

The Big Five - a practitioners view “Bring back the colour into personality measurement”

As a newly qualified psychologist in the 1970's my ideas about personality were shaped by theory, models and questionnaires – and of course my life. At that time the giants in the field were Hans Eysenck and Ray Cattell. One of their debates concerned how many factors were needed to describe human personality with Eysenck proposing only 3 and Cattell arguing for 16. My own view, I liked to believe, was informed by a good grasp of the research and guided by intuition and common sense. However, I have no doubt that I had a deeper level reaction against the idea that even 16 factors could explain so much difference and “colour” in the lives and relationships of people!

Now, with the benefit of more than 30 years of studying and helping to develop and train people, I feel more qualified to comment on this old debate. My work has taught me more about human diversity than all the books, theories and correlation tables I have studied. My use of 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 16, 20 and 30 factor questionnaires has enabled me to experience the simplification of personality and to evaluate the benefits.

The current favoured model is now the “Big Five” (meaning five main scales often with slightly different names but broadly covering Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness and Agreeableness). It seems that Eysenck's “Holy Trinity” may have overdone the simplification but it seems closer to the current received wisdom. Some Big Five theorists argue that these 5 factors account for most of the observable personality differences between people. The argument is that multi-factor questionnaires simply give an illusion of greater differentiation - but in reality this is all “noise” and error. And yet, as a practitioner, I never choose a Big Five questionnaire to capture the important differences between people – or when I do it is one which offers a comprehensive breakdown of these 5 factors into multiple underlying facets. Am I, and most of the practitioners I know, simply pretending and playing with error and chance? I think not and shall explain why the Big Five survives research but not practical usage.

There are two main reasons for the success of the Big Five model :

- Its simplicity
- The over reliance on limiting statistical models

Simplicity

We are a “meaning seeking” species. We are driven to make sense of the world around us. Given its complexity, any offer of clarity can be extremely comforting. Nowhere is this truer than in the field of understanding people and relationships. Most people acknowledge the complexity of personality. However, when faced with the responsibility of making judgements about them there can be comfort in falling back on simplicity. This reminds me of the following story :

“Search and ye shall find”

One night a young boy saw an old man searching for something under a street lamp and went up to him.

“What are you doing?” asked the young boy.

“I’m looking for my keys” the old man replied.

“Where did you drop them?” the boy asked.

“Over there” said the old man who pointed to a dark spot between the two street lights.

“So why are you looking for them here?” the little boy asked with surprise.

“Well I’ll never find them there because it’s too dark” replied the old man.

This story captures our need to find an answer – any answer. In trying to understand human beings, personality questionnaires provide easy answers since they not only provide readily defined sets of constructs but they yield easy to use numerical values. Their use is seductive. They help us cut through the dark and complex reality of human personality. However, like the old man, we must not forget what it is we are really looking for. The users of the “Big Five” are only at one end of the “need to simplify” scale. However, they are in danger of ending up looking for the wrong things in the wrong place at the wrong time. By restricting their search by using the “psychometric light” have they ended up with a superficial and inadequate view of personality? As Einstein said – all things should be simplified as far as possible BUT NO FURTHER! This brings me on to my second point.

Limiting Statistical Models

It may seem self-evident but, in our search for simplicity, we use methods designed to simplify! Many personality questionnaires derive their particular model of simplicity from the statistical “pattern seeker” called Factor Analysis. By its very nature, Factor Analysis starts with greater diversity, seeks communality and ends up with a smaller number of common threads. By analogy, you can start with leaves and branches and end up with tree trunks. This is not irrelevant but it is hardly adequate for describing the forest. Continuing the analogy, advocates of simple personality models need to beware that, in trying to see the wood from the trees, they have not lost the essence of human nature. Too often in the field of human diversity, there is beauty to be admired but our lenses sometimes simplify to a barren landscape.

Conclusion

Big Five theorists – deriving as they do from the Factor Analytic approach to personality - are simply at one extreme of the simplification spectrum. They have often expressed their model as the “primary colours” of the personality spectrum. Even if this were true, there is still a need to recreate the “full colour” experience. As a practitioner I know that we cannot do so from the 5 primaries. Even the NEO, the best known of the Big Five questionnaires, has needed to create greater colour by subdividing the 5 domains into 30 facets. Clearly practitioners face the challenge of obtaining colour by appropriate description of relevant constructs and not simply from noise and error. However, researchers can lose sight of reality by applying simple and inadequate models without lifting their heads. My work clearly leads me to say that, if we want both the breadth and depth of human personality we will need more than five constructs. My best bet would be that we need hundreds not tens! For those who do not spend their life in this search perhaps it is understandable to see the flight towards simplicity. Our job is to communicate Einstein’s message loud and clear so I repeat - all things should be simplified as far as possible BUT NO FURTHER!

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