Personality Correlates of Self-Esteem

Richard W. Robins, Jessica L. Tracy, and Kali Trzesniewski

University of California, Davis

Jeff Potter

Brown University

and

Samuel D. Gosling

University of Texas, Austin

The current study examined the relation between self-esteem and the Big Five personality dimensions. Data were collected over the Internet from a large heterogeneous sample of individuals who ranged in age from 9 to 90 years ($N = 326,641$). Collectively, the Big Five accounted for 34% of the variance in self-esteem. High self-esteem individuals were emotionally stable, extraverted, and conscientious and were somewhat agreeable and open to experience. Despite an extensive search for potential mediators and moderators of this general pattern, the relations between self-esteem and the Big Five largely cut across age, sex, social class, ethnicity, and nationality (United States vs non-United States). High self-esteem individuals tended to ascribe socially desirable traits to themselves, and this tendency partially mediated relations between the Big Five and self-esteem. Discussion focuses on interpreting the social desirability effects, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.   © 2001 Elsevier Science

Researchers interested in individual differences in personality have generally relied on the five-factor model (FFM) as a framework for organizing the central constructs. Over the past couple of decades, studies have linked

the Big Five dimensions to a wide range of other personality constructs (John & Srivastava, 1999). During the same period, self-esteem researchers have conducted thousands of studies examining the correlates, causes, and consequences of high and low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1993; Harter, 1998). Surprisingly, these two important lines of individual-difference research have rarely been connected. We know little about the personality characteristics that distinguish high versus low self-esteem individuals.

Understanding the relation between self-esteem and personality is important for several reasons. First, embedding self-esteem within the Big Five framework will link it to all other psychological constructs and outcomes that have been linked to the Big Five. The FFM provides a nomological network that helps to explain similarities and differences among variables. The Big Five dimensions of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability (vs. Neuroticism), and Openness to Experience (hereafter Openness) account for the interrelations among most trait terms (Goldberg, 1993b), and they are conceptualized at the broadest level that retains descriptive utility (John, Hampson, & Goldberg, 1991). Possibly because of this breadth, the Big Five are relatively consistent over the life course (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000), generalize across many different cultures (McCrae & Costa, 1997), and predict a wide range of outcomes including job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), academic achievement (Robins, John, & Caspi, 1998), delinquency (John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994), personality disorders (Costa & Widiger, 1994), adjustment (Graziano & Ward, 1992), and divorce (Cramer, 1993). Connecting self-esteem to the Big Five will provide a basis for making predictions about how self-esteem might relate to the same set of outcomes and perhaps even offer clues to the mechanisms linking the Big Five to these outcomes.

Second, self-esteem and personality are likely to share common developmental roots, and examining the personality correlates of self-esteem across the life span might provide insights into the nature of self-esteem and its development. Like personality, self-esteem is moderately heritable, with about 30% of the variance due to genetic differences (Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1998). Basic temperamental characteristics, rooted largely in genetic differences, influence people's behavioral tendencies as well as their affective feelings about what kind of persons they are. For example, individuals with a temperamentally low threshold for the experience of negative affect tend to feel negatively about themselves (Watson & Clark, 1984). Similarly, positive emotionality might lie at the core of both Extraversion and self-esteem (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). It seems likely, then, that self-esteem will be most strongly related to the two Big Five traits that have a clear affective component, namely Extraversion (positive affect) and Neuroticism (negative affect).

Third, in addition to sharing a common underlying etiology, self-esteem and personality may directly influence each other. For example, people's