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# An historical analysis of the lexical emergence of the Big Five personality adjective descriptors <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This study examined two questions regarding the emergence of adjectives that describe the Big Five Personality dimensions and when they emerged into the modern English lexicon: (1) Did the terms that describe these qualities appear simultaneously or sequentially? (2) Can the emergence of these terms be linked to specific historical eras? Results showed that the adjective descriptors for Openness appeared in the modern lexicon significantly later than those for Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness. The historical context surrounding the emergence of Openness was presented and the implications of these findings for understanding personality were discussed.

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*Keywords:* Five-factor model of personality; Lexical analysis; Culture

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<sup>☆</sup> Request reprints from Ralph L. Piedmont, Department of Pastoral Counseling, Loyola College in Maryland, 8890 McGaw Road, Suite 380, Columbia, MD 21045. Or via e-mail at: [rpiedmont@loyola.edu](mailto:rpiedmont@loyola.edu). Portions of these data were presented at the 2002 Annual Convention of the Eastern Psychological Association in Boston, MA. Thanks are extended to Mark M. Leach, Robert R. McCrae, Rose Piedmont, and Martin F. Sherman for their comments on an earlier version of this report.

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## 1. Introduction

Generations of lexicographers have spent decades in a continuum of collaborative and detailed analyses to carefully document the categorizations of human interpersonal experiences. Miller (1991) made the observation: “When an idea is important, people are likely to have a word for it. Mountain people will have a word for mountain; people who live on the plains and have never seen a mountain will not have such a word. The more important something is, moreover, the more words that are likely to be” (p. 4). This idea reflects what has come to be known as the “lexical hypothesis”, and formed the underlying logic to Allport’s groundbreaking research that saw the English language as a potential source point for identifying salient individual-difference variables (Allport & Odbert, 1936). The result of this work has been the development of the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM; Digman, 1990).

The FFM has become one of the more widely accepted taxonomies for describing personality structure (Digman, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992; Wiggins, 1996). The value of this model has been found in its widespread usage in personality assessment (Ozer & Riese, 1994) and its importance has been extended through research documenting its cross-cultural relevance (McCrae & Allik, 2002). Behavioral genetics research has documented that between 40% and 60% of the variance of these constructs is genetically heritable (Jang, Livesly, & Vernon, 1996). As biological realities, these dimensions have important implications for understanding human behavior.

However, this genetic linkage does not imply that culture and context have no impact on how these dimensions are expressed and the adaptive function(s) they serve. There is a complex interaction between nature and nurture, and no aspect of human behavior can be understood solely in terms of just one of these perspectives. Research with the FFM has generated findings that support the hypothesis that culture can have an impact on the salience and expression of personality qualities. Four sets of findings are presented that support this hypothesis. Although alternative explanations for the findings of each study are possible (e.g., McCrae, 2004; Poortinga, van de Vijver, & van Hemert, 2002), taken as a whole these findings provide a compelling rationale supporting a cultural impact hypothesis.

First, mean level scores on the domains of the FFM vary across the globe. McCrae (2002) presented data from 36 cultures and found much variability in scores on the FFM. For example Austrian, Swiss, and Dutch samples scored the highest on Openness to Experience, whereas the Danes, Malaysians, and Telugu Indians scored the lowest. When these differences were plotted spatially, Allik and McCrae (2004) noted that systematic patterns of personality profiles emerged that corresponded to the mapping of the countries on the globe. Thus, Indonesians, Filipinos, and Malaysians occupied one quadrant whereas Czech, Germans, and Austrians were found in another. Americans, Canadians, and Hispanic Americans were found in yet another quadrant. Levels of personality differ across cultures (and geographic regions) suggesting that different adaptive pressures may stress some aspects of personality more than others. In a related study by Hofstede and McCrae (2004), they noted how FFM personality scores in these cultures were significantly related to the cultural-based dimensions of Individualism, Power Distance, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance.

Second, emic-based research examining the lexical structure of traits in various cultures has revealed that there may exist other context-specific personality dimensions not contained in the FFM (Bond, Nakazato, & Shiraiishi, 1975; Isaka, 1990; Narayanan, Menon, & Levine, 1995; Yik & Bond, 1993). These dimensions capture trait aspects that may have developed in response

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