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RESEARCH WITH PERSONALITY

My major research interest is in the field of personality. Personality affects much of what people do in their daily lives and is empirically related to many important life outcomes including academic and job performance, quality of interpersonal relationships, psychological well-being, leadership, and even mortality and longevity. Having practiced as a clinical psychologist in public and private mental health settings, I found personality testing very useful in understanding people and answering practical questions. Because of its ubiquitous relevance to a variety of disciplines, some scholars have argued that personality should be a core organizing construct in the social sciences.

Traits are a basic component of personality and are central in defining the self. Personality traits are dispositional patterns of thinking, acting, and feeling that are relatively consistent and enduring.

The English language includes thousands of trait-related words. Researchers have attempted to determine which traits are most important. Based on extensive statistical analyses, a broad consensus in the field has converged on five domains as the fundamental traits of human personality: Extraversion versus introversion, Agreeableness versus antagonism, Emotional Stability versus neuroticism, Conscientiousness versus heedlessness, and Openness to Experience versus closed to experience. These “Big Five” appear to be the basic traits in widely diverse cultures. Interestingly, the Big Five also reliably characterize the behavior of a variety of animal species.

The “Big Two”

Recent research suggests there are two broad, higher-order dimensions of the Big Five. However, the nature of these constructs is unclear. The first dimension is comprised of Extraversion and Openness to Experience, and the second includes Agreeableness, Emotional Stability, and Conscientiousness. A question that captured my interest is, “What are these underlying dimensions?” It is essential to identify the fundamental elements of personality traits in order to understand why they are the most basic dimensions.

In research currently in press I posit that Extraversion and Openness to Experience share a common dimension labeled **Engagement**. Extraversion entails social engagement, and Openness to Experience involves experiential engagement (intellectual, behavioral, emotional, and aesthetic). Individuals differ in their typical level of engagement. Thus, some persons tend to be highly engaged (e.g., enthusiastic, interested, curious, active) and others are typically disengaged (e.g., detached, uninvolved, passive, apathetic). Most people fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Traits associated with Engagement are empirically related to variables such as active classroom participation among college students, positive emotions, innovation, the experience of inspiration, and pursuit of novel and intense experiences. Engagement traits are also correlated with historians' ratings of presidential greatness. The greatest U.S. presidents were more socially and especially experientially engaged and involved than lesser presidents.

I posit that the other three Big Five traits reflect **Self Control**. This dimension entails interpersonal self-control (Agreeableness), emotional self-control (Emotional Stability), and task-oriented self-control (Conscientiousness). These three traits encompass self control of critically important areas of human functioning: interpersonal relations, internal emotions, and external tasks. The Self Control dimension is associated with restraint, inhibition of hostile, uncooperative, and irresponsible behavior, and control of distressing emotions. Studies have shown that persons who score high on these Self Control traits a) show effective job performance, b) tend not to have personality disorders, and c) display fewer problematic work-related behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, stealing, substance abuse).

There may be an evolutionary basis for Engagement and Self Control traits. An individual must engage the environment in order to obtain resources for nourishment, shelter, and growth. Engagement would increase the chances that the individual would explore and pursue goals that foster evolutionary tasks such as survival and reproduction. Over time, humans have evolved highly complex and sophisticated forms of engagement with their environment. Self Control, the second trait dimension, also provides numerous adaptive benefits. Survival is generally enhanced by control of potentially rash and hasty actions and by thorough consideration of consequences. Inhibition of impulsive responses may help avoid exposure to predators, enemies, disease, and other dangers. Careful planning and foresight increase the odds of securing necessary resources such as food and shelter. Control of emotional reactions such as rage and hostility facilitates formation of cooperative alliances and successful pair-bonding.

These two higher-order trait factors appear to constitute the basis of an elegantly designed personality system. Using a mechanical metaphor, Engagement and Self Control may be conceptualized as *Go* (accelerator) and *Stop* (brake) systems, respectively. The Engagement dimension reflects the degree of the individual's engagement in his or her inner and outer world, from relative quiescence and minimal engagement (No Go) to "full throttle" involvement and maximal participation (Go). The Self Control dimension, the brake or Stop system, reflects the degree of self-restraint (controlled versus uncontrolled). For any given person, either the accelerator and/or brake may typically be depressed fully, partially, or not all. These multiple possible combinations lead to the variety of personality trait styles seen in humans.

Research has shown that, on average, the level of Engagement traits declines somewhat during adulthood whereas Self Control traits increase. It makes adaptive sense that Engagement should be greater at earlier stages of life when the individual lacks experience and would most benefit from exploring numerous opportunities for

accomplishing major life objectives. With increasing life experience and progress in achieving one's goals, there may be less need for, and interest in, social and experiential engagement. Increased Self Control during adulthood may reflect peoples' experience with aversive outcomes and their attempts to restrain behaviors that lead to undesirable consequences. For example, the increase in Agreeableness may reflect learning to behave in ways that minimize rejection or punishment from others. The increase in Emotional Stability may stem from learning how to control one's emotions so as to reduce emotional distress.

Traits are only one component of the complex phenomenon of personality. This research is part of my own intellectual engagement and curiosity about the nature of personality, the functions it serves, and its relation to real-world behaviors.