



Five factor model of personality disorder: Integrating science and practice[☆]

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Abstract

The National Institute of Mental Health has been encouraging the implementation of “translational” research, or studies that integrate basic science and applied, clinical practice. A potential exemplification of this effort would be the integration of basic science research on personality structure with the psychiatric classification of personality disorders; more specifically, a five-factor model of personality disorder. Advantages of a five-factor model of personality disorder include the provision of a precise yet comprehensive description of both normal and abnormal personality functioning, the avoidance of the many limitations and problems inherent to categorical diagnoses, and the incorporation of basic science research on general personality functioning into our understanding of personality disorders. An important goal of future research will be to evaluate its potential utility in clinical practice.

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1. Introduction

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has been encouraging for some time the implementation of “translational” research, or studies that integrate basic

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science and applied, clinical practice. “NIMH has developed a number of initiatives designed to foster and speed the translation of basic behavioral and neuroscience work into research that addresses the etiology and treatment of mental disorders” (Cuthbert, 2002, p. 6). An intention of this mission is to have the clinical understanding of mental disorders be guided more heavily by basic scientific understanding of psychological functioning, as well as to in turn encourage basic science, laboratory research to have a more direct and clear relevance to clinical practice. NIMH is investing considerable effort and funding to build this bridge between science and clinical practice. “These initiatives include large-scale and comprehensive translational research centers in neuroscience and behavioral science that are designed to encourage large-scale, hypothesis-driven integration of basic and clinical research” (Cuthbert, 2002, p. 6). A potential exemplification of this effort would be the integration of basic science research on personality structure with the psychiatric classification of personality disorders.

As expressed well by Ball (2001) in his introduction to a special issue of *Journal of Personality*, “the application of personality trait models to the conceptualization of personality disorders has forged a much needed integration of what were separate areas of scientific study for most of the 20th century” (p. 151). The American Psychiatric Association’s (2000) classification of personality disorders within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 2000) has been derived from treatment experiences and psychiatric research of clinical populations, largely divorced from the study of general personality structure (Millon et al., 1996). DSM-IV currently includes 10 personality disorder diagnostic categories (i.e., antisocial, avoidant, borderline, dependent, histrionic, narcissistic, obsessive–compulsive, paranoid, schizoid, and schizotypal). The theoretical and clinical origins of these diagnoses are diverse, but none would trace its history to basic science research on general personality structure (Frances & Widiger, 1986; Livesley, 2001; Millon et al., 1996). It is proposed herein that the five-factor model (FFM) of general personality structure provides an effective means with which to integrate the applied psychiatric nomenclature with basic science personality research.

2. Scientific foundation

Much has been written on the problems and limitations of the APA (2000) DSM-IV personality disorder nomenclature. These include the heterogeneity among persons sharing the same diagnostic category, excessive diagnostic co-occurrence, the problematic boundaries with other mental disorders, lack of a compelling boundary with normal personality functioning, and inadequate coverage of maladaptive personality functioning (Livesley, 2003; Widiger & Mullins-Sweatt, in press). Emphasized herein is the concern of an inadequate scientific base.

Blashfield and Intoccia (2000) conducted a computer search of the personality disorder research literature, and concluded that there were “five disorders (dependent, narcissistic, obsessive–compulsive, paranoid, and passive–aggressive) that had very small literatures” (p. 473). “The only personality disorder whose literature is clearly

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