



Brief Report

The Big Five personality traits and perceptions of touch to intimate and nonintimate body regions

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Abstract

This investigation tested whether (1) the Big Five personality traits contribute to favorable perceptions of touch from a relational partner, (2) participants' sex or personality better predicted positive perceptions of touch, and (3) perceptions of touch vary as a function of relationship satisfaction. A total of 305 participants aged 18–69 years completed self-report measures of reactions to touch, personality, and relationship satisfaction. Results showed that agreeableness was a significant predictor of positive perceptions of touch to both intimate and nonintimate body regions. Openness to experience was also a significant predictor in positive perceptions of touch to nonintimate body regions. Overall, personality was a stronger predictor of positive perceptions of touch than either biological sex or relationship satisfaction with the toucher. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

As one of the most intimate forms of human communication, touch is a critical component in relationship development and maintenance, and can have a substantial impact on the attitudes recipients form about the toucher (Fisher, Rytting, & Heslin, 1976). The preponderance of nonverbal research on individual differences and touch has focused on sex differences (Derlega, Lewis, Harrison, Winstead, & Costanza, 1989). Nevertheless, biological sex is not the sole contributor to perceptions of touch. Personality significantly predicts a multitude of interpersonal outcomes ranging from relationship conflict and abuse, to relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Whereas neuroticism is detrimental, agreeableness and openness to experience contribute to greater marital satisfaction (Donnelan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004). Given that personality drives much of the subjective experience of a particular relationship (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000), it is reasonable to speculate that it may also influence global evaluations of touch from a relational partner.

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Thus far, research has examined personality and the production, or encoding, of touching behaviors (McCroskey, Heisel, & Richmond, 2001). However, social scientists have yet to analyze the role of the Big Five personality traits in individual's *perceptions*, or decoding, of touch. This lack of attention is curious in light of various studies that conceptualized touch avoidance and touch comfort as stable individual differences (e.g., Andersen & Leibowitz, 1978).

The purpose of this study was to measure the extent to which personality is associated with perceptions of touch. Specifically, we sought to discover which of the Big Five personality traits, if any, would predict perceptions of touch. Given that feelings of pleasantness and warmth are among the dominant meanings associated with touch (Pisano, Wall, & Foster, 1986), we focused exclusively on measuring general positive interpretations of interpersonal touch.

Further, we sought to determine whether participant's personality or sex would account for the most variance in positive reactions to touch. Because men and women do not always interpret touch equivalently especially at increasing levels of intimacy (Johnson & Edwards, 1991), we differentiated between measures of touch to intimate and nonintimate body regions. Personality was also assessed controlling for participants' sex, given their intercorrelation (Feingold, 1994).

Finally, we included a relational dimension to our assessment. Given that the relationship to the person enacting the touch could affect outcome responses (Major, Schmidlin, & Williams, 1990), we measured how satisfied individuals were in their romantic relationship with the toucher to obtain a social context variable against which the effect of personality and sex can be compared.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants in this study were 305 adults (40% male, 60% female) ranging in age from 18–69 years ($M = 33.77$, $SD = 13.87$). The majority of participants were White (76%), followed by Hispanic or Latino/a (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (5%), African American (4%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (2%), and other/unknown (2%). The majority of participants (81%) were currently involved in a romantic relationship, and out of those who were coupled, 13% were casually dating, 21% were seriously dating, 2% were engaged, and 45% were married. Relationship length ranged from 1 month to 45 years ($M = 12.11$, $SD = 11.69$). Due to their extreme deviation from the entirety of the sample, data from three participants were removed from all subsequent analyses, resulting in an $N = 302$.

2.2. Procedure

The data presented in this report were collected as part of a larger investigation of reactions to interpersonal touch, therefore only those procedures and measures pertinent to the present report are described. Participants were recruited through 1 of 3 methods. First, 154 students from two Southwestern universities were given extra credit toward their course grade for their participation. Second, a different group of students were offered extra credit if they could refer a person over the age of 30 to participate in the study. These students furnished the names and addresses of 119 potential participants who were subsequently mailed a survey with a pre-paid envelope enclosed for return of the completed survey; which 105 people completed, resulting in an 88% response rate. Third, surveys were mailed to coaches and parents of teenagers (one parent each) from a local youth sports club, again with a pre-paid envelope included for return of the completed survey. Two hundred surveys were mailed, 11 were undeliverable and returned to sender, and 46 were completed and returned (24% response rate).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. The Big Five Inventory

The Big Five Inventory (BFI-John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to obtain a score for each of the Big Five personality traits. Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly

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