



## The contribution of the big five personality factors to sense of coherence

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### ABSTRACT

How much of the variation among individuals with regard to sense of coherence (SOC) can be explained by some of the important and central factors in people's lives, above what can be explained by the big five personality factors? Six hundred and ninety-eight randomly selected persons (419 women and 279 men, aged 30–65 years) responded to a questionnaire that measured SOC, the big five personality factors, demographic, socio-economic, private-life, and work-life variables. The five personality factors explained 38% (for women) and 40% (for men) of the variation in SOC and the demographic, socio-economic, private-life, and work-life variables explained an additional 17% (for women) and 12% (for men) of the variation in SOC. Thus, the five personality factors explain a substantial part of the variation in SOC but SOC captures additional aspects that cannot be captured by the five fundamental personality factors.

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### 1. Introduction

Sense of coherence (SOC) is a well-established concept, coined by Antonovsky and assumed to affect people's health (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987). Antonovsky (1987, p. 19) defined SOC as "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that: (1) the stimuli, deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement". Thus, SOC comprises: (1) a cognitive component labelled comprehensibility, representing the extent of the belief that the problem faced is clear; (2) an instrumental component labelled manageability, representing the extent of the belief that the necessary resources to successfully cope with the problem are available; (3) a motivational component labelled meaningfulness, representing the extent of the belief that one wishes to cope (Antonovsky, 1987). Antonovsky (1987, 1993) has stated that the three components are separately insufficient to assess SOC and that they should be considered together.

SOC is assumed to be affected by life experiences (characterized by consistency, participation in shaping of outcomes, and to underload–overload balance) and life experiences are in turn assumed to be affected by generalized resistance resources (GRR) (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky (1979, p. 99) suggested a broad definition of GRR as "any characteristic of the person, the group or the environment that can facilitate effective tension management". Many of an

individual's GRR tend to stabilize around the age of 30 years, which leads to SOC also becoming relatively stable at that age (Antonovsky, 1987). Antonovsky (1987) has stated that SOC should be perceived as a relatively stable generalized orientation and not as a specific basic personality trait.

The GRR previously studied in relation to SOC include various demographic variables, socio-economic variables, private-life variables and work-life variables (e.g. Cohen, 1997; Feldt, Metsapello, Kinnunen, & Pulkinen, 2007; Pallant & Lae, 2002; Volanen, Lahelma, Silventoinen, & Suominen, 2004; Volanen, Suominen, Lahelma, Koskenvuo, & Silventoinen, 2006; Von Bothmer & Fridlund, 2003). Results from these studies are partly inconsistent and it is premature to sketch a general tendency about the relations between the various GRR and SOC (cf. Volanen et al., 2004). However, it should be noted that the relation between some of the GRR and SOC can differ between men and women (e.g. Pallant & Lae, 2002; Volanen et al., 2004; Von Bothmer & Fridlund, 2003).

Another important category of GRR that has been related to SOC is personality (e.g. Cohen, 1997; Ebert, Tucker, & Roth, 2002; Feldt et al., 2007; Langius, Bjorvell, & Antonovsky, 1992; Pallant & Lae, 2002; Ruiselova, 2000, 2002; Von Bothmer & Fridlund, 2003). Personality may be described by the big five model in terms of the following five fundamental personality factors: neuroticism alternatively labelled as emotional stability (e.g. at ease, calm), extraversion (e.g. sociable, outgoing), conscientiousness (e.g. self-disciplined, responsible), openness (e.g. imaginative, curious), and agreeableness (e.g. gentle, acquiescent) (e.g. Goldberg, 1990; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992). Theoretically there should be a positive relationship between SOC (as previously defined in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness) and extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness. In brief: (a)

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extravert's social orientation should relate to all aspects of SOC; (b) emotionally stable persons' use of effective coping should relate to the manageability aspect of SOC; (c) conscientious individuals are organized, structured, and plan their actions, which should relate to all three aspects of SOC; (d) open individuals are curious, imaginative and willing to explore, which should facilitate comprehension and feelings of meaningfulness; (e) agreeable persons handle interpersonal relations well, which should relate to the manageability component of SOC (cf. Feldt et al., 2007; Ruiselova, 2000). Even though these suggested relations have often been supported by research, the most consistent verification across studies has been obtained for the relation between neuroticism (emotional stability) and SOC (e.g. Ebert et al., 2002; Feldt et al., 2007; Ruiselova, 2000, 2002).

In sum, there are a number of factors that are assumed to contribute to a person's SOC and many of the relations between these factors and SOC have been empirically studied. However, no study has investigated how much of the variation among individuals' SOC can simultaneously be explained by some of the GRR that are important and central in people's life. Furthermore, the question of how personality – as operationalized by the five personality factors – relate to SOC, has only been investigated in a few studies and without taking into account other variables that are also assumed to affect SOC (e.g. Ebert et al., 2002; Feldt et al., 2007; Ruiselova, 2000, 2002). In addition, the relations between the big five personality factors and SOC have only been studied in relatively small and restricted samples of subjects (e.g. Ebert et al., 2002; Feldt et al., 2007; Ruiselova, 2000, 2002). Thus, the aim of the present study was to estimate – for men and women, separately – the contribution of some of the important and central factors in people's life to SOC, over and above the contribution made by personality. More precisely, the question was how much of the variation in SOC – in men and women, respectively – can be explained by a demographic variable (*age*), socio-economic variables (*educational background* and *financial situation*), private-life variables (*marital status*, *home and family situation*, and *appreciation at home*), and work-life variables (*occupational status*, *working-life situation*, and *appreciation outside the home*), above what can be explained by the big five personality factors.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The present study was part of a larger study of health among residents in Stockholm County (Åsbring & Hochwalder, 2010). In the larger study, questionnaires were sent by ordinary post to a randomly selected sample of 4000 individuals in the age range 18–80 years living in Stockholm County. After 3 weeks reminders were sent to all the selected individuals. A total of 36% ( $n = 1425$ ) responded.

For the present study, only persons in the age range 31–65 years were selected (a total of 698 persons, 419 women and 279 men), (a) because according to Antonovsky (1987) SOC becomes usually fully developed around the age of 30 years, and also (b) because it was decided to focus on persons that were assumed to be in the labour market. A description of the study sample with regard to the 15 variables used in this study is presented in Table 1. The partial non-responses for the 15 studied variables varied between 0 and 4.6% (32 individuals) and individuals with partially missing-data were deleted pair-wise from the bivariate analyses and list-wise from the multivariate analyses (e.g. Norusis, 2008). The project was approved by the ethical committee of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm (2008/5:7).

**Table 1**

Arithmetic means (*M*) [alternatively percentages (%)] and standard deviations (*SD*) for variables used in the present study, for women and men.

Variables	Women		Men	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SOC	4.98	0.89	5.03	0.82
Extraversion	6.57	1.57	6.36	1.53
Emotional stability	5.65	1.64	6.08	1.57
Conscientiousness	7.17	1.27	7.23	1.12
Openness	5.79	1.32	5.80	1.29
Agreeableness	6.24	1.31	5.84	1.33
Age	47.91	10.32	48.98	10.41
Educational background (low/high %)	(46/54%)		(53/47%)	
Financial situation	4.94	1.54	5.15	1.37
Marital status (single/in relationship %)	(22/78%)		(18/82%)	
Home and family situation	5.74	1.39	5.70	1.28
Appreciated at home	5.75	1.36	5.82	1.14
Occupational status (inactive/active %)	(16/84%)		(15/85%)	
Working life situation	4.96	1.65	5.09	1.49
Appreciated outside the home	5.40	1.34	5.45	1.15

### 2.2. Measures

The participants completed a questionnaire that measured the following variables.

#### 2.2.1. SOC

The 13-item Orientation to Life Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987) was used to assess participant's SOC. Meaningfulness was measured by four items, comprehensibility by five items, and manageability by four items. Example of items for the three factors are as follows: meaningfulness (e.g. "Do you have the feeling that you don't really care about what is going around you?"), comprehensibility (e.g. "Has it happened in the past that you were surprised by the behaviour of people whom you thought you knew well?"), and manageability (e.g. "Has it happened that people whom you counted on disappointed you?"). Answers were given on a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 to 7. For each participant one average value was computed on the 13-item scale, where higher values indicate higher levels of SOC. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the scale in the present study were 0.88 for women and 0.85 for men.

#### 2.2.2. Personality

A 30-item scale developed by Shafer (1999) was used to assess participants with regard to the big five personality factors. This scale has satisfactory psychometric properties (Hochwalder, 2006). Each of the factors was measured by six items. Examples of items for the five factors are as follows: extraversion (e.g. "Shy–Outgoing"), emotional stability (e.g. "Nervous–At ease"), conscientiousness (e.g. "Lazy–Hardworking"), openness (e.g. "Uncreative–Creative"), and agreeableness (e.g. "Headstrong–Gentle"). Answers were given on a 9-point semantic differential type scale ranging from 1 (*the left trait in the trait pair describes me very well*) to 9 (*the right trait in the trait pair describes me very well*). For each respondent an average value on each factor was computed, and higher ratings indicated higher levels of the specific trait. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for extraversion, emotional stability, conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness in the present study were 0.92, 0.92, 0.87, 0.78, and 0.81 for women and 0.92, 0.92, 0.85, 0.78 and 0.83 for men.

#### 2.2.3. Demographic variables

One way to observe the effects of *gender* was to perform separate analyses for women and men. Another basic demographic variable was *age*.

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