raised by FFM supporters (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1999). We believe the Five Factors represent useful constructs especially for their practical utility; they provide a common language for self report and other ratings (see McCrae & Costa, 1987), and can help in reducing the distance among different informants and in enhancing interrater convergency.

1.2. Measuring the Big Five in childhood and adolescence

As recently noted by Shiner (1998), there is a substantial increase of studies exploring personality structure in middle childhood and early adolescence. A main problem of these studies, however, is in the absence of a common framework for interpreting the results. There is no agreement on the nature and the number of dimensions needed to describe personality. While the model developed by Cattell comprises 16 factors (see Coan & Cattell, 1966), the model developed by Sybil Eysenck comprises only three dimensions (Eysenck, 1975). Concluding her review, Shiner (1998) proposed a theoretical taxonomy for the classification of personality dimensions in middle childhood. This taxonomy comprised four general dimensions which can be traced back to four of the Big Five: (1) Positive Emotionality (corresponding to Extraversion); (2) Negative Emotionality (corresponding to Neuroticism); (3) Aggressiveness versus Prosocial Tendencies (corresponding to Agreeableness); and (4) Constraint (corresponding to Conscientiousness). In light of these considerations, we may wonder if the Big Five Model can be extended from adult personality to children's personality, serving thus as a reference structure for study comparison and results generalizability (see in this regard Mervielde & De Fruyt, 1999, 2000).

Although many studies have investigated the Big Five in adulthood, researchers only recently began to study the Big Five in late childhood. Digman and Inouye (1986) found five factors very similar to the "adult" Big Five in factor analyses of teacher ratings of about 500 junior high school children, using 43 adjectives scales. Mervielde (Mervielde, 1994; Mervielde, Buyst, & De

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