



Does the big five predict learning approaches?

Li-fang Zhang*

Department of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong

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Abstract

The present study examines if the big five personality traits can statistically predict learning approaches. Four hundred and twenty (286 female and 134 male) university students from Shanghai, PR China volunteered to participate in the study. The participants responded to the NEO Five-Factor Inventory and the Study Process Questionnaire. A cross-examination of the results from zero-order correlation, *t*-tests, multivariate analysis, and multiple-regression procedures indicated that the big five personality traits predict learning approaches to a certain degree. In this prediction, the conscientiousness and openness traits contributed the most in accounting for the differences in students' learning approaches. Conscientiousness is a good predictor for both the deep and the achieving approaches. Openness significantly predicted the deep approach to learning. Neuroticism is a good predictor for the surface approach to learning, whereas the agreeableness trait clearly predicted a learning approach that is not achieving. Finally, no distinct pattern was identified regarding the relationship of extraversion to any of the learning approaches.

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1. Introduction

One of the major achievements in psychology in the twentieth century is the finding of the big five personality traits. As Tokar (1995) has stated, the five-factor model is one of the most prominent and heuristic models of personality structure. Indeed, many scholars (e.g., Goldberg, 1993; Taylor & MacDonald, 1999) have asserted that the big five personality traits model accounts for a large amount of the variability in personality.

The five-factor model is the product of several decades of factor analytic research focusing on trait personality. According to Taylor and MacDonald (1999), the model was originally put forward by

* Tel./fax: +852-2859-2522.

E-mail address: lfzhang@hkucc.hku.hk (L.-f. Zhang).

Galton (1884) and had its roots in the 'lexical hypothesis' (see also Goldberg, 1993). Early in 1981, Goldberg (also see Antonioni, 1998) contended that the five dimensions of rating personality could serve as a framework for many theories of personality at the time, including the views of Cattell (1957), Norman (1963), Eysenck (1970), and Guilford (1975). Earlier empirical work (e.g., Fiske, 1949; Tupes & Christal, 1992) suggested that there existed five fairly strong and recurrent personality factors, these are surgency (termed as 'extraversion' by many other scholars), agreeableness, dependability (including such dimensions as responsibility and conscientiousness), emotional stability, and culture. More recent empirical investigations have demonstrated a strong existence of the five personality domains (e.g., Digman, 1994; Goldberg, 1990) that have been given slightly different names. These five personality dimensions are neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness.

Neuroticism (N) is the opposite of emotional stability. People high on the N scale tend to experience such negative feelings as emotional instability, embarrassment, guilt, pessimism, and low self-esteem. People scoring high on the Extraversion scale tend to be sociable and assertive. Extraverts also prefer to work with people. Openness (O) is characterized by such attributes as open-mindedness, active imagination, preference for variety, and independence of judgment. Also, people who are high on the O scale tend to be less conservative and traditional. People high on the Agreeableness scale are fundamentally altruistic, sympathetic, and readily helpful. Also, they value and respect other people's beliefs and conventions. Individuals who are high on the Conscientiousness scale are characterized as being purposeful, strong-willed, responsible, and trustworthy (see Costa & McCrae, 1992 for more details).

The five-factor model has attracted the attention of many personality psychologists. The work of Costa and McCrae (1985, 1992) is one of the most noteworthy. The most acclaimed work done by Costa and McCrae is their NEO Personality Inventory (1992). According to Taylor and MacDonald (1999), the NEO Personality Inventory has not only demonstrated exceptional psychometric properties, but also been successful in accommodating constructs already assessed by existing measures of personality traits. Among these measures are the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs & Myers, 1988) and the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970). Furthermore, the NEO-PI also has been proved to be associated with the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964), one of the most well-known assessment tools in the study of personality. Furthermore, the NEO-PI also has been successfully utilized in the investigation of the relationships of personality to other important variables such as creativity and divergent thinking (e.g., McCrae, 1987), achievement motivation (e.g., Busato, Prins, Elshout, & Hamaker, 1999), and career decision making (e.g., Shafer, 2000).

A short version of the NEO Personality Inventory is the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which also has been proved to reliably assess the five personality dimensions (e.g., Courneya & Hellsten, 1998; Saucier, 1998). The inventory has not only demonstrated good internal validity (e.g., Furnham, 1997; Holden & Fekken, 1994), but also obtained good external validity with such inventories as Holland's (1994) Self-Directed Search (e.g., Fuller, Holland, & Johnston, 1999; Tokar, 1995; Tokar & Swanson, 1995), Eysenck, Wilson, and Jackson's Eysenck Personality Profiler (e.g., Muris, Schmidt, Merckelbach, & Rassin, 2000), Gough's (1997) Adjective Check List (Parker, 1997; Parker & Stumpf, 1998), and the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (e.g., Furnham, 1996a; Parker & Stumpf, 1998). A PsycInfo search (covering the period between 1992 and 2001) with the input key words being "Five Factor Inventory" resulted in hundreds of

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