



## Which are the basic meaning dimensions of observable interpersonal behavior?

Daniel Leising<sup>a,\*</sup>, Wiebke Bleidorn<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Bielefeld, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

We investigated the basic meaning dimensions of overt interpersonal behavior in an observational multi-rater multi-situation study. The interpersonal behavior of 99 participants in 17 different interpersonal role-plays was videotaped and judged by three independent observers using 35 adjective-pairs. Principal Components Analysis yielded three factors with Eigenvalues above chance level. The first two factors were easily identifiable as *Agency* and *Communion*, which represent the fundamental dimensions in interpersonal theory (Wiggins, 1991). Unexpectedly, we also found a third, weaker factor pertaining to Emotional Stability. Factor coefficients and factor scores of all three factors showed acceptable to good stability across observers and role-plays. Our study is the first to demonstrate the appropriateness of the Agency/Communion framework with observational data.

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### 1. Introduction

A number of broad conceptual frameworks compete with each other regarding which best represents the various possible meanings of interpersonal behavior: One is the Interpersonal Circumplex Model (Leary, 1957; Wiggins, 1979; Kiesler, 1983), which addresses interpersonal behavior in terms of two orthogonal dimensions: *Dominance* and *Affiliation*. High Dominance implies high status, power, control, and leadership, whereas low Dominance implies submission, obedience, yielding and surrender. High Affiliation implies love, nurturance, warmth and intimacy, whereas low Affiliation implies coldness, distance, and (possibly) hostility. Wiggins (1991) expanded the Interpersonal Circumplex Model, by using Bakan's (1966) labels of "Agency" and "Communion" for the two dimensions. Agency highlights a person's motive and capacity to "get ahead" (sometimes ahead of others). The Agency dimension is considerably broader than Dominance, as it also pertains to characteristics such as competence, efficiency and activity (cf. Abele-Brehm & Wojciske, 2007). Communion, on the other hand, highlights a person's motive and capacity to "get along" with others (Hogan, 1983), and thus is quite similar to Affiliation.

\* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Halle-Wittenberg, D-06099 Halle (Saale), Germany. Tel.: +49 345 55 24377; fax: +49 345 55 27217.

E-mail addresses: [Daniel.Leising@psych.uni-halle.de](mailto:Daniel.Leising@psych.uni-halle.de) (D. Leising), [Wiebke.Bleidorn@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:Wiebke.Bleidorn@uni-bielefeld.de) (W. Bleidorn).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +49 521 106 4540; fax: +49 521 106 6422.

Another conceptual framework for assessing interpersonal behavior is associated with the Five Factor Model of personality (e.g., John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). The Five Factor Model suggests that five broad factors, namely Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience, suffice to capture most of the relevant personality variance between people. The first two are clearly the most interpersonal of these dimensions (see, McCrae & John, 1992): Extraversion distinguishes people who seek frequent, intense, and lively interactions with others (= high Extraversion) from more seclusive people who prefer lower levels of arousal and tend to keep a distance from others. Agreeableness distinguishes people who are willing to compromise and easy to get along with (= high Agreeableness) from people who are more calculating and quarrelsome. McCrae and Costa (1989) demonstrated that Extraversion and Agreeableness may be considered alternative rotations of the two Interpersonal Circumplex dimensions, or vice versa: Both sets of dimensions describe essentially the same two-dimensional domain of psychological functioning, which may be called the "interpersonal plane". The only difference between the two frameworks lies in the orientations of the "axes" of the plane: Extraversion is essentially a mixture of high Dominance and high Affiliation, whereas Agreeableness is a mixture of high Affiliation and some submissiveness (= moderately low Dominance).

All of the above-named frameworks were largely established by analyzing global retrospective descriptions of persons. Thus, they essentially reflect the factor structure of traits or dispositions. We are not aware of any study that ever addressed the question of how many, and which, interpersonal meaning dimensions

people would use spontaneously when they are asked to judge other people's overt, momentary interpersonal behavior. The goal of the present study was to answer this question.

Borkenau and Ostendorf (1998) demonstrated that the Five Factor Model of personality may not only be used to conceptualize stable individual differences between people, but also *changes within* individual persons (= states). For demonstrating this, they used "p-factoring", which means that the correlations of items across several measurement occasions (= "cases") were separately factored for each person. However, Borkenau and Ostendorf used self-report data only: Their participants reported their own states in terms of adjectives for 90 consecutive days. The idea that states and traits may be described in terms of the same items has recently gained some new popularity within the "personality states"-approach (Bleidorn, 2009; Fleeson, 2001). For example, Fleeson (2001) conceptualized personality in terms of "density distributions of states": As a person's states accumulate over time, they form a distribution. The mean of that distribution may be used as an estimate of the person's trait level, whereas measures of dispersion (e.g., the standard deviation) may be used to assess how much the person's states vary across time and situations. However, like Borkenau and Ostendorf (1998), Fleeson also used self-report measures (i.e., experience sampling) only.

We emphasize the issue of perspective (self- versus other-ratings), because it is likely to make a difference in terms of the dimensionality of person descriptions. Judgments of the same target person from different perspectives (e.g., from within versus from outside) may differ systematically with regard to the *kind and amount of information* on which they are based (cf. Beer & Watson, 2008; Vazire, 2010). Most important, because more internal phenomena like thoughts, intentions and expectations are difficult or impossible to observe, they are unlikely to form separate factors when a person is judged from outside, by strangers. Thus, if we are to judge only the overt (i.e., visible, audible), momentary behaviors of people who are interacting with others, and we have no prior information about those people, and no opportunity to ask them about their inner experiences, it is likely that the number of meaning dimensions we use in our judgments will be rather limited. The intriguing question that remains is: How many, and which, dimensions will it be? To answer this question, we videotaped target persons in several interpersonal role-plays, let unacquainted observers judge the targets' behavior by means of natural language terms, and then applied exploratory factor analysis to the observer-ratings.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

The study was carried out at a mid-size university in the East of Germany. We used an ad hoc sample of ninety-nine research volunteers (66 female) with a mean age of 23.0 years ( $SD = 3.8$ , range = 18–36). About half of the participants were university students, whereas the remaining participants came from the community. Participation was denied to persons who were undergoing psychiatric treatment, in order to protect them from the stress that may be caused by participating in the somewhat challenging interpersonal role-plays (see below). All participants received a financial compensation of 15 Euro. The study was advertised online and by public notice on campus.

### 2.2. Procedure

The data were collected in the course of a larger research project, in which the same participants were also assessed by means

of other measures. In the present paper, we will only refer to assessments of the participants' overt interpersonal behavior. Each participant took part in 17 dyadic role-plays ("standard interaction tasks"), to assess his or her habitual ways of dealing with challenging interpersonal situations. At the beginning of each role-play, the participant received a written instruction containing an outline of a hypothetical situation and a request to demonstrate some critical target behavior. For example, in one role-play the participants were asked to imagine that they had attended a very good party the evening before, and now incidentally met the host of that party again. Their task was to thank and commend the host for the great party.

We used the following interaction tasks: (1) initiate a conversation, (2) apologize to someone, (3) thank someone, (4) assert a claim, (5) confront someone, (6) present yourself positively, (7) be self-critical, (8) show empathy, (9) reprimand someone, (10) convince someone of doing something, (11) give instructions, (12) pay a compliment, (13) ask for emotional support, (14) encourage someone, (15) bargain with someone, (16) express your affection for someone, and (17) ask for instrumental support. The creation and selection of the role-plays was partly based on the theoretical models we referred to above, and on experiences with interpersonal role-plays that are reported in previous studies (e.g., Leising, Sporberg, & Rehbein, 2006; Leising & Müller-Plath, 2009). More detailed descriptions of the individual role-plays may be obtained from the first author.

In the role-plays, the participants interacted with one of three confederates (two female, one male), who were advanced psychology students. Participants were randomly paired with the confederates, as the orders in which participants and confederates signed up for time slots in the study were independent of each other. The only restriction was that the male confederate would be the interaction partner for about half of the sample. As a consequence of the random pairing, participant sex and confederate sex were uncorrelated. It was ensured that confederates and participants were unacquainted with each other. For each participant, the order in which the individual role-plays were presented was randomized. A participant interacted with the same confederate in all role-plays, and the confederates gave scripted answers, in order to make the situations as similar as possible for all participants.

The participants' interpersonal behavior in the role-plays was videotaped and then rated from video by three female observers, all of whom were grad students in psychology. For their ratings, the observers used 35 pairs of adjectives, which always appeared in the same order (reported in Table 1). The observers watched each video-clip once, judged the respective participant's behavior by means of the first 18 items, then watched the video-clip a second time, and then judged the participant's behavior by means of the remaining 17 items. By using this procedure, we hoped to maximize the amount of actual behavioral information that would be considered by the observers as a base for their judgments. It was ensured that the observers had never met the participants they rated before. The observers worked independently, and did not communicate with each other about their judgments. Furthermore, the observers were not aware of the research questions of the study, and did not know how the items of the measure (see below) related to the different dimensional models.

### 2.3. Measure

The Minimum Redundancy Scales (Ostendorf, 1990) consist of adjective pairs that were carefully selected to assess the Big Five personality factors with as little semantic overlap as possible. Its five-factor structure has repeatedly been demonstrated with large sets of self-ratings of personality. In the full version of the measure, each factor is assessed by nine pairs of adjectives (e.g., *talkative-silent* for

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