



Big-Five personality and aspects of the self-concept: Variable- and person-centered approaches

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ABSTRACT

This study used variable- and person-oriented approaches to examine the importance of Big-Five personality in predicting aspects of the self-concept (i.e., self-control, self-esteem, and self-feelings). The Mini-IPIP scales (IPIP-BFM-20), Self-Control Scale (SCS), Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale (SES), and Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA-3) were administered to 357 Polish students (59% female). The variable-centered approach, based on multiple regression analysis, revealed that the personality traits explained 5 to 45% of the variance in the self-variables, with the largest effect found on self-control. Two-step cluster analysis yielded three personality types, which corresponded to the previously described Resilient, Overcontrolled, and Undercontrolled types, and were meaningfully distinguished on self-variables of interest. However, this type approach showed weaker predictions than continuous and even dichotomized Big-Five traits.

1. Introduction

According to McCrae and Costa's (2008) personality model, basic, biologically-based tendencies, such as the Big-Five traits, are expressed as characteristic adaptations, which represent all acquired psychological attributes that are, to some extent, shaped by contingencies in psychosocial contexts. In this model, basic tendencies and characteristic adaptations represent, respectively, the distal (indirect) and proximal (direct) determinants of behaviors and experiences. A particularly important subset of characteristic adaptations is the self-concept. It consists of knowledge, views, and evaluations of the self, through which people understand themselves. The self-concept occupies a central position in many personality theories and has been associated with a wide range of human actions and modes of response. The prominence of the self-concept is amply demonstrated in psychotherapy, which is often explained in terms of reconstruction of the self (e.g., Rogers, 1951). However, to the extent the self-concept is shaped by stable personality traits, it cannot be expected to be affected by therapeutic interventions. This investigation was designed to study the associations between these two layers of personality. More specifically, it focused on how core personality traits, i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (reversed neuroticism), and openness, explain differences in self-esteem, self-conscious emotions (or self-feelings), and self-control.

Self-esteem and self-feelings both refer to the evaluative aspect of the self. Self-esteem is typically defined as one's attitude of personal worth (Rosenberg, 1965). It serves such vital functions as buffering

existential anxiety, monitoring the degree of social inclusion-exclusion, and promoting goal achievement (see review by Kernis, 2006). Low self-esteem is associated with various emotional/behavioral problems, including depression, aggression, and loneliness (e.g., Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995).

Self-conscious emotions constitute an important class of emotions that are theorized to be critically involved in social behavior regulation (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Prototypical self-conscious emotions include guilt, shame, and pride. Both shame and guilt arise from a perceived wrongdoing; guilt, however, is concerned with a negative evaluation of a specific act, while shame pertains to a negative evaluation of the whole self. Guilt-proneness has been linked with reparative and prosocial behaviors such as empathy, altruism, and caregiving. Shame-proneness, in contrast, has been found to be related to social-psychological maladjustment (e.g., social withdrawal; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Pride is a positive emotion that promotes sense of achievement and self-satisfaction. Some researchers distinguish between pride in self (alpha/hubristic) and pride in behavior (beta/authentic), with the latter being shown to lead to more positive outcomes than the former (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2007).

Self-control refers to the executive aspect of the self. Defined as the capacity to override one's responses (thoughts, feelings, impulses, and behaviors), self-control is posited as crucial for achieving personally valued goals (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007). Consistent with this view, research has linked self-control to many positive outcomes,

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including personal adjustment, academic performance, and social relationships (De Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Poor self-control results in deteriorated performance, and has immense personal and societal repercussions as diverse as procrastination, depression, obesity, violent crime, and drug abuse (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

To date, most research has taken the variable-centered approach (e.g., regression; structural equation modeling) to address the relation between the Big-Five personality and self-variables. Several studies have reported the Big-Five correlates of self-esteem (e.g., Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001), generally showing that self-esteem had positive associations with all five personality dimensions, especially the two having a clear affective component, namely emotional stability and extraversion. Self-control has previously been found to correlate strongly and positively with conscientiousness, and, to lesser degrees, with emotional stability and agreeableness (Marcus, 2003; Tangney et al., 2004). The scarce available research has linked authentic pride to socially desirable and generally adaptive Big-Five traits (especially extraversion and emotional stability), whereas hubristic pride has been negatively related to the two prosocial traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Tracy & Robins, 2007). The only consistent finding concerning guilt and shame has been that both correlate negatively with emotional stability (Abe, 2004; Einstein & Lanning, 1998; Harder & Greenwald, 1999).

This study aimed to extend previous research by using both variable- and person-centered approaches. It not only focused on separate traits in a nomothetic way, but also considered how individuals' standings on each of the Big-Five traits might shape their self-concepts. The person-centered approach has recently attracted considerable interest in Big-Five personality research. Using Q-factor or cluster analyses, three personality types (known as RUO types) have most consistently been identified: Resilient (i.e., well-adjusted), Undercontrolled (i.e., dysregulated), and Overcontrolled (i.e., constricted; Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf, & van Aken, 2001; Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996). However, only two studies have reported on the effect of personality type on self-variables of interest (to be exact, self-esteem). Both have found Undercontrollers and Overcontrollers to have lower self-esteem than Resilients (Asendorpf et al., 2001; Pulkkinen, Männikkö, & Nurmi, 2000). Considering that the RUO typology refers back to Block and Block's (1980) proposal, which focused on ego-resiliency and ego-control, it seems reasonable to expect that the personality types would be distinguished by their self-regulation tendencies and capabilities, as reflected by self-control and self-feelings. This study, thereby, could provide evidence on the suitability of Block and Block's model as a reference framework for interpreting the Big-Five types.

The point is also worth noting that despite the advantage of preserving information on individuals' personality structure, the type approach suffers from the disadvantage of losing information on inter-individual within-type variation, which makes its predictive power questionable. Several studies have evaluated the extent to which this approach can compete with the variable-centered approach, and most of them found the dimension prediction outperforming the type prediction (e.g., Asendorpf, 2003; Costa, Herbst, McCrae, Samuels, & Ozer, 2002; Roth & von Collani, 2007). However, because the outcome of such head-to-head comparisons may depend on different factors, like number and intercorrelations of the predictors, type of the criterion variable (dimensional or type), study design (cross-sectional or longitudinal), a definite conclusion about the relative predictive power of types versus traits awaits further investigation.

Based on the literature review and research objectives, the following hypotheses were proposed (1) self-variables would be predictable from the Big-Five traits, with self-control being predicted mainly by conscientiousness, self-esteem, pride, and shame-proneness being related most strongly to emotional stability, and guilt-proneness being predicted mainly by agreeableness; (2) the clusters for Resilient,

Overcontrolled, and Undercontrolled would emerge; (3) the clusters would differ with respect to self-variables, with Undercontrollers reporting lowest self-control, Resilients scoring highest on self-esteem, guilt-proneness, and beta-pride, and Overcontrollers reporting highest shame-proneness, and (4) the Big-Five traits would show a higher predictive power than the Big-Five types.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were a convenient sample of 357 Poznan (Poland) university students (59% female), majoring in different academic disciplines (29% in professions and applied sciences, 27% in social sciences, 14% in humanities, 10% in natural and formal sciences, and 20% in interdisciplinary academic areas). Participants' mean age was 21.19 years ($SD = 1.88$, range = 18–31). Questionnaires were administered, in a counterbalanced order, in classrooms during academic class hours by trained research staff. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. No financial incentives were offered.

Based on the most complex analysis planned, the sample size was determined sufficient to detect a small effect size of $f^2 = 0.05$, with 80% power and alpha set at 0.05.

2.2. Measures

The Big-Five traits (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, intellect) were measured by Donnellan et al.'s (2006) Mini-IPIP scales (IPIP-BFM-20; adapted by Topolewska, Skimina, Strus, Ciecuch, & Rowiński, 2014).¹ The instrument consists of 20 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = very inaccurate, 5 = very accurate), with higher scores indicating that the trait describes the individual better.²

To assess self-control, the Self-Control Scale (SCS) developed by Tangney et al. (2004; adapted by Pilarska & Baumeister, in press) was employed. It consists of 36 5-point scale items ranging from 1 = not at all to 5 = very much. These items pertain to control over thoughts, emotions, impulses, performance, and habit-breaking, and yield a single total score, with higher values indicating higher self-control.

Self-esteem was evaluated using the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965; adapted by Łaguna, Lachowicz-Tabaczek, & Dzwonkowska, 2007). The SES is a 10-item scale in a 4-point format (1 = strongly agree, 4 = strongly disagree), with higher scores indicating greater self-esteem.

Self-conscious emotions were assessed with Tangney, Dearing, Wagner, and Gramzow's (2000) Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA-3; adapted by Adamczyk & Sobolewski, 2014). The measure uses 16 scenarios followed by responses indicating shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, alpha-pride, beta-pride, and defenses such as externalization (i.e., blaming others) and detachment (i.e., minimizing problems or emotionally distancing oneself). Responses are rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not likely) to 5 (very likely), with higher scores indicating a greater proneness to that reaction.

¹ The IPIP-BFM-20 measures the five basic traits as identified in the lexical approach. There is sufficient overlap between the lexically- and psychometrically-derived models to assume intellect and Costa and McCrae's openness refer to the same personality domain. Moreover, the items on the IPIP Intellect and the NEO-PI Openness scales possess similar content.

² A person-mean substitution was used to replace missing values for participants missing up to 20% of a (sub)scale's items. The (sub)scale was unscored for those missing more items.

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