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Big Five traits interact to predict perceived social support

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have examined the simple bivariate associations between the Big Five personality traits and perceived availability of social support. The current study examined whether any of the Big Five traits interacted to predict perceived support. Participants ($N = 366$) completed a Big Five personality inventory and a measure of perceived social support. Extraversion, neuroticism and openness predicted overall social support. These same three traits interacted to predict perceived support. That is, at low levels of extraversion, low neuroticism was associated with greater perceived support irrespective of level of openness. However, as extraversion increased, the combination of low neuroticism and low openness was associated with the greatest level of perceived support. At high levels of extraversion, high neuroticism and low openness was associated with the lowest level of perceived support. Implications of these findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Various personality dimensions are related to social support coping, including all of the Big Five personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience) (Swickert, 2009). Personality traits are believed to exert an important influence on social support coping for a number of reasons. First, our personality traits often evoke reactions from those around us (Scarr & McCartney, 1983), meaning that individuals respond to us in ways that are consistent with our personality. In the context of support, an individual who is prone to experiencing anger or hostility might be more difficult to interact with, and as such would receive less support from members of her or his social network (Dehle & Landers, 2005; Fyrand, Wichstrøm, Mowm, Glennas, & Kvien, 1997). Another process by which personality affects social support coping is that it actively influences the construction of one's social support network. To illustrate, individuals who are very extraverted enjoy being around others and typically have a wide circle of friends (Henderson, 1981; Russell, Booth, Reed, & Laughlin, 1997; Swickert, Rosentreter, Hittner, & Mushrush, 2002). As such, when they find themselves in stressful situations, they have a larger number of individuals to turn to for support.

Research that has examined the relationship between Big Five personality traits and social support has shown that agreeableness,

extraversion and neuroticism seem to be most strongly related to social support, in particular, perceived availability of social support (Swickert, 2009). Perceived availability of social support refers to the perception that various forms of support are available to the individual (Cohen & Hoberman, 1983). These forms of support typically include appraisal support (having someone to talk to about their problems), belonging support (having people to do things with), self-esteem support (having a positive comparison when evaluating oneself against others), and tangible support (having someone to provide material aid). Perceived availability of social support has been found to play an important stress-buffering role when people are under high levels of stress (Cohen, 2003; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 1985). That is, it is believed to provide a protective role as individuals cope with a stressful experience by fostering a more positive interpretation of the event which, in turn, can help to reduce the individual's experience of anxiety and stress (Cohen, 2003).

Of the studies that have examined the relationship between personality and perceived social support, it has generally been found that individuals high in extraversion, high in agreeableness, and low in neuroticism report higher levels of perceived social support (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003; Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Chay, 1993; Finch & Graziano, 2001; Halamandaris & Power, 1997; Lakey & Dickinson, 1994; Swickert, Hittner, Kitos, & Cox-Fuenzalida, 2004; Swickert et al., 2002). It is not surprising that these traits show a strong relationship with perceived support, as the characteristics associated with these dimensions influence social interactions. Individuals who are high in extraversion, as compared to those low on this trait, tend to be more

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sociable and friendly. So too, individuals high in agreeableness can be described as kind and gentle, whereas those low on this dimension are viewed as demanding and selfish. Finally, those high in neuroticism are seen as easily irritated and tense, as compared to those low in this dimension. In short, these traits have an important influence on one's social relationships and as such, they are believed to play a significant role in influencing one's perception of social support. Indeed, there are many studies that have documented the bivariate relationships between these traits and perceived availability of social support (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003; Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Chay, 1993; Finch & Graziano, 2001; Halamandaris & Power, 1997; Lakey & Dickinson, 1994; Swickert et al., 2002; Swickert et al., 2004). The relationship between conscientiousness and social support as well as openness to experience and social support has not been as well studied as the relationship between the other Big Five traits and perceived social support. However, it seems reasonable to surmise that these traits could influence perceptions of social support because they, too, influence the quality of one's social interactions. As an example, conscientious individuals, as compared to those low on this trait, tend to have a strong work ethic and follow through on the promises that they make. Because of this, their social relationships should be more stable and secure given their dependability. Additionally, those high in openness to experience, as compared to those low, often are imaginative, flexible and curious; however, they also can be unconventional in their thinking. As such, these individuals may attract a wide circle of friends (Tong et al., 2004), but they also may alienate those around them if they are too eccentric. Indeed, a limited number of studies have documented a relationship between these two traits and social support processes (Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003; Lakey et al., 2002; Madjar, 2008; Tong et al., 2004). Although this research is not as extensive as the work examining the relationship between the other Big Five traits and social support, these preliminary studies seem to suggest that conscientiousness and openness to experience may have a role to play in the prediction of perceived support.

In sum, there is both theoretical and empirical evidence indicating a relationship between the Big Five traits and perceived social support. However, no studies have thoroughly examined how these personality traits might interact to predict perceived availability of social support, as the existing literature has focused on testing the simple bivariate relationships between each Big Five trait and perceived support. Examining these interactions is important because personality functioning is characterized by multiple interacting determinants rather than isolated, independent dimensions (Allport, 1961). For example, extraversion and agreeableness each share a strong relationship with perceived support. However, there may be a synergistic effect associated with these traits such that those who are high in both of these dimensions report even greater support than those scoring high on just one or the other of these personality traits. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate possible interactions between these traits in predicting social support. In investigating this issue we first examined how well all five personality traits simultaneously predicted global perceived social support. Given findings in the extant literature, it was predicted that the traits of extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism would be most strongly related to perceived social support. After determining which personality traits significantly predicted perceived support, we then examined whether these personality traits interacted to predict overall perceived support, as well as the four forms of perceived support (appraisal, belonging, self-esteem, tangible). This exploratory analysis allowed us to identify and characterize the specific interactive effects that exist among these traits.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three-hundred and sixty-six subjects were recruited from a medium-sized liberal arts college located in the southeastern region of the United States. Two-hundred and forty-nine participants were female and 117 were male. Age of the subjects ranged from 18 to 53, with the majority (81.8%) falling between 18 and 26 years old. In regards to race, 14% identified as black, 80.2% white, and 5.9% identified themselves as other.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Social support

The Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL; Cohen & Hoberman, 1983) was used to assess perceived social support. The questionnaire assesses four types of social support: appraisal, self-esteem, belonging, and tangible. The appraisal subscale measures the perceived availability of people to talk to about one's problems; the belonging subscale measures the perceived availability of people to do things with; the self-esteem subscale measures the positive comparisons a person makes when evaluating themselves against others; and the tangible subscale measures the perceived availability of resources and assistance from others. Participants marked whether the statements were mostly true (2 points) or mostly false (1 point). A high score on each of the 12-item subscales, as well as the total scale, indicates higher levels of perceived social support. In the current study, internal consistency was shown to be adequate, with alphas of .85 for the total ISEL, .72 for appraisal, .70 for belonging, .60 for self-esteem, and .64 for tangible. Information about the reliability and validity of the ISEL can be found in Cohen and Hoberman (1983).

2.2.2. Personality

The NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992a) was employed to measure participants' personality. The questionnaire contains 60 items which participants respond to by choosing from a 5 point Likert-scale. The scale is made up of five factors (agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience). Each of these factors consists of 12 items; higher scores on each scale indicate higher levels of that particular trait. In the current study, alpha was acceptable for each scale: agreeableness (.77), conscientiousness (.83), extraversion (.81), neuroticism (.88), and openness (.77). The NEO PI-R Manual contains information regarding the reliability and validity of the NEO (Costa & McCrae, 1992b).

2.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate computer science and psychology classes. Participants were tested in groups and each subject filled out a consent form and was given a packet of materials to complete, including the ISEL, NEO, and a demographic questionnaire. Upon completing the survey materials, subjects were thanked for their participation. Students received course credit for their participation.

3. Results

Prior to hypothesis testing, all variables were screened for normality and those variables with high standardized skewness values (defined as $-3 \geq z \geq +3$) were transformed using a logarithmic procedure. The transformed variables were the ISEL subscales and total scale, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion.

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