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Agreeableness and the self-regulation of negative affect: Findings involving the neuroticism/somatic distress relationship

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Abstract

In the temperament literature, agreeableness has been theoretically linked to effortful control. Further, research in this area has suggested that effortful control may play a broad role in moderating temperament-based tendencies toward negative affect. The present three studies, involving a total of 300 undergraduate participants, sought to extend this perspective to the adult literature by examining potential interactions between agreeableness and neuroticism in predicting reported somatic symptoms. Although such symptoms have been linked to neuroticism, they are not characteristic of the interpersonal concerns linked to agreeableness. Nevertheless, all studies found that agreeableness and neuroticism interacted to predict somatic symptoms such that high levels of agreeableness decoupled the relationship between neuroticism and somatic distress. These findings indicate a broad role for agreeableness in the self-regulation of neuroticism-linked distress.

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1. Introduction

Agreeableness is often viewed in terms of its interpersonal correlates. Experience-sampling studies have found that, in comparison to disagreeable individuals, agreeable individuals generally engage in less quarrelsome behavior and more cooperative behavior in daily life (Moskowitz, 1994). In terms of the social cognitive basis of agreeableness, this trait dimension has been associated with less perceived interpersonal conflict in laboratory interaction paradigms (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996) and agreeable individuals exhibit a preference for more socially adaptive modes of conflict resolution (Graziano et al., 1996; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001).

In addition, we suggest that agreeableness may also tap broad tendencies toward effortful control in domains that are less tied to interpersonal outcomes. Consistent with this perspective, Tangney, Baumeister, and Boone (2004) report a relationship between agreeableness and a dispositional self-control measure assessing the ability to override intrapsychic urges, such as those related to overeating or laziness. Furthermore, Jensen-Campbell et al. (2002) found that agreeableness was associated with smaller Stroop-interference effects, suggesting superior abilities to inhibit cognitive conflicts. These findings, although modest in number, are suggestive of a possible broad relation between agreeableness and self-regulation, a theoretical view consistent with the developmental construct of effortful control.

1.1. *Agreeableness as effortful control*

Effortful control is primarily a cognitive construct that has been theoretically linked to operations of the cognitive control regions of the brain (Posner & Raichle, 1994; Rueda, Posner, & Rothbart, 2004). Although the developmental literature does not tend to use self-report measures to assess personality, it has been suggested that effortful control is an important precursor to adult levels of trait agreeableness (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Cumberland-Li, Eisenberg, & Reiser, 2004; Kochanska & Knaack, 2003). This suggestion is consistent with data indicating that both effortful control (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999) and agreeableness (Martin, Watson, & Wan, 2000) are inversely related to anger and aggression.

If effortful control is a substantial precursor of agreeableness, then the developmental literature makes some other points that deserve more systematic attention. First, the construct of effortful control is broader than that of anger-control, encouraging a more extensive conceptualization of agreeableness as self-regulation. As such, agreeableness may be associated with the self-regulation of forms of negative emotionality other than anger, including anxiety and depression (Eisenberg et al., 1996).

Second, it has been suggested that effortful control is particularly important among children with temperamental tendencies toward negative affect, presumably a precursor of neuroticism (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Nigg, 2006). In the developmental literature, a frequent finding is that, among children high in negative emotionality, those high in effortful control are less vulnerable to mood-disordered outcomes (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2000; see Nigg, 2006). Translating such findings to the adult trait literature, agreeableness may be expected to offer some protection against negative affect at high levels of neuroticism, but be less consequential at low levels of neuroticism. The purpose of the present studies was to examine such interactive predictions in the context of adult personality traits and we did so in relation to somatic symptoms.

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