



Do prosocial people prefer sweet-tasting foods? An attempted replication of Meier, Moeller, Riemer-Peltz, and Robinson (2012)



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ABSTRACT

Meier, Moeller, Riemer-Peltz, and Robinson (2012) reported a correlation of .36 between self-reported prosocial personality and preference for sweet-tasting foods. We examined further a possible link between having a “sweet” personality and liking sweet foods, by obtaining self- and observer reports of personality in two samples of about 300 participants each. In both samples, sweet taste preferences correlated .15 or under with self-reports and under .10 with observer reports of a prosocial personality composite based on the HEXACO factors. In one sample, the Big Five factors were also assessed, and sweet taste preferences correlated .19 with self-reports but only .06 with observer reports of Big Five Agreeableness. We conclude that prosocial personality is not substantially associated with sweet taste preferences.

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1. Introduction

In a recent article, Meier, Moeller, Riemer-Peltz, and Robinson (2012) reported that individuals having stronger preferences for sweet foods tended to have more prosocial personalities and tended to show more prosocial behaviors than did individuals with weaker preferences for sweet foods. The purpose of the present report is to investigate the relation between preference for sweet foods and prosocial personality characteristics more fully, by using a larger participant sample, a wider range of prosocial personality characteristics, and observer reports as well as self-reports of personality.

The findings of the five studies reported by Meier et al. (2012) can be summarized as follows. In Study 1, participants rated hypothetical persons as more agreeable (but not more extraverted or more emotionally stable) when those persons were described as liking sweet foods (but not when they were described as liking bitter, sour, salty, or spicy foods). In Study 2, participants' self-rated liking of sweet foods (but not of any other kind of food) was correlated with a self-report Big Five Agreeableness scale. In Study 3, participants with higher self-rated liking of sweet foods were more likely to volunteer to help others and to participate in a survey. In Study 4, participants who tasted a sweet chocolate subsequently obtained higher self-report scores on a Big Five Agreeableness scale

than did participants who tasted a non-sweet mint. In Study 5, participants who tasted a sweet chocolate subsequently volunteered more of their time for a research study than did participants who tasted a non-sweet cracker or who tasted no food at all. Although Meier et al. examined sweet taste preferences in relation to prosocial behaviors (and intentions to commit such behaviors), we focus here on the relation of sweet taste preferences with personality characteristics. This focus is due in part to the inherent interest of personality but also in part to our assumption that any link between individual differences in sweet taste preferences and in prosocial behavior should be mediated heavily, if not entirely, by prosocial personality characteristics.

Only one of the studies by Meier et al. directly examined the relation of preference for sweet-tasting foods with a prosocial personality characteristic. In that study (Study 2), self-ratings of sweet taste preferences correlated .36 with self-reports on the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999) Big Five Agreeableness scale in a sample of 55 undergraduate students. Meier et al. (p. 167) commented on this result as follows:

Study 2 revealed that there is a kernel of truth to such taste-related inferences in that agreeable individuals do, in fact, like sweet-tasting foods to a greater extent than do their disagreeable counterparts. The results of Study 2 thus provide a unique perspective on individual differences in prosocial functioning, one that focuses on intrapsychic and folk predictors of personality processes. Further, we emphasize the importance of the Study 2 findings in another way. The fact is that no prior studies of personality have sought to link personality traits to taste

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preferences, yet our results suggest that such a metaphor-based analysis appears fruitful.

However, there are some reasons to be cautious about interpreting the findings of a link between prosocial personality and sweet taste preferences. Given the small sample size ($N = 55$) of Meier et al.'s Study 2, it is possible that the population value of the correlation would be much weaker than the .36 value obtained in that study. Moreover, given that this result is based only on self-reports of personality, the question arises as to whether it would generalize to observer reports of personality as provided by close acquaintances. Presumably, if people who prefer sweet-tasting foods really are "sweeter" in the sense of being more prosocial, they should be perceived as such not only by themselves but also by persons who know them well. Given that Meier et al. found sweet taste preferences to be related to objective indicators of behavior in their Study 3, one should expect that the association with personality self-reports would not be due to any response biases or inaccurate self-perceptions and would instead generalize to observer reports of personality.

Meier et al. described the rationale for their expectation of a link between sweet taste preferences and prosocial personality characteristics in terms of metaphors in which persons who are considered to be kind tend to be described as "sweet" (or to be likened to sweet substances such as honey or sugar). That is, persons who perform kind acts tend to be perceived as being similar to substances that taste sweet. However, Meier et al. did not propose any reason to predict that kind persons should especially enjoy the taste of sweet substances. Perhaps one could construct some psychobiological theory by which prosocial persons should be particularly sensitive to the pleasant taste of sweet foods. However, one might just as easily speculate that prosocial persons would already be "sweet" enough, and thereby would have a relatively weaker preference for sweet foods than would less prosocial persons.

Since the publication of the Meier et al. (2012) report, various studies have examined further the possibility of links between sweetness and prosociality, thus extending some of the findings of that report (e.g., Chan, Tong, Tan, & Koh, 2013; Gray, 2012; Hellman, Thoben, & Echterhoff, 2013). These studies, however, are not replications of the association being examined here, that is, between prosocial personality characteristics and sweet taste preferences. One study that did attempt to replicate this association was that of Lucas and Donnellan (2014), who obtained self-reports on the IPIP Big Five scales along with the taste preferences inventory of Meier et al. from a sample of 414 participants. Lucas and Donnellan reported a correlation of .22 between IPIP Big Five Agreeableness and the sweet taste preference scale. This result, based on a much larger sample than that of Meier et al., suggests that self-reports of IPIP Big Five Agreeableness and of sweet taste preferences are in fact positively related, but that their association is considerably smaller than the .36 correlation reported by Meier et al. for their sample of 55 participants.

1.1. The present studies

In the present studies, we attempt to replicate the finding of an association between liking of sweet-tasting foods and prosocial personality characteristics. Specifically, we examine the association of self-ratings of preferences for sweet foods (and other categories of foods) with both self-reports and observer reports of personality characteristics, with a particular focus on prosocial personality characteristics. By obtaining two moderately large participant samples (each $N \approx 300$), we aimed to obtain a better estimate of the strength of any association between sweet taste preferences and prosocial personality characteristics. By

examining personality in terms of the HEXACO framework—in which three of six dimensions are implicated in prosocial versus antisocial tendencies—we aimed to capture a wider array of prosocial personality characteristics. Finally, by obtaining both self- and observer reports of personality, we aimed to ensure that any associations found in self-report data would not merely represent a tendency for persons who prefer sweet tastes to perceive themselves as prosocial persons, or even a response style. (Scales assessing sweet tastes and some scales assessing prosocial personality characteristics tend to show very high mean scores in self-report data; therefore, persons who tend *not* to indicate extreme responses on self-report items having relatively extreme mean responses may obtain below-average scores on both variables, thereby inflating any correlation.)

In the HEXACO model of personality structure, three of the six dimensions are interpreted as having theoretical relevance to prosocial or altruistic versus antisocial or antagonistic tendencies (e.g., Ashton & Lee, 2007; Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014). The HEXACO Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness (versus Anger) dimensions are considered to be relevant to two forms of reciprocally altruistic tendencies, representing the tendency to cooperate even when others could be exploited (high Honesty–Humility) and even when others seem not to be cooperating fully (high Agreeableness). The HEXACO Emotionality dimension is considered to represent a tendency to reduce risks to one's inclusive fitness through kin altruism and self-preservation (as opposed to accepting potential harms that might yield gains), and correspondingly shows higher means for women than for men. An overall altruistic or prosocial tendency is represented in the HEXACO framework as a blend of these three dimensions, and the Altruism scale of the HEXACO inventories typically divides its loadings between them.¹ Because the variance of the HEXACO Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality dimensions is generally not fully accounted for by measures of the Big Five or Five-Factor Model (see, e.g., Lee & Ashton, 2013), we could potentially identify any associations between sweet taste preferences and prosocial personality characteristics that would be missed by five-dimensional inventories. To allow a direct replication of the Meier et al. (2012) findings, and following on the work of Lucas and Donnellan (2014), we also obtained self- and observer reports on the Big Five personality factors in the second of our two samples.

We assessed sweet taste preferences—along with preferences for salty, sour, bitter, and spicy tastes—using self-rating items taken from the studies of Meier et al. (2012). We tested the hypothesis that sweet taste preferences are associated with prosocial personality characteristics by finding the correlations of the sweet taste scale with self- and observer reports on the three prosocial dimensions of the HEXACO framework—Honesty–Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness (versus Anger)—and on Big Five Agreeableness.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In Sample 1, 324 undergraduate students (63% women, median age 19 years) were recruited from universities in two provinces of Canada (Alberta and Ontario). In Sample 2, 300 undergraduate students (70% women, median age 19 years) were recruited from the same locations. In both samples, English-language fluency was a requirement for participation. Participants attended the study sessions in pairs, where members of each pair had known each other

¹ In the HEXACO framework, the intensity of social interaction corresponds to the Extraversion factor, but this dimension is roughly independent of the prosocial versus antisocial quality of that interaction.

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