



A general factor of personality: Evidence for the Big One in the five-factor model

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Abstract

Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses using different personality measures in three samples confirmed the existence of general factor of personality (The Big One) within the five-factor model. The Big One is characterized by high versus low Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Openness, and by high versus low higher-order factors of personality, Stability, and Plasticity. A comprehensive theoretical model of personality structure was therefore proposed with the Big One at the highest level of the hierarchy. The Big One was interpreted as a basic personality disposition that integrates the most general non-cognitive dimensions of personality. It is associated with social desirability, emotionality, motivation, well-being, satisfaction with life, and self-esteem. It also may have deep biological roots, evolutionary, genetic, and neurophysiological.

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1. General factor of personality

Hierarchical structural models have been established in different psychological domains including human abilities and intelligence (Burt, 1941; Carroll, 1993; Cattell, 1971, 1987; Horn, 1988, 1994; Jäger, 1967; Jensen, 1998; Spearman, 1904, 1927; Sternberg and Grigorenko, 2002; Vernon, 1971, 1989), personality (Costa & McCrae, 1992a; Cattell, 1950, 1957, 1965, 1987; Eysenck, 1947, 1952, 1970, 1991; Goldberg, 1990; Guilford, 1959; Hampson, 1988; Hampson, John, & Goldberg, 1986; John, 1990; McCrae & Costa,

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1998), emotionality (Diener, Smith, & Fujita, 1995; Larsen & Diener, 1992; Tellegen, 1985; Watson & Clark, 1993), motivation (Cattell, 1957; Cattell, Radcliffe, & Sweney, 1963; Elliot & Thrash, 2002), self-concept (Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988), and values (Musek, 1993a, 1993b, 1998, 2000; Schwartz, 1994; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990). Interestingly, only within the ability and self-concept domains, the existence of only one single general factor on the top of the structural hierarchy has been convincingly confirmed. In all other domains, the highest-order solutions vary from two or three to five or more basic factors.

The notion of a single general factor of intelligence (*g*), based on positive inter-correlations among tests, was promoted as early as the beginning of the 20th century (Spearman, 1904, 1927). In the contrast, the single factor position is virtually non-existent in hierarchical structural models of personality. In several structural models of personality, different numbers of highest-order dimensions have been proposed. Cattell's structural taxonomy of personality (Cattell, 1946, 1950, 1957), containing 16 primary factors, could be reasonably reduced to second-order or even third-order factors, yet never resulted in the single general factor solution. Eysenck (1947, 1970, 1986, 1991) developed a model with 3 so-called basic dimensions of personality, Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism. Eysenck's dimensions are not correlated, leaving thus no further place for more general dimensions. Another line of research led to the circumplex models of personality structure (Wiggins, 1979) that are by definition incompatible with the single factor position in structural modeling of personality traits. In the past decades, the structural model of personality that has attracted the most research interest has been the five-factor model (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1981, 1990; John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1998). The model emerged from the lexical tradition in personality research (Goldberg, 1981), and proposed five very broad dimensions of personality, so called Big Five or B5: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and (Intellectual) Openness (some other labels for each factor have been also applied by different authors and some have been reversely coded, e.g. Emotional Stability for Neuroticism). In the first phase, the five factors have been interpreted as dimensions of implicit (lay-person) theory of personality (Norman, 1963; Passini & Norman, 1966). Later, the Big Five have been progressively recognized as basic factors of real interpersonal differences (Goldberg, 1981), and finally, the five-factor model became the leading taxonomy of personality structure (Costa & McCrae, 1992b, 1992c; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; John, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1998).

The first proponents of the five-factor model of personality view the Big Five as robust, orthogonal and therefore irreducible basic dimensions of personality. The confidence in the independence of the Big Five has been further reinforced by the fact that most studies of the Big Five performed orthogonal rotation of factors. However, even if the measures of the Big Five have been constructed on the basis of varimax rotated factors, they tend to correlate (Becker, 1999; Costa & McCrae, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Digman, 1997). This fact was also the reason why Eysenck denied the fundamentality of the Big Five (Eysenck, 1991, 1992). There is strong evidence that the Big Five are not orthogonal, and the correlations between the Big Five increase to substantial levels if oblique solutions were used in factor-analytic procedures (Becker, 1999, 2002; Block, 1995; Digman, 1997; John & Srivastava, 1999; Ostendorf & Angleitner, 1994; Wiggins & Trapnell, 1996).

Digman (1997) performed a meta-analysis of the Big Five-factor correlations from 14 studies and found very clear evidence for two higher-order factors, labeled Alpha and Beta. Superfactor Alpha saturated the Big Five dimensions Agreeableness, Conscientious-

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