

The Behaviour of People at Work

Lecture Title: Personality



Lecturer: Sonya Sammut B.SC., M.SC., M.ENT.

Date: 31 October 2022



Focus on the individual

The Central Six and the Big 5 Personality Traits



Course Outline



Module 1. About people and about the workplace: the fundamentals



Module 2. A trip to the biology department: basics of evolutionary theory



Module 3. Focus on the individual: the Central Six and the Big Five personality traits



Module 4. A focus on the individual: sex differences



Module 5. Emotions at work: the function of coordinating mechanisms



Module 3: A Focus on the Individual: Personality

Personality and the Big 5:

- Personality in organisational behaviour
- Human personality traits
- General intelligence
- Measuring the Big 5
- Extraversion
- Neuroticism/emotional stability
- Openness
- Conscientiousness
- Agreeableness
- Fitness benefits of the Big 5



Personality in organisational behaviour

- Personality encompasses the relatively stable feelings, thoughts, and behavioral patterns a person has.
- Our personality differentiates us from other people and understanding someone's personality gives us clues about how that person is likely to act and feel in a variety of situations.
- In order to effectively manage organisational behavior, an understanding of different employees' personalities is helpful. Having this knowledge is also useful for placing people in jobs and organisations.



Personality and behaviour in organisations

- Is our behavior in organisations dependent on our personality? To some extent, yes, and to some extent, no.
- For example, having a sociable and outgoing personality may encourage people to seek friends and prefer social situations. This does not mean that their personality will immediately affect their work behavior.
- At work, we have a job to do and a role to perform. Therefore, our behavior may be more strongly affected by what is expected of us, as opposed to how we want to behave.
- When people have a lot of freedom at work, their personality will become a stronger influence over their behavior.



Turning to evolutionary biology

- “All living humans are evolutionary success stories.” David Buss, evolutionary psychologist. That’s a rather refreshing thought, isn’t it?
- And it’s true.
- We have each inherited the mechanisms of mind and body that led to our ancestors’ achievements in producing descendants.
- If any of our ancestors had failed along the way to survive, mate, reproduce, and solve problems, they would not have become ancestors.
- As their descendants, we hold magical keys – adaptive mechanisms that led to success.



The traits are independent of each other

- Surprisingly, the Central Six are not much correlated with one another. In fact, they are almost statistically independent – knowing a person's score on one trait gives you almost no information about their other traits.
- The only major exception is that general intelligence has a modest positive correlation with openness: bright people tend to be more interested than average in new experiences, travel, culture, and aesthetics.



Measuring your Big 5

- The Big Five can now be measured with moderate accuracy, using a self-rating scale, in about a minute.
- The psychologists Beatrice Rammstein and Oliver John published a Big Five scale in 2007 called the BFI-10 that uses just 10 questions.



Measuring your Big Five

- After each statement below, write down a number from 1 to 5 to represent how well the statement describes your personality, where:

1 = disagree strongly

2 = disagree a little

3 = neither agree nor disagree

4 = agree a little

5 = agree strongly



I see myself as someone who...

1. Has an active imagination
2. Only has a few artistic interests
3. Does a thorough job
4. Tends to be lazy
5. Is generally trusting
6. Tends to find fault with others
7. Is relaxed, handles stress well
8. Gets nervous easily
9. Is outgoing, sociable
10. Is reserved

1 = disagree strongly
2 = disagree a little
3 = neither agree nor disagree
4 = agree a little
5 = agree strongly



Interpretation

- Items 1 and 2 concern openness;
- 3 and 4 conscientiousness;
- 5 and 6 concern agreeableness;
- 7 and 8 concern emotional stability;
- And 9 and 10 concern extraversion.

For each successive pair of items, subtract the number you wrote for the even-numbered item from the number you wrote for the odd-numbered item, and that gives you the score for the corresponding Big Five trait.

- Scores can range from -4 (very low on the trait) to +4 (very high on the trait), with 0 being about average.



Openness in organisations

- People high in openness seem to thrive in situations that require being flexible and learning new things, and they do well in training settings.
- They also have an advantage when they enter into a new organisation; their open-mindedness leads them to seek a lot of information and feedback, which leads to quicker adjustment to the new job.
- When supported, they tend to be creative - open people are highly adaptable to change. Compared to people low in openness, they are also more likely to start their own business.



Openness from a biological perspective

- Openness to experience is a piquant trait, delectable to some but disgusting to others.
- At first glance, it seems to be unalloyed good – openness is positively related to artistic creativity, and it is known that women find creativity attractive.
- The core of openness is a divergent cognitive style, that seeks novelty and complexity.
- This unusual thinking style can lead to high functioning as well as psychosis and depression.



The two sides of openness

- Whether this trait leads to success or disorder depends on the degree to which it is manifested, and the interactions with other traits and developmental events.
- For example, innovation and entrepreneurship are linked to a high degree of openness, which means that these people seek novelty, new ideas and business opportunities and are more willing to take them.



Conscientiousness on the job

- Conscientiousness is the one personality trait that uniformly predicts how high a person's performance will be, across a variety of occupations and jobs. In fact, conscientiousness is the trait most desired by recruiters and results in the most success in interviews.
- This is not a surprise, because conscientious people have higher levels of motivation to perform, lower levels of turnover, lower levels of absenteeism, and higher levels of safety performance at work.
- Finally, it seems that conscientiousness is a good trait to have for entrepreneurs. Highly conscientious people are more likely to start their own business, and their firms have longer survival rates.



Agreeableness in action at the workplace

- Not surprisingly, agreeable people help others at work consistently, and they are also less likely to retaliate when other people treat them unfairly.
- Agreeable people may be a valuable addition to their teams and may be effective leaders because they create a fair environment when they are in leadership positions.
- On the other hand, people who are not agreeable are shown to quit their jobs unexpectedly, perhaps in response to a conflict they engage with a boss or a peer.



When to choose agreeable

- Does this mean that we should only look for agreeable people when hiring? Some jobs may actually be a better fit for someone with a low level of agreeableness.
- Think about it: When hiring a lawyer, would you prefer a kind and gentle person, or a pit bull?
- Also, high agreeableness has a downside: Agreeable people are less likely to engage in constructive and change-oriented communication. Disagreeing with the status quo may create conflict and agreeable people will likely avoid creating such conflict, missing an opportunity for constructive change.



Conscientiousness and agreeableness in a social context

- These two traits are often thought of as being pure in their benefits because they are negatively related to criminality and anti-social behaviour.
- It is important to remember, however, that natural selection favours success that often comes at the expense of others, so fitness can be increased by an ability to demand a free ride, break the rules, and cheat on others in some circumstances.



Agreeableness as a special trait

- Agreeableness is not just one of the Big Five personality traits.
- Construed more broadly as a personal capacity for empathy, kindness, and benevolence, and as a desire for egalitarianism and social justice, agreeableness is at the heart of human altruism and social progressivism.
- It is the rare product of natural selection and sexual selection that makes our species seem to transcend the otherwise selfish imperatives of our species.



The downside of agreeableness

- In as much as agreeableness facilitates social interactions and cooperation, it is highly advantageous – agreeable individuals are valued as friends and coalition partners.
- On the other hand, excessive trusting or attention to the needs of others, is detrimental to fitness. Among modern executives, for example, agreeableness is negatively related to status and remuneration.
- The costs of an empathic style may be in terms of exploitation or inattention to personal fitness gains.



Conscientiousness from a biological perspective

- Conscientiousness is the Big Five personality trait that includes such characteristics as integrity, reliability, predictability, consistency, and punctuality.
- It predicts respect for social norms and responsibilities, and the likelihood of fulfilling promises and contracts.
- Conscientiousness is lower on average in juveniles, and as it matures slowly with age, it tends to inhibit spontaneity, fun, and romance.



The disadvantages of high conscientiousness

- It involves orderliness and self-control in pursuit of goals, so a by-product of conscientiousness is the delay of immediate gratification.
- This trait is positively associated with life expectancy (through healthy behaviour and avoidance of risks) but on the other hand, high levels – moral principle and perfectionism – are found in persons with eating disorders and obsessive-compulsive behaviours.



Conscientiousness as an unusual personality trait

- In several respects, conscientiousness is an unusual personality trait. Because hunter-gatherer life did not require as much planning and memory for debts and duties as life in larger-scale societies with more complex divisions of labour, conscientiousness may have evolved to higher average levels only recently, and perhaps to a greater degree in some populations than others.
- Only with the rise of activities like agriculture and animal herding would our ancestors have needed the sort of anxious obsessiveness and future-mindedness that characterise the highly-conscientious.



Extraverts at work

- Extraverts tend to be effective in jobs involving sales, effective as managers and demonstrate inspirational leadership behaviors. They also tend to be effective in job interviews, because they are likely to use their social network to prepare.
- Extraverts have an easier time when adjusting to a new job. Interestingly, extraverts are also found to be happier at work, which may be because of the relationships they build with the people around them and their relative ease in adjusting to a new job.
- However, they are not necessarily model employees. For example, they tend to have higher levels of absenteeism at work, potentially because they may miss work to hang out with or attend to the needs of their friends.



Extraversion from a socio-biological perspective

- This is the dimension related to positive emotion, exploratory activity, and reward.
- Extraversion is related to number of sexual partners, which for men, can increase fitness. The benefits of extraversion extend to other domains – higher sensation seeking and greater social behaviour, increased support.
- Extraverts expose themselves to risk: higher rates of hospitalisation, suffer traumatic injury, higher probability of migrating, STDs, and step-parenting.



People high in neuroticism at work

- People very high in neuroticism experience a number of problems at work. For example, they are less likely to be someone people go to for advice and friendship.
- They tend to be habitually unhappy in their jobs and report high intentions to leave, but they do not necessarily actually leave their jobs.
- Being high in neuroticism seems to be harmful to one's career, as they have lower levels of career success (measured with income and occupational status achieved in one's career). Finally, if they achieve managerial jobs, they tend to create an unfair climate at work.



Neuroticism and emotional stability

- This personality axis is associated with negative emotion systems such as fear, sadness, anxiety and guilt.
- High neuroticism is a strong predictor of psychiatric disorders, particularly anxiety and depression. It is also associated with impaired physical health, through chronic activation of stress mechanisms.
- It is also linked to relationship failure and social isolation.



Benefits for neuroticism

- It would seem a challenge to find compensatory benefit for neuroticism.
- However, given the 1. normal distribution in the human population and 2. the persistence of lineages high in the trait, it would seem such a benefit is likely.
- In ancestral environments, a level of neuroticism would have been necessary for avoidance of acute dangers. Anxiety, for example, enhances detection of threatening stimuli.



Benefits for neuroticism

- Certain groups of people who take extreme risks (and have a high mortality rate), for example alpinists, have been found to be unusually low in neuroticism (protective benefit).
- Other benefits. Neuroticism is correlated with competitiveness and high academic success – the negative effect of the trait can be channeled to better one's position.
- Here, however, interactions with other factors – notably intelligence and conscientiousness – play an important role



Summary of hypothesised fitness benefits and costs of increasing levels of each of the Big Five Personality Dimensions (Nettle, D. 2006. The Evolution of Personality Variation in Humans and Other Animals, in American Psychologist).

| Domain | Benefits | Costs |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Extraversion | Mating success; social allies; exploration of the environment | Physical risks; family stability |
| Neuroticism | Vigilance to dangers; striving and competitiveness | Stress and depression, with interpersonal and health consequences |
| Openness | Creativity, with effect on attractiveness | Unusual beliefs; psychosis |
| Conscientiousness | Attention to long-term fitness benefits; life expectancy and desirable social qualities | Missing of immediate fitness gains; obsessive <u>behaviour</u> ; rigidity |
| Agreeableness | Attention to mental states of others; harmonious interpersonal relationships; valued coalitional partner | Subject to social cheating; failure to <u>maximise</u> selfish advantage |



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Thank You!





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