



Disentangling trait from state components in the assessment of egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement

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ABSTRACT

A latent state-trait model has been used to assess the extent to which egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement represent: (a) stable individual differences and (b) systematic effects of the situation and/or the person-situation interaction. Analyses were conducted on a sample of 187 adults (64% females). Findings revealed that both self-enhancement tendencies mostly capture stable interindividual differences, although significant occasion-specific effects were observed. Egoistic self-enhancement presents a higher proportion of trait variance than moralistic self-enhancement. The egoistic dimension was mostly related with the stable (trait) components of conscientiousness and emotional stability. The moralistic dimension, on the contrary, was mostly related with the transient component of emotional stability. Potential explanations for the observed differences between egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement were discussed and interpreted in terms of their implications for personality assessment.

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1. Introduction

Egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement represent two styles of self-presentation that lead people to describe themselves in positive terms by overclaiming agentic (i.e. intelligent, dominant) and communal (i.e. warm, dependable) qualities (Paulhus, 2002). These tendencies have been recently conceived as the product of substantive personality characteristics (Lönnqvist, Paunonen, Tuulio-Henriksson, Lönnqvist, & Verkasalo, 2007), which derive from basic needs for power (egoistic) and approval (moralistic) (Paulhus & John, 1998). As a result, egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement would represent stable individual differences in the degree to which people are motivated to behave and present in a certain manner (Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008).

Self-presentation strategies, however, are generally sensitive to social settings and situational demands (e.g. Sedikides, Herbst, Hardin, & Dardis, 2002), that may undermine their consistency across time. It is widely acknowledged, for instance, that respondents are more likely to inflate scores on personality tests during hiring procedures than under anonymous conditions, in the attempt to increase the likelihood of being hired (Smith & Robie, 2004). We therefore argue that dispositional and situational forces may operate in concert, affecting individuals' responses to self-enhancement measures. Of course, the extent to which these constructs develop as a function of maturational processes contribute to increase the state variance. Yet, these processes take place over

long periods of time, and are therefore unnoticed in short-term longitudinal studies.

Although self-enhancement measures may comprise both trait and state components, there is a paucity of studies aimed at investigating the extent to which these measures are attributable to stable individual differences and to systematic effects of the situation and/or to the person-situation interaction. To the best of our knowledge, only one study has dealt with a similar issue (Schmitt & Steyer, 1993), by applying a latent state-trait model to the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MC-SDS, Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Authors found that the largest proportion of variance of the observed scores was due to stable interindividual differences. A small but significant proportion of variance was due to situation-specific effects. Although this study provides interesting findings, it is based on the MC-SDS, which fails to distinguish between agentic and communal styles of self-presentation.

The present research aims to fill this gap by applying a Multi-State Multi-Trait (MSMT) model (Eid & Diener, 1999) to a measure of egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement. MSMT models are suitable for longitudinal studies, where persons are observed repeatedly over time, without necessarily know the situation in which measurement takes place (Steyer, Schmitt, & Eid, 1999). In particular, a MSMT model for a two-wave design was used to decompose the total variance of the latent constructs measured at two occasions into three components: *consistency*, which reflects the amount of total observed variance explained by the latent trait, *occasion specificity*, which reflects the amount of total observed variance due to the situation and the situation by trait interaction, and *random error variance*.

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Within this framework, egoistic (henceforth, E) and moralistic (M) self-enhancement (SE) can be regarded as personality dispositions to the extent to which their measures reveal relatively consistent interindividual differences in self-presentation, showing only moderate fluctuations across situations. We hypothesized that E- and M-SE have a substantial degree of trait variance, in line with the hypothesis that self-enhancement mostly reflects substantive individual differences in personality (Lönqvist et al., 2007). We also expected a significant portion of state variance for both E- and M-SE, given the susceptibility of self-presentation processes to situational demands.

We then extended the latent-state-trait analysis to the Big Five personality traits. We focused on conscientiousness and emotional stability, two traits consistently related to E- and M-SE (Paulhus, 2002; Paulhus & Reid, 1991), as measured by the Self Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) and Impression Management (IM) subscales of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR, Paulhus, 1998). In the meta-analysis of Li and Bagger (2006), SDE and IM correlated .42 with conscientiousness, after controlling for sampling error and measurement unreliability. This trait includes both agentic (i.e. will to achieve) and communal (i.e. dependability) qualities (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996), that are typically endorsed by individuals high in E- and M-SE, respectively. The estimated population correlation with emotional stability was .54 for SDE, and .35 for IM. These links can be explained by the beneficial implications that overly positive self-evaluations seems to have for psychological adjustment (Taylor & Brown, 1988; but see Colvin & Block, 1994, for a different perspective).

Including personality traits has two main advantages with respect to the aims of the study. First, they provide a useful reference for interpreting the proportion of variance in E- and M-SE that is due to stable interindividual differences and situational effects. Given that the Big Five represents enduring dispositions with large genetic components (Loehlin, McCrae, Costa, & John, 1998), we expect a relatively high consistency for both conscientiousness and emotional stability. In a previous study by Deinzer et al. (1995), the proportion of trait variance for the neuroticism and conscientiousness scales of the NEO-Personality Inventory ranged from .71 to .88. Significant, though small, effects due to the situation can also be expected, due to the reactivity of personality traits to situational cues (e.g. Schutte, Malouff, Segrera, Wolf, & Rodgers, 2003). The proportion of state variance of neuroticism and conscientiousness reported by Deinzer et al. (1995) ranged from non significant values to .20.

Second, including basic traits allowed us to calculate their links with self-enhancing tendencies. In accordance with earlier results, conscientiousness and emotional stability are expected to be positively related with both E- and M-SE. Whilst this issue has been already investigated, the present research adds to the literature by examining the intercorrelations among the constructs at the level of both traits and states. This allowed us to isolate the portion of variance shared by self-enhancement and personality traits that is due to dispositional rather than situational factors. The correlations between trait components would reflect the variance shared by the constructs that is due to stable individual differences. On the contrary, correlations between state components would reflect the shared variance due to transient states affected by the characteristics of the situation in which measurement takes place.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The BFQ-2 was administered face-to-face to members of the adult population in Italy. The sample was composed of 187 partic-

ipants (64% females), ranging in age from 20 to 65 years ($M = 26.42$; $SD = 9.79$). They were resident in Rome, and varied widely in socioeconomic backgrounds. Educational levels attained included: elementary school (6.5%), junior high school (10.2%), high school (62.2%), and college (21.1%). Annual income ranged from “less than 5,000€” (3.0%) to “more than 80,000€” (7.3%), with the modal group being “from 15,000 to 29,000€” (25.4%).

2.2. Procedures

The research was introduced as a project on the assessment of personality. Respondents were recruited by approximately 50 psychology majors as part of a course assignment in Psychological Statistics at the University of Rome (Italy). Students earned course credit in exchange for participation. They were briefed on the general aims of the research, instructed on how to administer the questionnaires, and later informed of the specific objectives of the study. Each student was asked to recruit two volunteers from adult populations. Participants were required to complete the BFQ-2 in two sessions, with an interval of 4 weeks between the two occasions of measurement. As stated by Eid (1997), such period of time is short enough to exclude changes in the constructs under investigation, but also sufficiently large to minimize memory effects. In each session, the questionnaire was completed in a laboratory setting, in the presence of the student. In most cases respondents were described by the students as friends or acquaintances.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement

Participants completed the egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement (EMS) scale (Vecchione, Alessandri, & Barbaranelli, *in press*). The instrument is composed by 14 items that describe highly desirable agentic or communal qualities. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very false for me*) to 5 (*very true for me*). Example of items are: “There is nothing I have done that I could have done better” (egoistic) or “I have never told a lie” (moralistic). The scale was developed in Italian, to be included in the Big Five Questionnaire-2 (BFQ-2, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Vecchione, 2007). Items of the egoistic and moralistic self-enhancement were randomized, and mixed with personality items.

Dimensionality and criterion validity of the measure have been reported in previous studies (Vecchione, Alessandri, & Barbaranelli, *in press*) and in the Italian manual of the BFQ-2 (Caprara et al., 2007). High correlations with the BIDR (Paulhus, 1998) corroborated the construct validity of the EMS scale (Vecchione, Alessandri, & Barbaranelli, *in press*). In the present research, Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients were .76 for E-SE and .70 for M-SE at time 1, .75 and .73 at time 2. Average scores observed in our sample were close to the normative scores of the Italian general population. When converted in standard T scores, self-enhancement measures ranged on average from 47 (M-SE, females) to 50 (E-SE, males).

2.3.2. Conscientiousness and emotional stability

Participants rated (1 = very false for me; 5 = very true for me) their conscientiousness and emotional stability on 24 items taken from the BFQ-2 (Caprara et al., 2007). Examples of items are “Before completing a job I spend a lot of time revising it” (conscientiousness), and “I don’t believe I’m an anxious person” (emotional stability). Alpha reliability coefficients were .86 (T1) and .89 (T2) for conscientiousness, .90 (T1) and .92 (T2) for emotional stability. Average T scores were 49 for emotional stability and 52 for conscientiousness in both gender groups.

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