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Measuring Big-Five personality dimensions with the implicit association test – Implicit personality traits or self-esteem?

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Abstract

We examined whether the implicit association test (IAT) could serve as an implicit measure of the dimensions of the Five-Factor Model of Personality. In the first study ($N = 84$) IAT-effects of the Big-Five (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness) were found and the IAT showed good internal consistencies and convergent validity with an explicit Big-Five questionnaire (NEO-FFI-30). In a second study ($N = 50$), conducted to determine the overlap of the personality-IATs with implicit self-esteem, the Extraversion and the Neuroticism-IAT were shown to correlate with a self-esteem-IAT only moderately.

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1. Introduction

According to the current consensus among structurally oriented scientists in personality research personality can be described best through the dimensions of the Five-Factor Model of

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Personality, the so called Big-Five – Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness (Digman, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992 for an overview).

To measure the Big-Five, adjective based procedures (e.g. Goldberg, 1992) and phrase based questionnaires (e.g. Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993) have been used. These two kinds of Big-Five measures can be characterized as explicit measures, which require a self-report by the respondent and thus measure aspects of the person's explicit self-concept of personality. One aspect that threatens validity of explicit measurement tools is the limited accessibility of information about one's personality or self-concept from memory. Furthermore, it has been criticised that explicit measures – which may also be termed direct measures according to Fazio and Olson (2003) – can easily be distorted by participants (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). In particular, self-presentational strategies and faking tendencies due to socially desirable responding have turned out to be critical. Thus Borkenau and Ostendorf (1992), e.g. showed that socially desirable responding is a problem in the measurement of the Big-Five.

To summarize, explicit measurements are subject to various limitations and therefore it is desirable to search for measurement tools that are less susceptible to distortions. A different approach might be to assess the constructs of interest in an implicit way (for an overview of implicit measurement methods see Fazio & Olson, 2003). The implicit measurement mode can be characterized by features like automatic, intuitive and uncontrolled responding (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000) and consequently can be expected to be more robust against the distortions mentioned above. One of the most often used and best known implicit measurement tools is the implicit association test (IAT; Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT is a reaction time based classification task, measuring associations between concepts by contrasting reaction times from two different combined response tasks.

In the last years the IAT has gained broad acceptance and has been used in many fields of psychological research – social psychology (McConnell & Leibold, 2001), clinical psychology (Teachman & Woody, 2003), neuropsychology (Phelps et al., 2000) and personality psychology (Asendorpf, Banse, & Mücke, 2002; Egloff & Schmukle, 2002). For a recent review of psychometric properties of the IAT see Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji (in press). In the following, we will first review some recent work on Big-Five-IATs and will then outline the aims of this contribution.

1.1. Big-Five-IATs

Reiman, Bel-Bahar, and Harbke (1999) were presumably the first investigating the Big-Five using IATs. Their “Implicit Personality Structure Test” consisted of an IAT and adjective trait-ratings of personality as an explicit measure. Schmukle and Egloff (2004) presented the outline of an IAT to measure the Big-Five. Other researchers used IATs to measure single dimensions of the Big-Five, but mainly in the context of other research issues. Steffens (2004) investigated the fakeability of the IAT with respect to Extraversion and Conscientiousness. In their study on task-set-switching Mierke and Klauer (2003) found a significant IAT-effect for Extraversion, which correlated with the corresponding NEO-FFI-scale.

A recently published study (Steffens & Schulze König, 2006) administered IATs for all Big-Five dimensions. They were able to show correlations between Big-Five-IATs and various aspects of behaviour.

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