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The General Factor of Personality (GFP) and parental support: testing a prediction from Life History Theory

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Abstract

In the present study, we tested whether the General Factor of Personality (GFP) is related to the level of parental support. The GFP is assumed to occupy the apex of the hierarchy of human personality structure and is believed to reflect a socially and sexually selected aggregate of behavioral characteristics that are generally valued as "desirable" in interpersonal relationships. The relationship between the GFP and parental support tested in this study is predicted by Life History Theory, a midlevel evolutionary account of systematic differences in evolved reproductive strategies. A total of 428 families with mother, father, and two children (range 14–16 years) participated. Parents filled out personality questionnaires (Big Five) and their level of parental support. The children also independently rated the amount of support they perceived from their parents. In the present sample, parents' GFPs were found to explain 33% of the variance in the Big Five. Moreover, the parents' GFPs showed significant relationships with the parents' self-rated parental support, but also with the child-rated parental support. The monoinformant (parents ratings) and multi-informant (parent and child ratings) data support the notion of a substantive GFP that is related to the investment of parents into their offspring.

Keywords: General Factor of Personality; Life History Theory; Parental support; Big Five

1. Introduction

Personality plays an important role in studies on human behavior as it is believed to affect how individuals interact with others and how they approach a wide range of different situations. In evolutionary psychology the relevance of personality has also been acknowledged because it may affect the differential survival and reproduction of individuals (Buss, 1991). For example, certain personality profiles may enhance one's mate value and thus increase the probability of leaving high-quantity or -quality offspring (Figueredo, Sefcek, & Jones, 2006). Much of the research on personality has focused on well-known models such as the Eysenck' (1967) Psychotism, Extraversion, Neuroticism model, Gray's (1990) Behavioral inhibition and approach model, or the Big Five (Goldberg, 1981). The latter is a psychometric theory about personality stating that most individual differences in character can be described by Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness (or Altruism), and Neuroticism.

Recently however, several researchers have emphasized that a general factor can be found in various personality measures and that this General Factor of Personality (GFP) is related to evolutionary selective forces (e.g., Musek, 2007; Rushton & Irwing, 2011; Rushton, Bons, & Hur, 2008). The GFP is assumed to occupy the apex of the hierarchical structure of personality, thereby leading to correlations among many of the lower-order traits. The existence of a general factor in personality measures has already been proposed more than a century ago and has occasionally been mentioned in the literature since then. More recently, the general factor has been put into the center stage of research again (Musek, 2007) and has now been replicated in

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numerous studies, including several large meta-analyses (e.g., Rushton & Irwing, 2011; Van der Linden, Te Nijenhuis, & Bakker, 2010; Veselka, Schermer, Petrides, & Vernon, 2009). Individuals scoring high on the GFP are assumed to possess a mix of socially desirable traits and can be described as open minded, hardworking, sociable, friendly, and emotionally stable (Figueredo et al., 2006; Rushton et al., 2008). Currently, the literature provides different interpretations of the GFP. One interpretation is that the construct emerges due to a social desirability bias, implying that the GFP reflects nothing more than biased answering tendencies on personality questionnaires (e.g., Anusic, Schimmack, Pinkus, & Lockwood, 2009). Another explanation for the GFP comes from the evolutionary perspective in which socially and sexually selective pressures have shaped the GFP over evolutionary time into a suite of adaptive characteristics (Figueredo & Rushton, 2009; Rushton et al., 2008). These selective pressures might have actually brought the higher-order factor into being in a manner analogous to the evolutionary processes described by Fisher's classic model of Runaway Sexual Selection (Fisher, 1954; Nesse, 2007). As there is an ongoing debate about which of the above-described interpretations is the most plausible, there is a need for studies that gain insight into the nature of the GFP.

In the present study, we test a specific hypothesis that can be derived from the evolutionary account of the GFP, namely, that a high GFP score is related to high levels of support of parents towards their children (Figueredo et al., 2006). This expectation is derived from Life History Theory, a midlevel evolutionary account of systematic differences in evolved reproductive strategies (Wilson, 1975). Life History Theory states that in producing offspring, individuals can roughly adopt two major strategies. One is to produce many offspring with relatively little parental care. This has been labeled a *fast* life history strategy (Figueredo et al., 2006). Typical species using a fast life history strategy are several types of fish (such as the salmon) that drop millions of eggs into the water, hoping that some of them will hatch and survive. The other strategy is to produce fewer offspring but to provide a relatively large amount of parental care to better ensure their survival to reproductive age. This has been labeled a *slow* life history strategy. A typical slow-life history strategy animal (such as the elephant) has only few offspring but provides a very large amount of parental care to each one.

Although Life History Theory was originally constructed to explain differences between species, it has been shown that within species, individual differences exist in life history strategies. For example, considered on the continuum of mammalian species, humans are typically slow-life history strategists. Yet, it is evident that during human evolution and development, individual lineages have occupied niches that favor more offspring and lower parental care versus less offspring and more parental care (Figueredo et al., 2006; Figueredo, Gladden, Vásquez, Wolf, & Jones, 2009; Figueredo, Sefcek, & Olderbak, 2009; Rushton, 1985). In humans, fast or slow life history strategy is related to a broad pattern of individual differences such as speed of maturation, cohesiveness of social networks, degrees of religiosity, and also the distribution of personality traits (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2005). By definition, life history strategy should also be related to the level of parental investment, and there are now several larges studies that have indeed linked parental care with other life history variables. For example, in a large national survey containing thousands of participants, Figueredo et al. (2006) found that characteristics of a slow life history strategy were accompanied with higher levels of parental care and better family bonds (e.g., between parents and children and between spouses). Sefcek and Figueredo (2010) found similar results in a study with undergraduate students. Moreover, Del Giudice and Belsky (2011) reviewed the literature on attachment styles and argued that Life History Theory is a relevant theoretical framework in explaining attachment between parent and child. In sum, slow life history strategy is related to high levels of parental investment into offspring.

In humans, the type of life history strategy that is adopted is assumed to be closely linked to the GFP too (Rushton et al., 2008). For example, in their social survey study, Figueredo et al. (2006) examined a wide range of life history variables and found that the GFP falls into the same factor space as many other indicators of a slow life history strategy. In fact, some researchers have argued that the GFP is actually an indicator of life history strategy (e.g., Dunkel & Decker, 2010). Thus, as a slow life history strategy is linked to high GFP scores as well as to high levels of parental investment, it can be expected that high-GFP individuals provide more parental support. Such support can be in the form of resource allocation (e.g., food, money), somatic effort, or emotional support. In the current study, we examine emotional support. We focus on testing the specific and theory-driven expectation about the relationship between the GFP and parental support and do so by analyzing a large data set from the Netherlands that includes information about the parents' personality and the level of support that they provide towards their children (Harakeh, Scholte, de Vries, & Engels, 2005).

In earlier studies on Life History Theory, the relationship between parental support and the GFP has been examined before (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2006; Sefcek & Figueredo, 2010). However, the present study goes beyond this previous research because, to our knowledge, no other studies have directly examined the GFP–parental support association using multi-informant data (parents and child ratings). Yet, given the current debate about the nature of the GFP (see below), the use of such data may be particularly relevant for addressing the substantive versus artifact (e.g., social desirability bias) explanations of this construct.

1.1. Controversy surrounding the ontological status of the GFP

In discussing the research on the GFP, it is relevant to elaborate on the current controversy that surrounds the