

The Big Five Personality Factors

The Five Factor Model has its roots in the factor analytic tradition that began a half century earlier. Building on the lexical hypothesis of Galton (1884), Thurstone (1934) prepared a foundation for subsequent factor analytic research into personality traits based on trait vocabularies. To isolate and describe the underlying dimensions of personality and temperament, Thurstone drew upon a set of 60 adjectives and their synonyms, from the hundreds that describe temperament and personality. Thirteen hundred assessors rated a well-known individual with regards to whether those terms were applicable to that person or not. Subsequent factor analysis of the data revealed five factors. For our purposes it is not so much the five factors, despite the apparent suggestion of the Five Factor Model, but the clear distinction between factors of temperament and of personality that needs to be emphasized here since that distinction will become obscured.

The next phase in the evolution of this approach came from the work of R. B. Cattell and his identification of 16 Personality Factors. It was Cattell's (1943a) aim to present a new hypothesis regarding traits and a new empirical method for identifying underlying unities. He (Cattell, 1943b), took up the Allport and Odbert (1936) list and reduced that to a sample that could be subjected to factor analysis. These terms were subjected to analyses and yielded first 67, then 35, clusters that overlapped with each other (Cattell, 1945). Behavior ratings, questionnaires, and tests based on these were further factor analyzed and produced 12 underlying dimensions (Cattell, 1947). Eventually, although this is not our concern, Cattell would identify 15 and then 16 personality factors (Cattell, 1956) but it is his conception of personality traits that is a matter that needs mention.

Personality traits for Cattell (1943a, 1943b), unlike those that will emerge from the Five Factor Model, were neither asocial nor ahistorical. Many of the terms that refer to traits reflect the influence of social pressure and culture. Education within a social group, for instance, promotes the development of socially accepted habits like honesty, charm, religiosity, and courageousness.

All traits involve a relationship between a person and the environment (as historically and culturally conditioned), not a reaction tendency that can be defined with respect to an individual alone. On the other hand, each trait formed is unique to the individual, but one can treat them as common if the population has common cultural backgrounds (a point made previously by Allport, 1937). This is because the traits molded by a culture will yield common aspects among the people under its influence. While traits based on constitution—temperament traits—will hardly be influenced by changes in the environment, socially molded traits may be gained, altered, or lost. The permanence of some common traits is likely to be as stable as the cultural pattern that engendered them. One needs to be sensitive to the culturally and historically conditioned nature of some traits.

One can imagine, for instance, how the people of New Orleans may develop a trait of insecurity after the ravages of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 coupled with the devastation of the oil spill (flood) of 2010 and the losses to the environment and livelihood. Research on common traits should consider the possibility of “cohort effects,” the possibility that the trait of interest may refer to a specific culture and/or population. Some of the people who suffered severe poverty and hardship due to the Great Depression of 1929 had to adjust to changes in their conditions of their existence and went from being independent to dependent (Elder, 1974). Other people who, before the Depression, had status and security became frustrated, angry people. Children, who suffered loss of social standing, became acutely self-conscious

and developed feelings of insecurity from the constant uncertainty and unpredictable difficulties. As Cattell had emphasized, traits have a conditional nature and are subject to the historical and cultural context and the vagaries attendant to it. As we shall see, the Five Factor Model is lacking in this respect.

Subsequent to Cattell, Tupes and Christal (1961/1992) assessed people on 35 trait variables (some drawn from Cattell) and found that factor analysis revealed only five underlying factors that were replicable. These were not considered to be the only possible personality dimensions but they were considered to be fundamental to personality. Norman (1963) also found clear and consistent evidence for five fairly orthogonal personality factors. Norman intended his efforts to be directed at establishing an effective, observational language of personality and that the endeavor would not constitute a complete theory of personality. Further, Norman believed that a return to the natural language was called for in order to seek out additional indicators of personality beyond those that fit comfortably into the five already established. This he conjectured may lead to a workable *observation language* of personality (I emphasize observation language here because there is no suggestion of any underlying universal personality structure in this as will be the case with the Five Factor Model).

The first phase of the five-factor approach ended during the mid-sixties and phase two commenced with the work of Goldberg during the seventies and eighties (Block, 1995). It was he who coined the phrase “the Big Five” in a review of existing research. Costa and McCrae began their program around the same time as Goldberg. Prior to establishing their own Five Factor Model, however, Costa and McCrae (1976, in Block, 1995) began their contribution by conducting a cluster analysis of Cattell’s 16 Personality Factor Questionnaire and identified three clusters, two of which resembled Eysenck’s “neuroticism” and “extraversion” and a third that they called “openness to experience.” The recurring reports of five factors caused them to revise their program by including items that were intended to tap into “agreeableness” and “conscientiousness” since these adjectives had been lacking from their original set. As Block (1995) noted (as did Allport, 1937, before him) the factors that emerge from factor analysis are sensitive to variable selection and subject to bias. McCrae and Costa (1985) were fully aware of that: “one could argue that an openness factor emerges in the analysis of the extended set only because the selection of items had been biased in that direction” (p. 719). They further acknowledged that many trait terms used by others, had they been included, may have revealed other unexamined dimensions of individual differences. While this was acknowledged it was sidestepped in favor of their preferred five.

As the matter stands currently, there is broad support among researchers for the Five Factor Theory of McCrae and Costa (1997, 1999, 2003) which posits five structural personality traits or basic tendencies that are universal to humans. These are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. As structural components, the Five Factors, being universal, are also purported to be transcultural. Work in genetics and evolutionary psychology, it has been argued, provides a basis for conceiving of these human personality universals as transcending any differences that are based on culture. This should not surprise us, they claim, given the biological unity of humans. Culture and personality are relatively independent in shaping a person’s life and conduct, but the structure of individual differences in personality across cultures is consistent and uninfluenced by culture. This is supposedly demonstrated by factor analytic assessment of linguistic personality categories across numerous languages. In other words, factor analysis of terms referring to personality, regardless of language analyzed, all reveal the same underlying five factors. If that is so, what then are personality and traits of personality, as they are independent of culture, and as they are structurally universal? Has culture been embraced or bypassed?

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