Personality, Stress and Coping Section

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Overview: Personality traits are dimensions of individual differences in the tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions. Traits are important because their influence is pervasive: They affect personal interactions and social support, health habits and somatic complaints, attitudes and values, ways of coping, occupational and recreational interests, and much more. For the past 20 years, research in this laboratory has utilized a particular version of trait structure, the Five-Factor Model, and an instrument developed to assess 30 specific traits that define the five factors, the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R). Work in the past year has emphasized basic research on the generalizability of the model and its development in adulthood across cultures.

Cross-Cultural Studies of the Five-Factor Model: Cross-cultural studies are of immense importance in personality psychology, because the major variables thought to affect personality development?genetic inheritance, early family environment, and social structural variables such as class, political climate, and religious traditions?cannot feasibly or ethically be manipulated. Personality psychologists must depend on natural experiments, and many of these are provided by comparing individuals across cultures.

Since the publication of the NEO-PI-R in 1992, researchers outside the U.S. have translated the instrument into over 40 different languages, and many have collected data for their own research purposes. In collaboration with these investigators, we have recently conducted cross-cultural studies of personality structure and development. In the first of these we reported an analysis of personality structure in Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese samples. Using statistical methods developed in part in this Laboratory, we showed that the Five-Factor Model is well replicated in both these non-Indo-European languages. Subsequent research has extended this finding to several other languages?in fact, to date no study using an authorized translation, adequate sample size, and appropriate analysis has failed to replicate the five-factor structure of the NEO-PI-R. These data suggest that the Five-Factor Model may be a human universal.

American studies of adult personality development can be summarized by saying that three of the factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness) decrease, whereas the other two (Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) increase with age; most of the change occurs between age 18 and age 30. These cross-sectional differences might reflect cohort effects attributable to the historical experience of different generations of Americans. But other nations have had very different histories during the same period, and if age differences are due to cohort effects, it is unlikely that the same kinds of age differences would emerge in cross-sectional studies in those countries. However, reanalysis of data provided by collaborators in twelve countries (including Portugal, Russia, Turkey, Croatia, and South Korea) show very similar patterns of age differences, suggesting that these may perhaps best be interpreted as effects of intrinsic maturation.

In the first half of this century, anthropologists attempted to assess the modal personality of various groups and relate personality to features of culture. In an updating of this endeavor,
recent analyses have examined the mean levels of personality traits across cultures. Preliminary results suggest that personality profiles obtained in different languages or versions are comparable to the original, that subgroups (men and women, students and adults) from the same culture have similar personality profiles, and that culture-level analyses of personality traits show the same Five-Factor structure seen in analyses at the individual level.

The Origins of Personality - Behavior Genetics: According to Five-Factor Theory, personality traits are endogenous basic tendencies. Genetic factors are expected to play a major role in their origin and development, whereas environmental factors like culture should play a minor role. In collaboration with Swedish researchers, we published one of the first studies on the heritability of Openness to Experience, and we collaborated with John Loehlin and Oliver John to reanalyze the classic National Merit Twin Study data for all five factors. A collaboration with behavior geneticists in Canada and Germany suggests that the five factors are strongly heritable in both these two cultures. In addition, that study demonstrates that more narrow and specific facet-level traits are also substantially heritable. Thus, it appears that there is a genetic basis for many of the details of personality, as well as the broad outlines.

Genetic covariance analyses are used to examine the origins of covariation between traits. In previous research, it has been claimed that the phenotypic structure is unaffected by shared environmental influences, but is mirrored by both genetic influences and non-shared environmental influences. However, non-shared environmental influences are estimated as a residual term that includes measurement bias. When we supplemented Canadian and German twin data with cross-observer correlations from American samples, measurement bias was reduced, and the phenotypic structure appeared to be due only to genetic influences.

Studies of Openness to Experience: Openness to Experience is the least well understood of the five personality factors. Different versions of the factor have been labeled Culture, Inquiring Intellect, Imagination, and Independence of Judgment. As assessed by the NEO-PI-R, Openness is seen in Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values, and is thus much broader than labels such as Intellect suggest. Correlational studies in the BLSA have shown that Openness is empirically related to a wide variety of constructs, including Jung's Intuition, Hartmann's Thin Boundaries, Tellegen's Absorption, and Murray's Need for Sentience, as well as to corresponding factors in alternative measures of the Five-Factor Model (e.g., Goldberg's Intellect). It shows smaller, if still significant, correlations with measures of intelligence and divergent thinking ability.

This body of empirical findings has been used to develop a conceptualization of Openness with both motivational and structural aspects. Although Openness is essentially a matter of differences in the internal processing of experience, it has far-reaching consequences in social interactions. A review of the literature showed that Openness or related constructs were important for understanding cultural innovation, political ideology, social attitudes, marital choice, and interpersonal relations.