



The Big Five and adolescent adjustment: An empirical test across six cultures



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ABSTRACT

The current cross-cultural study tested the measurement of the Big Five personality dimensions and the relationships between them and four measures of adjustment and well-being, namely measures of depression, anxiety, well-being, and self-esteem. Anonymous data were collected on 5835 middle and late adolescents from six different cultural contexts, namely China, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Taiwan, and Turkey. Based on an ESEM approach, which fit the data better than a CFA, configural invariance was found for a 28-item short form of the BFI, suggesting that the Big Five model fit adequately across cultures. Findings from path analyses provided evidence that the Big Five factors explained from an average of 21% of the variance in anxiety to 26% in low well-being, net any effects by background variables. Consistent with some previous work, the study provides new evidence on the links between the Big Five and four measures of adolescent adjustment and well-being across six distinct cultural contexts. It also illustrates some of the inherent challenges of modeling the structure and psychometric properties of the Big Five in a cross-national comparative framework.

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1. Introduction

Personality can be described as the sum of characteristics that differentiate people. Different taxonomies have been proposed throughout the history of personality research, but in recent decades, there has been growing consensus for the Big Five model. This model describes five broad dimensions of human personality, namely openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The Big Five model of personality has been subject to a substantial amount of research, which tests its validity across different contexts. For instance, regarding cultural differences, a number of studies have found evidence in support of the basic five-factor structure in specific cultures (e.g., Benet-Martínez & John, 1998; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1990; Hrebickova & Ostendorf, 1995); some work has also shown that this structure remains consistent when directly comparing samples from different cultures (Hendriks et al., 2003; McCrae, 2001; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae et al., 2010). A meta-analysis by Rolland (2002) across 16 cultures provides evidence supporting the existence of Neuroticism, Openness, and Conscientiousness factors as well as the “interpersonal circumplex” that can be “always interpreted in terms of Extraversion and Agreeableness factors” (p. 21).

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Past research on personality also provides evidence of a substantial genetic component in personality traits; for instance, studies have shown increasing rank-order consistency over time as individuals move from childhood to adolescence (Bates, Schermerhorn, & Goodnight, 2010). However, genetic effects on personality development are not uniform in magnitude, a point emphasized by Roberts, Woods, and Smith (2005), who cite behavior genetic evidence which indicates that personality trait heritability estimates decrease in adulthood; in other words, it appears that environmental effects gain in importance from early to middle adulthood (Bleidorn, Kandler, & Caspi, 2014). At the same time, adolescence is considered to be a developmental period characterized by great changes in personality (Klimstra, Beyers, & Besevegis, 2014). Relatedly, there exists a growing body of research which examines personality factors as predictors of adolescent adjustment (e.g., Klimstra, Luyckx, Hale, & Goossens, 2014). However, few studies have directly compared these effects cross-culturally. We found one study by Klimstra, Crocetti, Hale, Fermani, and Meeus (2011), where the authors assessed associations between the Big Five personality dimensions and internalizing symptoms among Dutch ($n = 1521$) and Italian ($n = 1975$) early and middle adolescents. Based on their results from multi-group structural equation modeling comparisons, evidence supporting the existence of the Big Five trait structure was found in each sample; in addition, metric invariance was established. However, the

authors found slight cross-national differences in (a) the meaning of the Big Five factors and (b) the links between Big Five traits and psychopathology. Significant associations were found for four out of five dimensions. Significant negative associations were observed between extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness and depression, while a positive one was found between neuroticism and depression. However, this latter relationship was stronger in the Italian sample than in the Dutch sample.

In the current study, we were interested in examining the extent to which we find similarities or differences in the links between the Big Five dimensions and measures of adolescent adjustment across different cultures. We define psychological adjustment as a term encompassing several adjustment measures that refer to an individual's mental health, which in the current study includes depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and low well-being. Van de Vijver and Leung (1997) have argued that cross-national comparisons represent a quasi-experimental approach (the next best thing after experimental research), where culture is treated as an independent variable that is beyond the control of the researcher. Furthermore, they suggest that as in experimental work where experimental manipulations predict differences between treatment versus control conditions, the observed differences in a cross-cultural comparative study can be attributed to culture or a particular cultural context. Thus, the current study is what might be considered a "generalizability study," as we tested a simple model that focused on the Big Five dimensions as predictors of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and low well-being. Since most studies in this area are limited to samples from a single culture, the field of inquiry lacks a comparative perspective and does not avail itself of the more powerful quasi-experimental approach inherent in cross-cultural comparative work. Thus, the current study sought to provide new empirical evidence that informs both conceptual and empirical work on the Big Five, particularly focused on adolescents. Using samples from different cultures permits a test of quasi cultural universality versus specificity of not only the Big Five model (as hypothesized and supported by the research of McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & Terracciano, 2005; McCrae et al., 2000), but also the relationships between these constructs and overall adjustment. In the following sections, we provide a brief review of relevant studies focused on adolescents assessing the above-mentioned associations.

1.1. Neuroticism

Neuroticism is defined as a tendency to experience the world as threatening and distressing. High scores on neuroticism describe individuals who are anxious, vulnerable to stress, depressed, insecure in relationships, moody, and easily frustrated (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Since neuroticism is described as negative emotionality, it is of little surprise that this trait has been consistently found to be related to depression as well as anxiety. Previous work provides evidence for both a direct link between neuroticism and depression (e.g., Hansell et al., 2012; Kuyken, Watkins, Holden, & Cook, 2006) as well as an indirect one, where the relationship is mediated by negative life events (Kercher, Rapee, & Schniering, 2009) or ruminations (Muris, Fokke, & Kwik, 2009). In addition, some studies have also found that neuroticism moderates the relationships between loneliness and depression (Vanhalst et al., 2012). Similarly, as there is substantial comorbidity between depression and anxiety disorders (Hirschfeld, 2001), a number of studies have also found neuroticism to be a predictor of anxiety (e.g., del Barrio, Moreno-Rosset, López-Martínez, & Olmedo, 1997; Griffith et al., 2010; Zinbarg et al., 2010). Likewise, high levels of neuroticism have also been found to be related to lower self-esteem (Mlačić, Milas, & Kratochvil, 2007; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001) as well as lower well-being (Butkovic,

Brkovic, & Bratko, 2012; Garcia, 2011). Thus, based on previous work, we expected to find that neuroticism would be positively associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and low well-being. In addition, we also expected that this relationship would be consistent across the six cultural contexts studied.

1.2. Extraversion

This term generally describes the tendency toward highly active behavior, positive emotional feelings, assertiveness, and being outgoing. Extraversion is considered a trait that generates positive affect (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991) and previous work attests to this notion, finding that extraversion is negatively related to depression (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Klimstra et al., 2011), anxiety (Uliaszek et al., 2010), while positively related to well-being (Garcia, 2011; Salami, 2011), and self-esteem (Kawash, 1982; Robins, Tracy, Trzesniewski, Potter, & Gosling, 2001). Based on the previous literature, we hypothesized that extraversion would be negatively associated with measures of adjustment, namely depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and low well-being; based on previous conceptual and some empirical work, we also expected that these relationships would not vary across cultural groups.

1.3. Conscientiousness

Conscientiousness refers to differences in volitional control of an individual's behavior and cognition. People who score high on this dimension are described as responsible, planful, attentive, careful and orderly, with a high need for achievement and high commitment to work (Costa, McCrae, & Dye, 1991). This trait is associated with successes in behaviors that require effort and self-restraint. Conscientiousness has been consistently found to be positively related to academic achievement among youth (Martin, Nejad, Colmar, & Liem, 2013; Spengler, Lüdtke, Martin, & Brunner, 2013). Since high academic achievement tends to be associated with positive self-esteem (Booth & Gerard, 2011; Zhang, Wang, Li, Yu, & Bi, 2011; but see Osborne, 1995 for possible moderating effects of race), we expected conscientiousness to be negatively associated with low self-esteem. In addition, some studies have found that adolescents with high levels of conscientiousness reported lower levels of depression and anxiety (John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994; Topić, Kovačević, & Mlačić, 2012). Thus, in the current study, we expected that conscientiousness would be negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, and that this relationship would be largely invariant across cultural groups.

1.4. Agreeableness

Limited empirical evidence exists bearing directly on the relationships between agreeableness and measures of internalizing behaviors among adolescents, although some relevant work has been conducted on adult samples. Agreeableness refers to the quality of interpersonal behaviors. Individuals high on agreeableness are empathic, considerate, generous, polite, warm, and harmonious in relationships with others (Graziano & Tobin, 2009). A meta-analysis by Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, and Watson (2010) provided evidence that agreeableness is generally unrelated to either depressive symptoms or anxiety. In some studies, agreeableness was found to moderate the relationship of neuroticism and depression (Ode & Robinson, 2009) as well as social support and depression (Hoth, Christensen, Ehlers, Raichle, & Lawton, 2007). In addition, low agreeableness has been found to be a risk factor for chronic depression (Harkness, Bagby, Joffe, & Levitt, 2002; Lingjærde, Førelund, & Engvik, 2001; Wiersma et al., 2011); however, high agreeableness in combination with low

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