The personality traits of consensually supportive people

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ABSTRACT

We investigated the personality traits of supportive providers, assessed as the consensus among observers. Each provider was rated by three perceivers who knew the provider well in a round robin design (16 groups of 4 apartment mates; $N = 64$). Perceivers rated providers on providers' supportiveness, a subjective judgment that a provider would assist in times of trouble. Perceivers also rated providers on five-factor personality traits. Consensually supportive providers were more agreeable, extroverted and emotionally stable. The link between provider supportiveness and agreeableness was sufficiently strong to suggest that supportiveness is an aspect of agreeableness. We also examined the aspects of personality and support that reflected unique relationships among apartment mates. Relationally supportive providers were seen as highly open to experience. Thus, the trait markers of supportiveness depended upon whether supportiveness was assessed as the consensus among observers or as a feature of relationships. Implications for integrating research on social support and structural models of personality were discussed.

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1. Introduction

People who believe that friends and family will help during times of need (i.e., perceived support) have better mental health than those who doubt their social networks (Barrera, 1986; Cohen & Wills, 1985). For example, perceived support is related to greater happiness (Lakey, 2013), low negative affect, high positive affect (Finch, Okun, Pool, & Ruehlman, 1999) and lower rates of major depressive disorder (Lakey & Cronin, 2008). There has been long-standing interest in the role of personality in social support. For example, investigators have examined the personality characteristics of people who typically see others as supportive (Lewis, Bates, Posthuma, & Polderman, 2014; Swickert, Hittner, & Foster, 2010; Uchino, Vaughn, & Matwin, 2008), and social support itself has been conceptualized as a trait-like, individual difference variable (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990; Uchino, 2009). But there has been little attention to the personal characteristics of people perceived as supportive. Supportive providers are perceived as offering enacted support (e.g., advice or reassurance); but the magnitude of this link is not strong, accounting for only about 10% of supportiveness (Barrera, 1986; Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). Thus, there is much to explain about how some providers are seen as supportive and others are not.

In the current article, we investigated which five-factor personality traits (Goldberg, 1990) were characteristic of consensually supportive providers. We focused on the five-factor structural model of personality (Goldberg, 1990), as most research on support and personality used this model. Conceptually, agreeable providers might be seen as supportive because they are kind and sympathetic, extroverted providers because they are cheerful and optimistic, emotionally stable providers because they are calm and secure, conscientious providers because they are reliable and scrupulous, and open providers because they are insightful and perceptive.

Research has found that supportive providers are agreeable and emotionally stable, even after controlling for 1) the amount of enacted support offered by providers and 2) the perceived similarity between perceivers and providers (Lakey et al., 2002). Supportive providers have also been described as conscientious, controlling for perceived similarity (Lakey, Ross, Butler, & Bentley, 1996). However, each provider was rated by only one perceiver in these studies. Thus, it is impossible to know whether findings reflected providers' actual personality and supportiveness, or perceivers' cognitive biases. Did Samantha rate Jill as supportive and agreeable because there was a consensus among observers that Jill actually had these characteristics, or because Samantha sees everyone as agreeable and supportive? These questions are well addressed by the social relations model (SRM; Kenny, 1994; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

The present study used the SRM to isolate the characteristics of providers that reflect agreement among observers. When participants within a group rate each other (a round-robin design), the SRM isolates three determinants of ratings: 1) characteristics of the persons being rated (i.e., provider, target, partner effects or inter-rater agreement), 2) characteristics of the perceivers who make the ratings (i.e., perceiver or actor effects) and 3) characteristics of the unique relationships

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among perceivers and providers. For example, provider effects occur when perceivers agree that Sam is more supportive than is Jill. Perceiver effects reflect trait-like differences among raters in their tendencies to see providers as supportive. For example, when rating the same providers, Kristie sees them as more supportive than does Helen. Perceiver effects will not be described further in the introduction, as the present study did not find significant perceiver effects for supportiveness. Relationship effects reflect perceivers' idiosyncratic tastes and occur when a perceiver sees a provider as 1) more supportive than how the perceiver typically sees providers (i.e., perceiver effects) and 2) more supportive than how the provider is typically viewed by perceivers (i.e., provider effects or inter-rater agreement). For example, relationship effects would emerge when Kristie sees Sam as more supportive than Jill, but Helen sees Jill as more supportive than Sam. We use the phrase "unusually supportive" and "unusually agreeable" to refer to relationship effects.

Relatively few studies of provider supportiveness and personality have isolated provider, perceiver and relationship effects. Moreover, each study has its limitations.

Branje, van Lieshout, Cornelis, van Aken, and Marcel (2005) examined supportiveness and agreeableness within 4-member families in a round-robin design. When perceivers agreed that a provider was supportive, they also agreed that the provider was agreeable (provider effects). Relational agreeableness was also a marker of relational support. When a perceiver saw a provider as unusually supportive, the perceiver also saw the provider as unusually agreeable. Agreeableness was the only trait studied in Branje et al. (2005) and one wonders about the role of the other five-factor traits. Thus, one aim of the current study was to explore how each of the five-factor personality traits is linked to provider support.

Other studies broadened the assessment of provider personality by including all five-factor traits (Coussens, Rees, & Freeman, 2015; Lakey, Lutz, & Scoboria, 2004). However, these studies did not assess providers from subjects' own social networks. Instead, students rated popular TV characters (Lakey et al., 2004), or athletes rated video-recorded, or well-known professional coaches (Coussens et al., 2015). Only Lakey et al. (2004) reported significant consensus among observers on provider supportiveness. Consensually supportive providers were agreeable, neurotic, introverted, open to experience, and conscientious. However, this study did not test which of these traits had independent links to provider supportiveness. Each study also estimated the personality markers of relational support. When a perceiver saw a provider as unusually supportive, the perceiver also saw the provider as unusually agreeable, controlling for the other five factor traits (Coussens et al., 2015). Lakey et al. (2004) also found that relational agreeableness, as well as every other five-factor trait, was a marker for relational support. Yet, the authors did not test which traits were independent markers.

Thus, the field lacks a solid understanding of the personality markers of supportiveness. Although two studies have found that consensually supportive providers were highly agreeable, only one study (Branje et al., 2005) included providers who were members of perceivers' social networks, and that study did not assess trait markers other than agreeableness. Lakey et al. (2004) assessed a wider range of traits, but studied participants' judgments of TV characters and did not determine the extent to which trait markers were independently linked to supportiveness. With regard to relational support, all studies found that relational agreeableness was a marker for relational supportiveness. However, no other trait marker has emerged as a replicated predictor in analyses that controlled for other traits.

Our primary goal was to help clarify the personality characteristics of consensually supportive providers. We studied members of participants' social networks and used a round robin design in which each provider was rated by multiple perceivers, as in Branje et al. (2005). We assessed each of the five-factor traits and tested which were independent markers of supportiveness. Empirically, there is good evidence that agreeableness is a marker for consensually supportive providers (Branje et al., 2005; Lakey et al., 2004) and some evidence for emotional stability (Lakey et al., 2002) conscientiousness (Lakey et al., 1996, 2004) as well as extroversion and openness to experience (Lakey et al., 2004). However, evidence for traits other than agreeableness is limited because the research did not study perceivers' actual network members (Lakey et al., 2004) or providers were rated by only a single perceiver (Lakey et al., 1996, 2002).

A second goal was to provide additional estimates of the extent to which five factor traits are independent makers for relational support. Relational agreeableness is a well-established marker of relational support (Branje et al., 2005; Coussens et al., 2015; Lakey et al., 2004). However, the potential role of other trait markers has not been established.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Sixteen groups of four apartment mates ($N = 64$; 93% female; 91% European ancestry; median age = 20) from a university in the Great Lakes region of the US participated. Roommates had shared an apartment for at least three months before participating. The median duration of relationships was 1–2 years. Findings from this study regarding support, affect and ordinary social interaction have been published separately.

2.2. Procedure

Each group of roommates participated in separate sessions. Participants completed measures while seated at desks arranged in a rectangle within a large room. Participants were far enough apart that they could not observe each other's responses to the questionnaires. Each participant wore a tag displaying her or his subject number. Upon completing the packet, participants were debriefed and given ten dollars.

2.3. Measures

Perceived social support was assessed with 12 items from the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987), which has established reliability and validity. Participants responded to each item using a 5-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item was, "Does your relationship with your roommate provide you with a sense of emotional security and well-being?" Internal consistency reliabilities[1] are presented in Table 1.

Perceivers rated provider personality using 10 items for each five-factor trait from the International Personality Item Pool (Goldberg et al., 2006). This measure is widely used and has good evidence for its validity (Goldberg et al., 2006). Participants responded to each item on a 5-point Likert-style scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items are "My roommate sympathizes with people" (agreeableness); "My roommate starts conversations" (extroversion); "My roommate worries about things" (neuroticism); "My roommate has a vivid imagination" (openness); and "My roommate pays attention to details" (conscientiousness).

2.4. Statistical analyses

Provider, relationship and perceiver effects were estimated using the computer program *SOREMO* (Kenny, 1998), developed to analyze round-robin data. SOREMO generated scores for each variable for each of the three effects (i.e., a provider effect score for each

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[1] Formulas for internal consistency reliability were $\alpha_{per} = \sigma^2_{per}/[\sigma^2_{per} + (\sigma^2_{perxi}/n_i)]$ for perceiver effects, $\alpha_{prov} = \sigma^2_{prov}/[\sigma^2_{prov} + (\sigma^2_{provxi}/n_i)]$ for provider effects and $\alpha_{rel} = \sigma^2_{rel}/[\sigma^2_{rel} + (\sigma^2_{relxi}/n_i)]$ for relationship effects, for which per indicates perceivers, prov indicates providers, rel indicates relationships, i indicates items and n_i indicates the number of items. There are two items in these analyses: the mean of even and odd numbered items.