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Evidence for the Big Five personality trait structure in memory organization

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Abstract

The extent to which the “Big Five” personality trait factors guide organization in free recall was examined. Unlike previous studies, which failed to find effects, this study used traits with factor purity as stimuli. Significant levels of clustering in free recall around the Big Five factors were found. In addition, this level of clustering was compared with that found for common object nouns and personality type nouns.

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The “Big Five” approach currently dominates the study of personality trait structure (Allport & Odbert, 1936; see John & Srivastava, 1999, for an overview). An impressive amount of research suggests that personality traits can be organized into the five dimensions of extraversion–introversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. These dimensions were uncovered primarily by factor-analyzing trait ratings. This strategy has proven quite robust – the five dimensions have been obtained across different types of targets (e.g. ratings of self, ratings of other people; McCrae & Costa, 1987), in a variety of languages and cultures (McCrae & Allik, 2002), and across different factor analysis methods (Goldberg, 1990).

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Smith and Kihlstrom (1987) postulated that the ubiquity of the Big Five in trait ratings suggests that these factors might serve as conceptual structures (i.e., natural categories; Cantor & Mischel, 1979) that people use when perceiving others. If so, the individual trait concepts contained in memory should be associated with each other according to their degree of similarity to the five dimensions, and these structures should guide person perception (that is, that they function as schemas; Smith & Kihlstrom, 1987). Is there evidence for this assumption? The factor analysis of trait ratings provides one type of evidence, of course. However, there are other ways that one might estimate the cognitive organization of personality traits. For instance, research has examined the perceived similarity of traits (e.g. Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972). These studies suggest that traits can be ordered in a conceptual space defined by the dimensions of evaluation (which can be split into social and intellectual aspects) and dynamism, which is akin to the activity or strength implied by the trait. The results of this research are not entirely consistent with the five dimensions uncovered by the trait rating approach, although the five factors have been obtained using this methodology (D'Andrade, 1965).

Smith and Kihlstrom (1987) conducted several studies examining the possibility that the Big Five function as schemas by using methods designed to reveal schema-like effects. They found evidence for the five factors using a conceptual-similarity methodology in which people chose traits they thought were likely to be true of a person who scored highly on one of the Big Five dimensions. They also found evidence for the Big Five using an illusory correlation-based method. However, further analyses indicated that the results of these two studies were driven by a relatively small set of traits. More importantly, Smith and Kihlstrom attempted to find evidence for trait organization around the Big Five by assessing clustering in free recall but failed to find such clustering in two studies. Dabady, Bell, and Kihlstrom (1999) also examined the influence of the Big Five on clustering, this time using modified items from the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992) as stimuli, but they also failed to find clustering around the Big Five categories.

The failure to find evidence for the Big Five in clustering in free recall is disconcerting, as a large amount of research from cognitive psychology suggests that mental organization should be reflected in such measures (see, e.g. Puff, 1979). Indeed, these measures are a primary way in which cognitive organization is shown. Combined with the equivocal evidence from the other techniques used by Smith and Kihlstrom (1987), this casts doubt on the extent to which the Big Five function as cognitive structures. Perhaps this is not surprising. The idea that the Big Five constitute the fundamental dimensions of personality has its critics (e.g. Block, 1995). Furthermore, even if the Big Five do constitute such dimensions, it may be that people's mental organization of traits does not reflect this. Perhaps people simply do not mentally organize personality traits in terms of the Big Five.

It is possible that an aspect of the procedure used by Smith and Kihlstrom (1987) and Dabady et al. (1999) limited the power of these studies to detect the predicted effects. For a relatively powerful test of cognitive organization, the stimuli should be strongly representative of a target category and not linked to other tested categories. That is, each stimulus should have a mental association with only one of the categories under examination. So, for instance, a researcher that is interested in the extent to which traditional animal categories (e.g. birds, mammals, insects) can organize memory for animals would be better off choosing "lions" as a representative of the category of mammal than "bats", which have birdlike qualities and therefore probably have mental

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