

Big Five Personality Traits

A personality trait is a characteristic pattern of thinking, feeling, or behaving that tends to be consistent over time and across relevant situations. The Big Five—Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to Experience—are a set of five broad, bipolar trait dimensions that constitute the most widely used model of personality structure. A considerable body of research has examined personality stability and change across the life span, as well as the influence of personality traits on important life outcomes, in terms of the Big Five.

Definitions and Evidence

Each of the Big Five represents a broad set of related behavioral characteristics. For example, Extraversion represents individual differences in social engagement, assertiveness, and energy level. Highly extraverted individuals enjoy socializing with others, are comfortable expressing themselves in group situations, and frequently experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm and excitement; in contrast, introverted individuals tend to be socially and emotionally reserved. Agreeableness captures differences in compassion, respectfulness, and acceptance of others. Agreeable individuals experience emotional concern for others' well-being, treat others with regard for their personal rights and preferences, and hold generally positive beliefs about others; disagreeable individuals tend to have less regard for others, and for social norms of politeness. Conscientiousness represents differences in organization, productiveness, and responsibility. Highly conscientious individuals prefer order and structure, work persistently to pursue their goals, and are committed to fulfilling their duties and obligations, whereas unconscientious individuals are comfortable with disorder and less motivated to complete tasks.

Neuroticism (sometimes referred to by its socially desirable pole, Emotional Stability) captures differences in the frequency and intensity of negative emotions. Highly neurotic individuals are prone to experiencing anxiety, sadness, and mood swings, whereas emotionally stable individuals tend to remain calm and resilient, even in difficult circumstances. Finally, Openness to Experience (sometimes referred to as Intellect) represents differences in intellectual curiosity, aesthetic sensitivity, and imagination. Highly open individuals enjoy thinking and learning, are sensitive to art and beauty, and generate original ideas, whereas close-minded individuals tend to have a narrow range of intellectual and creative interests.

Evidence for the Big Five comes from research examining both everyday language use and formal personality tests. Psycholexical studies—which compare personality-descriptive language across cultures—have found that many of the world’s languages include words synonymous with each of the Big Five, and that the Big Five structure can be recovered from personality ratings made using representative sets of personality-descriptive adjectives in these languages. Moreover, the traits measured by many formal personality tests—including tests that predate the current scientific consensus around the Big Five structure—can be organized in terms of the Big Five. Thus, the Big Five appear to adequately capture the structure of both lay and expert personality descriptions.

Lifespan Development

A considerable body of research has examined how and why the Big Five develop across the life span. Youth versions of the Big Five can be observed and reliably measured by middle childhood. However, some traits manifest through different behaviors during different developmental periods. Behavioral genetics research has shown that each of the Big Five is influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, and that each trait is genetically heritable

to an approximately equal degree. However, research attempting to identify the specific genetic and neurological substrates of the Big Five has had only limited success to date, suggesting that each trait has a complex biological basis.

Other research has examined stability and change in the Big Five over time. In terms of rank-order stability—the extent to which the ordering of individuals from highest to lowest remains consistent over time—personality traits are moderately stable by middle childhood. Rank-order stability then increases with age (a pattern known as the cumulative continuity principle), reaching a plateau during late middle age. However, the rank-order stability of the Big Five is not perfect at any age, indicating that some individuals continue to change throughout the life span.

Mean-level change concerns whether the average score on a trait increases or decreases with age. The most marked patterns of mean-level change in the Big Five occur during adolescence and young adulthood. For example, some negative patterns of personality development occur from middle childhood into adolescence, including decreases in Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. Developmental research also indicates that girls exhibit higher levels of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness than boys from a young age, and that they show higher levels of Neuroticism than boys by mid-adolescence. In contrast with the negative patterns observed during childhood and early adolescence, the Big Five show predominantly positive age trends from late adolescence into adulthood. Specifically, most individuals become more conscientious, agreeable, and emotionally stable from late adolescence through middle age (a pattern known as the maturity principle). The positive mean-level trends in agreeableness and emotional stability continue into late adulthood, and older adults who show negative personality changes are at increased risk for disease and mortality.

Research examining the causes and correlates of personality development indicates that change in the Big Five is influenced by both biological and environmental factors. Individual differences in personality change are somewhat heritable (suggesting a biological influence), but have also been linked with a variety of life experiences (suggesting an environmental influence). For example, changes in Conscientiousness tend to be preceded or accompanied by important social role experiences such as marriage and work, whereas changes in Neuroticism tend to co-occur with negative life events. Cultural research has found that patterns of mean-level change in the Big Five are generally similar across a variety of cultures (suggesting a possible evolutionary basis), but that cultural differences in these patterns may be linked with the culture-specific timing of social role experiences (suggesting a cultural influence). Better understanding the causes and correlates of stability and change in the Big Five remains an active area of research.

Prediction of Life Outcomes

Each of the Big Five has been shown to predict a number of important life outcomes. For example, extraversion consistently predicts social outcomes. Highly extraverted individuals tend to have more friends and dating partners, and are seen by their peers as having higher social status. They generally prefer and perform better in social and enterprising occupations, and are more likely to adopt community leadership roles. Psychologically, extraverts tend to experience greater subjective well-being than introverts, especially in terms of the frequency and intensity of positive emotions.

Agreeableness is associated with a number of affiliative and prosocial outcomes. For example, highly agreeable individuals tend to be better liked by their peers, and their close relationships tend to be more stable and satisfying. They generally prefer social occupations and

are more likely to hold religious beliefs, perform volunteer work, and serve in community leadership roles. Agreeable individuals are also less likely to engage in criminal behavior.

Conscientiousness is an important predictor of achievement and health related outcomes. Highly conscientious students tend to earn higher grades, and conscientious workers tend to perform better in a variety of occupations. Highly conscientious individuals also tend to live longer, reflecting their tendency to engage in healthy behaviors (e.g., exercising, maintaining a healthy diet) and avoid risky behaviors (e.g., smoking, substance abuse, criminal behavior). They are also more likely to hold conservative political attitudes and religious beliefs.

Neuroticism is negatively associated with subjective well-being and psychological health. For example, highly neurotic individuals tend to experience lower levels of overall life satisfaction, as well as lower satisfaction in a number of specific life domains (e.g., job and relationship satisfaction). They are also at increased risk for various forms of psychopathology, including anxiety and mood disorders.

Openness to Experience is most strongly associated with intellectual and creative outcomes. Highly open individuals tend to score higher on tests of creativity and intelligence, and to pursue scientific and artistic occupations. They are also more likely to hold liberal political and social attitudes, and to describe themselves as spiritual (but not necessarily religious).

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Cross-References

See also Emotions; Longitudinal versus Cross-Sectional Design, Analysis; Personality; Social Relationships; Stability; Well-Being; Work

Further Readings

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