



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paidThe Big Five, everyday contexts and activities, and affective experience[☆]Joshua Wilt^{a,*}, William Revelle^b^a Case Western Reserve University, United States^b Northwestern University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Big Five
 Everyday context
 Affect
 Experience sampling methodology
 Poisson regression
 Multilevel modeling

ABSTRACT

Prior research shows that personality traits predict time spent with different people and frequency of engagement in different activities. Further, personality traits, company, and activity are related to the experience of affect. However, little research has examined personality, context, and affect together in the same study. In the current study, 78 people described their Big Five traits and took part in a 1-week experience sampling study using mobile phones as a means for data collection. Participants indicated their current company, activity, and momentary affect along the dimensions of energetic arousal (EA), tense arousal (TA), and hedonic tone (HT). Poisson regressions revealed that traits predicted higher frequencies of trait-consistent contexts: for example, extraversion was related to more frequently being with various types of company. Results predicting contexts from multilevel logistic regressions were sparser. Multilevel models revealed that traits and contexts had main effects on affect, yet there were relatively few interactions of traits X contexts predicting affect. We discuss more specific implications of these findings.

Personality may be conceptualized as an abstraction to describe and explain patterns of affect, behavior, cognition, and desire - the “ABCDs” of personality- over time and space (Ortony, Norman, & Revelle, 2005; Revelle, 2008). Modeling such patterns is a concern of theories of personality with a dynamic focus (DeYoung, 2015; Read, Smith, Drotman, & Miller, 2016; Revelle & Condon, 2015) and theories of personality variation (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Heller, Perunovic, & Reichman, 2009). More specifically, these theories attempt to integrate across the constructs of personality traits, environmental contexts, and psychological states (i.e., ABCD states). Considerable research has examined pairs of these types of constructs (e.g., traits and affect; traits and situations), yet, little work has examined the relations between variables from all three types of constructs over time in the same study. The current study employs experience sampling methodology (ESM) to examine the relations between Big Five traits, social and behavioral contexts, and affect over time.

The current study tested whether traits predict naturally occurring contexts in daily life, specifically focusing on present company (e.g., alone, with friends, with family) and activities (e.g., working, studying, leisure). Company and activity have typically been lumped together as situational contexts (e.g., Wagerman & Funder, 2009; Wood, Tov, & Costello, 2015; Wrzus, Wagner, & Riediger, 2016). However, we see company only as purely situational (i.e., a feature of the external

environment) and conceptualize activities as a behavioral context (Rauthmann, Sherman, & Funder, 2015). This approach, sometimes referred to as an environmental context approach, is commonly employed in studies of daily life (Mehl, Gosling, & Pennebaker, 2006; Parrigton, Woo, Tay, & Wang, 2017; Saucier, Bel-Bahar, & Fernandez, 2007). We adopted the environmental context approach in our study due to its potential advantages for distinguishing effects of personality and context on outcomes (Wrzus et al., 2016). There have been a few studies investigating the relations between the Big Five, social company, and behavioral contexts, which we review next.

1. Predicting social company and behavioral contexts from traits

Most results relating traits to social company and behavioral contexts can be interpreted from the perspective of trait-consistency, that is, people may prefer to be in situations that provide opportunities for expressing their traits (Emmons & Diener, 1986b; Furnham, 1981). For instance, extraversion is positively associated with spending more time in social contexts (Diener, Larsen, & Emmons, 1984; Emmons, Diener, & Larsen, 1986). Extraversion is negatively related to being alone, positively related to spending time in conversation (Mehl et al., 2006), and positively related to spending time with various company such as friends, colleagues, and strangers (Wrzus et al., 2016). Agreeableness is

[☆] We are grateful for funding support from the National Institute for Mental Health, National Research Service Award Grant F31-MH093041 to JW, Dissertation Award from the Society of Multivariate Experimental Psychology to JW, and a National Science Foundation grant SMA-1419324 to WR.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.12.032>

Received 23 March 2017; Received in revised form 18 December 2017; Accepted 21 December 2017
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positively related to reporting being with friends (Wrzus et al., 2016). Emotional stability (reverse neuroticism) is negatively related to how much time people spend being alone, doing chores, and watching TV (Wrzus et al., 2016). Conscientiousness is positively related to spending more time in class (Mehl et al., 2006), engaging in non-leisurely pursuits (Barnett, 2006), and working (Wrzus et al., 2016). Finally, openness is positively related to being around strangers and negatively related to being with family, watching TV, or doing “nothing” (Wrzus et al., 2016).

One limitation of these studies, is that they relied on self-reports, with the exception of Mehl et al. (2006). Thus, they were not able to distinguish between objective contexts and subjective construals of context (Rauthmann, Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2015). This limitation should be kept in mind for the present study, which also relied on self-report.

2. Predicting affective experience from traits and contexts

2.1. Predicting affect from traits

Two of the more robust findings in personality psychology are the positive relation between extraversion and positive affect, and the negative association between emotional stability and negative affect (e.g., Kuppens, Van Mechelen, Nezlek, Dossche, & Timmermans, 2007; Lucas & Fujita, 2000; Meyer & Shack, 1989; Wilt, Nofle, Spain, & Fleeson, 2012; Zautra, Affleck, Tennen, Reich, & Davis, 2005). Additionally, agreeableness and conscientiousness show positive associations with positive affect and inverse associations with negative affect (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Komulainen et al., 2014; Leger, Charles, Turiano, & Almeida, 2016; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008; Watson, 2000), and openness is positively related to positive affect (Steel et al., 2008).

Relatively fewer studies have looked at the associations between the Big Five and the affective dimensions of energetic arousal (EA; ranging from energetic to sluggish), tense arousal (TA; ranging from tense to relaxed), and hedonic tone (HT; ranging from pleasant to unpleasant). Theoretically, EA and TA concern approach of reward and avoidance of punishment, respectively, whereas HT concerns receiving reward or receiving punishment (Schimmack & Grob, 2000; Schimmack & Reisenzein, 2002; Thayer, 1989). This approach has been used in studies of situational tasks and thus may be preferable for our purposes (Matthews et al., 2002). One study (Stolarski & Matthews, 2016) found that extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were positively related to EA and HT; extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness were negatively related to TA. Openness was not related to any affective dimension. Additionally, a study of achievement-related affect (Goryńska, Winiewski, & Zajenkowski, 2015) showed similar associations between the Big Five and the dimensions of EA, TA, and HT across a number of academic contexts (e.g., lecture, exam, grading).

2.2. Predicting affect from company and activity

Studies have also shown that company and activity relate to daily affective experience. In an early experience sampling study, more time spent in social/recreation activities related to higher positive affect, whereas more time spent in work/study activities related to higher negative affect (Emmons & Diener, 1986a). One study (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004) using the retrospective Day Reconstruction Method (DRM), found that more frequently being with friends and relatives was related to higher positive affect and lower negative affect, whereas more frequently being alone was related to lower levels of both positive affect and negative affect. Romantic and social activities were related to higher positive affect and lower negative affect, watching TV was more neutral (i.e., relatively low levels of positive and negative affect), and working was rated low for positive and high for negative affect. Another recent study (Howell & Rodzon, 2011) used the DRM and found that

socializing was related to higher levels of enjoyment and lower levels of stress; eating and watching TV had more neutral ratings; and academic and work activities showed a more negative affective profile.

2.3. Interactions between traits and contexts predicting affect

There is some evidence that personality and contextual factors interact to predict affective experience. Experimental studies have shown that extraversion is positively related to EA (but not pleasant affect) more strongly in goal-oriented, rewarding situations (Smillie, Cooper, Wilt, & Revelle, 2012; Smillie, Geaney, Wilt, Cooper, & Revelle, 2013). This finding and has received initial support in a study of affect in natural environments (Oerlemans & Bakker, 2014). Neuroticism is related more strongly to negative affect in stressful situations (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Leger et al., 2016; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004). There is also preliminary evidence that extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness may buffer the effects of stress on daily negative affect (Leger et al., 2016).

3. Aims of the research

From the literature review, we can conclude that Big Five traits are relevant to types of company and activity experienced in daily life, and that both traits and daily contexts are relevant to affective experience. Yet, few (if any) naturalistic studies have examined all constructs together over time. The present study is an exploratory, descriptive investigation meant to build on prior research in these domains. This is in line with the view that this type of research is important and underutilized in personality and social psychology (Funder, 2009; Rozin, 2001). This study has the potential to provide data relevant to fundamental questions of dynamic models of personality (e.g., Read et al., 2016; Revelle & Condon, 2015). Over time, what company do people keep, what activities do they participate in, and how do they feel in different types of company and activity?

We assessed Big Five traits, present company, behavioral contexts, and affect (EA, TA, and HT) multiple times per day over one week. We examined relations between each construct, and we examined interactions of traits and contexts predicting affect. Though exploratory, we expected to find evidence for effects noted in the existing literature. We expected trait-consistency effects when predicting context. We expected that socially desirable poles of traits would positively relate to more positive affective profiles (i.e., higher EA and HT, lower TA), that social contexts would also positively relate to more positive affective profiles, and that activities such as eating, watching TV, and surfing the net would relate to more neutral affective experiences. Tests of interactions of traits and contexts predicting affect were purely exploratory.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants and procedure

People were recruited by an advertisement placed on the university paid participant pool listserv. Participants were given informed consent and completed a personality survey online. They then completed the text-messaging portion of the study over the following week. The text-messaging protocol (described in more detail below) entailed sending a text message including numerical indicators of current affect, social company, and behavioral context to a secure e-mail address.

One hundred one participants (relationship, employment, and student status were not collected) completed all procedures in the study; of these, 78 (63 women) with a mean age 26.6 (SD = 7.9) completed at least five text-messaging responses and were retained for analyses.¹

¹ The distribution of responses showed a clear break at 5 total responses between people who were generally non-compliant and those who were somewhat compliant. See <https://osf.io/3va4t/> for a graph of the distribution.

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