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States reflecting the Big Five dimensions

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Abstract

Two studies explored the possibility that the Big Five dimensions, which extensive research has shown underlie most human traits, also provide a structure for transitory states. A confirmatory factor analysis showed an acceptable fit between responses on measures of transitory states and the Big Five dimensions. Further, the state measures of the Big Five dimensions had good internal consistency. As one would expect, each Big Five state was more related to the corresponding Big Five trait than to other Big Five traits. As expected on the basis of previous research, higher levels of state surgency were associated with higher levels of state positive mood, and higher levels of state emotional stability were associated with lower levels of state negative mood. Unexpectedly, state conscientiousness was also highly associated with state positive mood. Because one would expect states to be changeable, the second study used an experimental manipulation to attempt to change levels of the Big Five States. All states changed in the expected direction; however, only the changes in state surgency, agreeableness, and openness were statistically significant. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. States reflecting the Big Five dimensions

A number of theories of human behavior (Allport, 1961; Buss & Craik, 1983; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993; Wakefield, 1989) emphasize the hierarchical organization of human functioning. According to these theories general and enduring characteristics are at the top of the hierarchy and more specific or passing characteristics are at the bottom of the hierarchy. These

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characteristics at the bottom of the hierarchy are generally viewed as being less descriptive of an individual and as being prompted by certain situations or cognitive processes.

A related conceptualization of human characteristics is their classification into traits or states (e.g. Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). In a hierarchical model, traits are conceptualized as higher-level and enduring characteristics, while states are lower level and less enduring characteristics. Trait anxiety, for instance, disposes individuals to feel chronic anxiety, while state anxiety is a situationally linked experience of anxiety that passes when the situation is no longer present (Spielberger & Sydeman 1994). A similar differentiation can be made between state and trait anger (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994). Watson et al. (1988) studied characteristic (general) positive and negative affect and state (momentary) positive and negative mood. As one would expect, ratings of characteristic positive and negative affect were relatively unchanged over the course of an eight-week period, while ratings of momentary positive and negative mood showed some consistency, but more variability than characteristic affect. Similarly, Usala and Hertzog (1991) found that state anxiety was less stable over time than trait anxiety. Thus, one might conclude that these mood-related states are the result of characteristic affect interacting with situational influences.

Characteristics such as states, which may be placed at the bottom of a hierarchical conceptualization of functioning, may be related to important outcomes. For example, state anxiety has been found to be associated with performance (Catanzano, 1996; Menzel & Carrell, 1994) and cognitive dissonance (Menasco & Hawkins, 1978). State mood that has been manipulated on the positive mood dimension has been found to be associated with helping behavior (Isen and Levine, 1972; Isen & Simmonds, 1978), memory (Teasdale & Barnard, 1993), perception (Forgas & Bower, 1987), and judgement (Forgas, 1995).

State anxiety, state anger, and state positive and negative mood have been investigated. However, relatively little research has focused on other types of states. Five dimensions, surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness, seem to underlie many characteristic traits (Goldberg, 1993; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999). These Big Five dimensions have been identified in many factor analytic studies (Costa & McCrae, 1992, 1996; Digman, 1990; John, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999), including cross-cultural studies (McCrae & Costa, 1997a; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996). Typically these studies have found that if individuals rate themselves or others on a wide variety of trait descriptors, five factors emerge. Different researchers have applied somewhat different terms to these factors, e.g. using the term “extraversion” instead of “surgency,” low “neuroticism” instead of “emotional stability,” and “intellect” or “imagination” instead of “openness” (Goldberg, 1992; Saucier & Goldberg, 1996).

The consistent finding that many personality traits group into five dimensions might be in part due to biological predispositions to organize responses into these dimensions. Research showing moderate heritability of the Big Five traits and facets of the Big Five traits (e.g. Jang, McCrae, Angleitner, Riemann & Livesley, 1998; Loehlin, McCrae, Costa & John, 1998) supports the possibility of such a biological predisposition.

In a review of research on the Big Five dimensions, John and Srivastava (1999) pointed out that as well as being important in understanding the organization of human functioning, the Big Five dimensions are related to important life outcomes. For example, research with adolescents has found that low agreeableness and low conscientiousness predict juvenile delinquency; neuroticism

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