



Indecisiveness and Big Five personality factors: Relationship and specificity

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of indecisiveness with the Big Five personality factors and the specificity of indecisiveness compared to the Big Five factors in the prediction of decisional problems. A sample of 543 adolescents was followed between the beginning and the end of Grade 12. Neuroticism turned out to be the strongest correlate of indecisiveness. Using cluster analysis on the Big Five factors three clusters were identified which resembled the overcontrolled, undercontrolled, and resilient clusters from previous research. The resilient cluster showed the lowest scores whereas the overcontrolled cluster showed the highest scores on indecisiveness. Finally, the effect of indecisiveness on decisional tasks remained significant after controlling for the Big Five factors, providing evidence for the specificity of indecisiveness.

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1. Introduction

Indecisiveness is defined as a tendency to experience problems with making decisions across situations and domains (Crites, 1969). It has been described as a trait (Rassin, 2007; Van Matre & Cooper, 1984) characterized by chronic decision-making problems such as long decision-making times, feelings of uncertainty during decision-making processes, a tendency to delay and avoid decisions, and feelings of regret and worry about decisions made (Germeijs & De Boeck, 2002).

Although research findings indicate the importance of indecisiveness as a less adaptive characteristic (e.g., Ferrari & Dovidio, 2000; Rassin, Muris, Booster, & Kolsloot, 2008) several questions about the construct remain under investigated (Rassin, 2007; Rassin & Muris, 2005). The current study aimed to add to the conceptualization of indecisiveness by (1) investigating its relationship with the Big Five personality factors (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which is the most widely accepted model for describing personality traits, and (2) examining its specificity vis-à-vis the Big Five because it is considered important to establish the incremental validity of more specific personality characteristics, such as indecisiveness, compared with the 'core' personality characteristics of the Big Five Model (Hart, Atkins, & Fegley, 2003; Milgram & Tenne, 2000). Associations between indecisiveness and the Big Five were studied in two ways. First, a 'variable-oriented' approach (Magnusson, 1998) was used by describing the relationships of indecisiveness and

the Big Five factors across individuals (i.e., via correlations). Second, a 'person-oriented' approach (Magnusson, 1998) was followed, by investigating how indecisiveness relates to configurations of the Big Five dimensions as they operate within a person (i.e., personality types). With regard to the specificity of indecisiveness, we tested whether the effect of indecisiveness on decisional problems remained significant after controlling for the effect of the Big Five. This research question is in line with the commonly used method in which the Big Five serve as a benchmark to determine the unique or incremental validity of other constructs (Lounsbury, Hutchnens, & Loveland, 2005).

1.1. Indecisiveness and Big Five personality factors

Investigating the relationship between indecisiveness and the Big Five may shed more light on the connections between indecisiveness and 'core' personality characteristics. Previous research showed that indecisiveness is associated with personality characteristics such as trait anxiety, obsessive compulsive phenomena (e.g., controlling behaviour and rumination), and perfectionism (e.g., Frost & Shows, 1993). However, studies on the relationship between indecisiveness and the Big Five are lacking. Only Shafer (2000) investigated the relationship between the Big Five and indecisiveness, finding that indecisiveness related positively to neuroticism and negatively to conscientiousness. However, because this is the only study and Shafer (2000) did not use standard measures for the Big Five, additional research is needed to further clarify this relationship.

First, we hypothesized a strong positive relation between indecisiveness and neuroticism (Shafer, 2000). We expected that a general tendency to experience negative feelings of anxiety and

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distress which is characteristic of neuroticism would relate to experiences of difficulty and discomfort (e.g., worry, regret, uncertainty) in making decisions, which is characteristic of indecisiveness. Previous research found a positive association between neuroticism and decisional procrastination, which is one aspect of indecisiveness (Di Fabio, 2006; Milgram & Tenne, 2000).

Second, we expected a negative association between indecisiveness and conscientiousness (Di Fabio, 2006). Conscientiousness includes characteristics like self-discipline, perseverance, and a tendency to complete tasks, which were expected to relate negatively to problems with completing decisional tasks.

Third, a negative association between indecisiveness and extraversion was expected. Characteristics of extraversion such as being energetic and gregarious may be assets in decision-making because they may stimulate seeking advice from others and other kinds of support which is helpful when making decisions (Milgram & Tenne, 2000).

Finally, regarding openness and agreeableness we did not hypothesize a relationship with indecisiveness because no consistent empirical or theoretical arguments for these associations seem to exist.

1.2. Indecisiveness and personality types

Previous studies on Big Five personality profiles typically identified three types (e.g., Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf, & van Aken, 2001; de Fruyt, Mervielde, & Van Leeuwen, 2002): 'resilients' (individuals with the highest scores on conscientiousness, openness, and extraversion and the lowest scores on neuroticism), 'overcontrollers' (individuals with the lowest scores on extraversion and the highest scores on neuroticism), and 'undercontrollers' (individuals with the lowest scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness). These three labels refer to personality types that differ in their amount of ego-control and ego-resiliency (Block & Block, 1980). Resilients have the best adjusted personality profile, characterized by high levels of ego-resiliency (i.e., the ability to respond flexibly to environmental demands including stress and uncertainty). Over- and undercontrollers both show low levels of ego-resiliency. Overcontrollers are characterized by high levels of ego-control (i.e., high degree of impulse control), whereas undercontrollers show low levels of ego-control.

In the present study we first tested whether we could find the same three personality profiles as in previous research through cluster analysis. Next, we investigated the differences between the personality types regarding indecisiveness. Because of their flexible response to uncertainty, we hypothesized that individuals with a resilient profile would show the lowest level of indecisiveness. Because overcontrollers tend to reflect and to delay more in comparison to the more impulsive undercontrollers, we expected that overcontrollers would show the highest scores on indecisiveness.

1.3. Indecisiveness and decisional problems

The effect of indecisiveness on decision-making has been studied frequently in the career domain. In this domain indecisiveness has been described as a personality trait contrasting it with career indecision, which refers to a normal transitory phase in the process of making particular decisions (Osipow, 1999). Previous studies established negative effects of indecisiveness on several tasks or components in career decision-making processes such as decisional status (i.e., progress in choosing a career alternative), commitment (i.e., strength of confidence in a chosen career alternative), and perceived amount of information about oneself and the career alternatives (e.g., Germeijs, Verschueren, & Soenens, 2006; Van Matre & Cooper, 1984).

The Big Five have also been found to relate to career decisional tasks. Specifically, higher scores on neuroticism and lower scores on conscientiousness were associated with less career exploration (Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004; Tokar, Fischer, & Subich, 1998), less commitment (Page, Bruch, & Haase, 2008), more career indecision (Lounsbury et al., 2005; Tokar et al., 1998), and more perceived lack of information about oneself and the career alternatives (Shafer, 2000). As a consequence, to shed more light on the specificity of the construct of indecisiveness it seems important to investigate the unique predictive value of indecisiveness for career decisional tasks beyond the prediction of the Big Five on these tasks.

In the current study, one specific career decision was focused on, that is the choice of a major in higher education. In the country where the study was conducted (i.e., Belgium) students follow a major from the first year in higher education and have to choose this major by the end of high school. Therefore, in the current study adolescents' coping with decisional tasks regarding this educational choice was studied at the end of high school. We examined whether indecisiveness would predict the career decisional tasks beyond the effect of the Big Five factors on these tasks.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 12th Grade students from 25 high schools in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. At the beginning (i.e., September) of Grade 12 students completed at home a questionnaire on person characteristics, including indecisiveness and the Big Five factors. At the end of Grade 12 (i.e., May) and during regular classes they filled out a questionnaire on their decision-making process of choosing a major.

At the beginning of Grade 12 543 students (235 boys, 308 girls) returned the questionnaire on person characteristics. Mean age at that moment was 17; 1 year (SD = 5.4 months). At the end of Grade 12 483 students (207 boys, 276 girls) answered the questionnaire on their career decision-making process. No differences in scores on the indecisiveness or the Big Five factors were found between students who dropped out of the study between the beginning and the end of Grade 12 ($n = 60$) and the remaining longitudinal sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Indecisiveness

The 22-item indecisiveness scale of Germeijs and De Boeck (2002) was used. Items (e.g., "It is hard for me to come to a decision") were answered on a 7-point scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Germeijs and De Boeck (2002) provided support for the reliability and validity of the indecisiveness scale showing its differentiation with measures of career indecision and its relationship with measures of decision-making problems in several situations.

2.2.2. Big Five

Students filled out the Dutch authorized version of the well-established 60-item NEO-FFI (Hoekstra, Ormel, & de Fruyt, 1996).

2.2.3. Career decisional tasks

The Study Choice Task Inventory (SCTI; Germeijs & Verschueren, 2006) assessed students' coping with six decisional tasks in the process of choosing a major. The subscale Orientation (12 items) probed awareness of the need to make a decision and motivation to engage in the decision process (e.g., "I am motivated to make work of choosing a major"). A 9-point response scale (going from

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