



Phobic tendency within the Five-Factor and HEXACO models of personality structure ☆,☆☆

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Abstract

Recent research has indicated that the various specific phobias are only modestly correlated with the personality dimensions of the Big Five or Five-Factor Model (B5/FFM). We tested the hypothesis that the specific phobias would be more strongly associated with the dimensions of an alternative framework, the HEXACO model of personality structure. Self-reports on the Phobic Stimuli Response Scales (PSRS) were obtained along with self- and peer reports on measures of the B5/FFM and HEXACO dimensions from a sample of 248 non-clinical participants. The PSRS variables assessing specific phobias showed stronger correlations with the HEXACO Emotionality factor than with any B5/FFM dimension, and a stronger multiple correlation with the HEXACO factors than with the B5/FFM dimensions. Findings were similar across self- and peer reports of the personality variables. The results suggest that phobic tendency can be understood in terms of normal personality variation as conceptualized in the HEXACO framework.

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1. Introduction

Much recent research in personality and clinical psychology has been aimed at understanding the links between mental disorders and the dimensions of normal personality variation. Most such investigations have employed the well-known Big Five or Five-Factor Model (B5/FFM) of personality structure, and have generally shown results consistent with the conceptual links between B5/FFM dimensions and various disorders. Many of those links involve the B5/FFM Neuroticism dimension, which has shown strong associations with a wide range of psychopathology, including various anxiety and depressive disorders (e.g., generalized anxiety disorder and major depression; see [Bienvenu et al., 2001, 2004](#); [Trull & Sher, 1994](#)) and several personality disorders (e.g., borderline, avoidant, and dependent; see [Bagby, Costa, Widiger, Ryder, & Marshall, 2005](#)).

Despite the strong links between B5/FFM Neuroticism and several anxiety and depressive disorders, recent evidence suggests that some other anxiety disorders and their underlying dispositions are rather weakly associated with this factor. In particular, the relations of B5/FFM Neuroticism with the specific (or simple) phobias—and with the fearfulness that underlies those phobias—are apparently quite modest. For example, [Cutshall and Watson \(2004\)](#) examined the relations of the B5/FFM dimensions with the Phobic Stimuli Response Scales (PSRS), which assess the fears represented within the DSM-IV phobias. Of the five PSRS variables, only the scale assessing *social* fears—and hence corresponding to DSM-IV *social* phobia—showed a rather strong association with Neuroticism ($r = .49$). The other four scales of the PSRS, which assess fears of Animals, Blood/Injections, Bodily Harm, and Physical Confinement—and hence correspond to diverse DSM-IV *specific (or simple)* phobias—yielded only modest correlations with Neuroticism ($r = .19$ to $r = .35$). Cutshall and Watson also found that social fears correlated strongly with Extraversion ($r = -.46$), whereas the other four PSRS variables were only weakly associated with that dimension (and also with the remaining B5/FFM dimensions). Thus, the results of Cutshall and Watson indicate that the fears underlying DSM-IV social phobia can largely be understood as a blend of Neuroticism and (low) Extraversion, but that the fears underlying the DSM-IV specific (or simple) phobias can only be partially understood in terms of the B5/FFM dimensions, showing only a modest link with Neuroticism.¹

Given the pattern of correlations described above, it appears that the various specific phobias are not well accommodated within the B5/FFM. This suggests one of two possibilities. First, susceptibility to specific phobias may simply represent a disposition that largely falls outside the space of the major dimensions of personality. Alternatively, susceptibility to specific phobias might be better assimilated within the space of some other model of personality structure that is more comprehensive than is the B5/FFM. The purpose of this article is to examine these two hypotheses about the location of phobic tendencies, particularly those involving the specific phobias, within the space of the major dimensions of normal personality variation.

¹ Similar results were reported by [Bienvenu et al. \(2001, 2004\)](#): Persons diagnosed with social phobia averaged nearly one standard deviation higher in Neuroticism and nearly one standard deviation lower in Extraversion than did persons not diagnosed with any depressive or anxiety disorder; in contrast, persons diagnosed with simple (specific) phobia averaged only about half of a standard deviation higher in Neuroticism and less than half of a standard deviation lower in Extraversion than did the non-diagnosed persons.

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