“That line’s got personality!” – The Big 5 as a Model of Personality Perception

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Abstract

Personality – enduring traits describing how people tend to think and behave – often is described by the Big 5 model. Everything people do and think can be described as representing 1 of 5 more general traits. Though the Big 5 model has been posited to describe actual thought and behavior, the current work tested the hypothesis that personality ratings would fit the Big 5 model even when the target being rated does not have a personality in any meaningful sense. Supporting this hypothesis, the Big 5 model showed acceptable fit for describing a person (consistent with past work), but also a straight line drawn on paper, something that should not have personality in any meaningful sense. The Big 5 model thus does not necessarily describe actual thought and behavior but instead the structure of personality perception.

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Human personality (i.e., the enduring mental and behavioral dispositions of individuals) is highly complex. Evidence indicates that personality can be viewed usefully in terms of 5 dimensions or factors: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (e.g., Goldberg, 1993; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Each and every personality trait can be viewed as representing 1 of 5 more general traits. In the current work, we contend that the explanatory power of the Big 5 model is even broader yet than previous researchers have suggested – the big 5 model also describes personality perception. Each and every personality trait can be viewed as being 1 of 5 more general ways of how people view

Other people.

A full understanding of the structure of personality entails two primary components. As past research demonstrates, one is the actual personality that individuals experience or display, that is, the thoughts and feelings they experience and the behaviors they enact. A second component, that we wish to highlight, is the perception of personality or the making of personality judgments. Even if thought and behavior truly were random and had no structure, people might perceive personality as having structure (e.g., see Ivry & Knight, 2002). In the current study, we tested the veracity of this latter component by having participants make personality judgments of a line drawn on paper, a stimulus that surely has no personality in any meaningful sense of the psychological construct. If the Big 5 model describes personality perception, in addition to personality, then ratings of the line should conform to the Big 5 model, at least to some extent. To compare the extent to which the Big 5 model describes personality perception with the extent to which it describes actual personality, we also had participants provide trait ratings of a friend. We hypothesized and confirmed that the Big 5 model would provide reasonable fit for ratings of both the line and the friend, indicating that the Big 5 model applies to both personality (ratings of the friend) and personality perception (ratings of the line).

Method

Two-hundred and eighty-six undergraduates participated in exchange for credit toward fulfilling a course requirement. They received a packet of questionnaires that contained two sets of trait ratings embedded among filler questionnaires, presented in random order. For the ratings, participants were presented with 48 personality traits (see Table 1 for a list of traits and the factors on which they load) used in research on the Big 5 (Goldberg, 1992). For one set of traits, participants were presented with a line (10.16 cm in length) drawn at the top of the page. They were asked to rate the extent to which each trait described the line, using a scale from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 9 (extremely accurate). The instructions also stated that participants should “base their responses on the line and nothing else”, and that “this task may seem strange, but make sure to take it seriously and do your best.” For the other set of traits, participants were asked to think of a person they know fairly well and to indicate the extent to which each trait accurately described that person.

Results

The data and approach to statistical analysis (i.e., the syntax for analyses) are available for download at: http://www.psychwiki.com/wiki/The_Big_5_as_a_Model_of_Personality_Perception: % E2%80%9CThat%20line%E2%80%99s%20got%20personality%21%E2%80%9D#References.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the extent to which the Big 5 model fit participants’ trait ratings. Indices of fit consisted of the ratio between the chi-square statistic and its degrees of freedom, the normed fit index (NFI; Bentler & Bonett, 1980), the incremental fit index (IFI; Bollen, 1989), the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Browne & Cudeck, 1993). For the chi-square ratio, a ratio of 5 or less represents acceptable fit (Eisen, Wilcox, Leff, Schaefer, & Culhane 1999). For the indices of NFI, IFI, and CFI, values closer to 1 indicate better fit, with values greater than .90 suggesting most reasonable fit (Bentler & Bonett, 1980). For RMSEA, values closer to 0 indicate better fit, with values less than .08 suggesting most reasonable fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

For participants’ ratings of their friend, the Big 5 model showed acceptable fit to the data, chi-square ratio = 2.80, NFI = .91, IFI = .94, CFI = .94, RMSEA = .08. This is consistent with past research (e.g., see John & Srivastava, 1999), indicating that the Big 5 adequately describes the structure of personality.

For participants’ ratings of the line, the Big 5 model also showed acceptable fit, chi-square ratio = 3.40, NFI = .86, IFI = .90, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .09. Although the fit was less acceptable than for participants’ ratings of their friend, the Big 5 also described the line. Similar results have been viewed as indicating acceptable fit in past research in the behavioral sciences (e.g., Chow, Snowden, & McConnell, 2001).
Discussion

The descriptive value of the Big 5 model is broader than describing personality alone—it describes also personality perception. Even when making personality judgments of stimuli that do not have personality, such as a line or random stimuli, judgments will show reasonable correspondence to the 5 factors. The Big 5 is a structure indicating how people view human personality.

Although the Big 5 model fits personality perception, the Big 5 seems even better equipped to account for actual personality—that is, the thoughts and behaviors of individuals. The results indicated that the Big 5 model more adequately explained personality ratings for a friend than for a line—though it explained both. Likewise, past work on people and monkeys, for example, has also found better fit than we did for the line.

When using the Big 5 model, it should kept in mind that perception plays a role, albeit a smaller role than actual personality. How might this be accomplished? One approach is to obtain personality ratings for stimuli that do not have personality (in any meaningful sense of the construct, such as a line) and to compare the extent to which the Big 5 model describes these ratings with the ratings under investigation. Another approach would be to statistically control for the extent to which stimuli without personality while conducting factor analysis using the Big 5.

Personality ultimately is comprised of actual thought and behavior plus the perception of thought and behavior. Actual thought and behavior cannot be placed directly into factor analysis, and thus current methods of measuring personality include perception. The Big 5 model thus applies to personality perception.

We perceive only certain behaviors, and it is these perceptions that shape personality. An early morning smile is more often noticed than the wiggling of toes, for example, and it is the smile that shapes personality. Personality, in the psychological sense of the word, ultimately is based on perception.

References

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Traits</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>agreeable, cold, considerate, cooperative, helpful, kind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pleasant, rude, selfish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>careful, careless, conscientious, disorganized, efficient, neat,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>organized, practical, sloppy, undependable</td>
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<td>Extraversion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>withdrawn</td>
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<td>Neuroticism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>nervous, relaxed, touchy</td>
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<td>Openness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>philosophical, unadventurous, uncreative, unimaginative, unintelligent</td>
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