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Engagement and Self-Control: Superordinate dimensions of Big Five traits

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Abstract

Two separate factor analyses of Big Five traits have independently identified two higher-order factors. These factors have been interpreted quite differently by their respective researchers. This conceptual paper posits the superordinate personality dimensions of Engagement (engaged versus disengaged) and Self-Control as the common elements of these higher-order factors. A review and integration of existing research shows that Engagement traits decline and Self-Control traits increase during adulthood. The Big Five traits of the Engagement dimension are each empirically related to positive affect, academic engagement in the form of classroom participation, benefiting from major life challenges, sensation seeking, and the construct of inspiration. Self-Control traits are negatively related to variables such as problematic work-related behaviors and job performance, personality disorders, negative affect, and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. © 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The Five Factor Model of personality has attained a prominent status in the effort to identify the underlying structure of personality traits. The five factors (Extraversion, Agreeableness,

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Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Openness to Experience) have been found in numerous personality inventories and are widely applicable cross-culturally (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Two separate and independent factor analyses of the Big Five, using different types of data, have identified two higher-order factors. Results of these analyses suggest an underlying two-dimensional structure of personality traits. However, these higher-order factors have been interpreted quite differently by their respective factor analysts. The present conceptual paper addresses the question: What are the essential elements of these two fundamental dimensions?

Digman (1997) factor analyzed sets of factor correlations from 14 studies of Big Five traits. All 14 studies produced five primary factors that were the standard Big Five. Exploratory factor analyses indicated two—and only two—factors were evident in the 14 studies. This stable structure was present despite the wide diversity of data used. Methods involved teachers' ratings, personality inventories, peer ratings, and self-ratings. The data were also based on varied populations of participants: first- and second-grade children, mostly of Asian ancestry; early adolescents; university students in Germany and Hong Kong; and mature adults in the United States. The two factors found in the exploratory factor analyses comprised Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability (labeled Alpha), and Extraversion and Intellect/Openness (labeled Beta).

Mean loadings on the five factors were then correlated across the nine adult studies and across the five studies that were based on children and early adolescents. Several models were then tested by confirmatory factor analyses. Across all 14 studies, the two most stringent models yielded a comparative fit index (CFI) ranging from .957 to 1.000 (Model 1) and .981 to 1.000 (Model 2). A CFI value greater than .90 is considered an excellent fit (Bentler, 1990). Thus, the two higher-order factors appear to be robust across a wide range of participants.

Digman (1997) noted these two higher-order factors are necessarily abstract and very broad. He interpreted factor Alpha, which involves the common elements of Agreeableness (versus Hostility), Conscientiousness (versus Heedlessness), and Emotional Stability (versus Neuroticism), as a factor that “represents the socialization process itself” (p. 1249). In this regard, a variety of personality theories from psychoanalysis to behaviorism have emphasized the development of impulse restraint and conscience and the reduction of hostility, aggression, and neurotic defense. Factor Beta was interpreted as personal growth versus personal constriction, a dimension emphasized by personal growth theorists. Thus, the combination of Extraversion, with descriptors such as outgoing, adventurous, and active, and Openness to Experience, with descriptors of creative, imaginative, and open to new ideas and change, is seen as involving personal growth, “an enlargement of self by a venturesome encounter with life and its attendant risks, by being open to all experience, especially new experience” (Digman, 1997, p. 1250).

Digman's (1997) analyses were based on factor correlations rather than item ratings. More recently, Carroll (2002) conducted an extensive hierarchical analysis of teacher ratings of 43 characteristics on 499 early adolescents, a data set previously analyzed by Digman and Inouye (1986) (and not included in the 14 studies analyzed by Digman, 1997). Block (2001) noted the advantage of Carroll's method of analysis that included individual items because it allowed identification of the particular personality traits associated with the resultant higher-order factors. In Carroll's procedure, factor analysis of the initial, first-order personality traits of the participants resulted in the standard five second-order FFM factors. The correlations among the five factors of the FFM were then factored, producing two uncorrelated third-order “superfactors”.

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