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The role of the Big Five in appraisals

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Abstract

Using Hierarchical Linear Modelling, this study examined individual differences in appraisal styles. Data were collected using Ecological Momentary Assessment from police officers in Singapore who participated while on their work-routines. Average levels of 11 appraisals showed significant individual-difference variability. The Big Five personality traits were examined for whether they accounted for these individual difference variations. Only Neuroticism and Conscientiousness significantly explained individual-difference variability in appraisals. Also, replicating past studies, all Big Five traits except for Openness correlated significantly with daily emotions.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies of appraisal theories have shown that different people have different emotional reactions to the same event because they make varying appraisals of the same event

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(e.g., Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). The role of personality to appraisals has been discussed for some time. For example, Lazarus (1991, p. 138) spoke of appraisal styles, which he referred to as ‘dispositions to appraise ongoing relationships with the environment consistently in one way or another.’ Also, Roseman (2001) proposed specific appraisal styles, such as an anger-prone style and a guilt-prone style, in which events are chronically appraised in ways that increase the likelihood of anger and of guilt experiences, respectively. Despite this interest in personality as affecting appraisals, as far as we know, there are no published data on personality–appraisal relationships.

The idea that individuals may vary in terms of the appraisal mode to which they are chronically prone is not unique to appraisal theories but is a fundamental assumption in numerous other areas. For example, individual differences in social-cognitive processes, such as entity versus incremental processing (Dweck, 1986) and promotion versus prevention processing (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997), have been related to several psychological processes. Individual differences have been found in attribution styles that predict depression (Robins, 1988) and aggression (Dodge, 1980). Further, the voluminous literatures on topics such as self-esteem, stereotypic processes, and interpersonal attraction, just to name a few, have all examined individual differences in how the self and social stimuli are appraised.

However, data for personality–appraisal relationships is difficult to come by in appraisal theories. Thus, our first major objective was to show that appraisal-styles, as described by Lazarus (1991), exhibit cross-individual variability. We sampled a wide range of appraisals commonly examined in appraisal theories and selected 10 appraisal dimensions (Pleasantness, Goal Conduciveness, Effort, Perceived Control, Certainty, Agency-Self, Agency-Others, Agency-Circumstances, Unfairness, and Moral Violation), which are some of the main appraisals in major appraisal theories (cf. Mauro, Sato, & Tucker, 1992; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; see Appendix for definitions). Also, we added a new appraisal, Relationship-Involvement, to test predictions about appraisals of the social environment. Our approach was to assess appraisals for an extended period of time and to examine whether the average levels of appraisals across time differ between participants.

Our second major objective was to examine whether such variability correlates with the Big Five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1985) – Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Conscientiousness (C), Agreeableness (A), and Openness (O). There are theoretical reasons to expect relationships between N and E and appraisal-styles given the unique cognitive biases and thinking styles associated with these traits. Further, to the extent that emotions are associated with specific appraisal patterns, N and E should be associated with specific chronic appraisal styles since these traits are related to chronic affectivity (cf. Cote & Moskowitz, 1998).

High N individuals are more likely, than low N individuals, to perceive daily stressors as unpleasant (Kling, Ryff, Love, & Essex, 2003). This suggests that N should be negatively related to Pleasantness. They are also more likely to perceive daily stressors as harder to cope with (Guntbert, Cohen, & Armeli, 1999), suggesting that N should be positively related to Effort and Agency-Circumstances and negatively related to Perceived Control. Such construal of events should be associated with increased perceived difficulty of attaining goals and hence a negative association with Goal-Conduciveness was expected. Perceptions that events are less controllable suggest less perceived Certainty of the future for high N persons. Also, N correlates positively with seeing unfairness in moral situations (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005) and hence we also expected positive relationships with Unfairness and Moral Violation.

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