



Will Exploring the Darkness Prove Enlightening? Five Questions About the “Maladaptive Big Five”

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Guenole's (2014) focal article aims to enhance the field of personality research in industrial and organizational (I–O) psychology by asking psychologists to draw on the developments in clinical psychology to justify the addition of five new traits to the personality taxonomy.

Although I applaud any effort to enrich the measurement of personality in this field, there are five important questions that need to be answered before the field endorses the “maladaptive Big Five” (MB5).

Is a Comparison of the MB5 With the Big Five (B5) Appropriate?

Most personality textbooks and courses will trace the history of the B5 from Galton’s lexical theory to Allport and Odbert’s dictionary search to the various factor analyses of Cattell, Norman, Tupes, and others that led to the alleged (if illusory) consensus of five traits. Although Guenole explains that the MB5 was created as a proposed revision to Axis II of the DSM, theoretical underpinnings of this model remain somewhat unclear. The question of whether the proposed traits were the result of lexical analyses (such as the B5), empirical observation (such as Murray’s needs) or other theoretical considerations is important when considering whether to classify the MB5 as an extension of the B5 (as Guenole seems to think is appropriate) or another theoretical framework. If the B5 is the correct basis for comparison, why would the lexical theory have failed to previously consider the MB5? If a different theoretical comparison is more appropriate, what does it offer that the B5 omits?

What Does the MB5 Add to Existing Personality Research (Both Empirically and Theoretically)?

Guenole concedes that four of the maladaptive traits may be considered conceptually similar to B5 constructs (negative emotionality representing extreme Neuroticism, detachment representing extreme introversion, antagonism representing the opposite of Agreeableness, and disinhibition representing the opposite of Conscientiousness). To the extent that compulsivity can be

considered the opposite pole of disinhibition (extreme Conscientiousness), the only novel construct provided by the adoption of the MB5 is psychoticism, which represents schizotypal personality disorder.

Schizotypal personality disorder encompasses the “positive” symptoms associated with schizophrenia, including, but not limited to hallucinations, paranoia, disorganized speech, and strange beliefs. These odd and eccentric behaviors are often intense and occur episodically without warning or explanation. At other times, these individuals tend to remain aloof, preferring passive rumination to social interaction (APA, 2000).

It is difficult to imagine a pre-employment screen that includes questions like “I often feel as if others are conspiring against me” and “I can communicate with other people using my mind.” It is similarly difficult to find organizational theory that links random spurts of odd cognition or behavior to performance, satisfaction, turnover, or other important organizational outcomes. Nevertheless, organizations would likely benefit from the identification and expulsion of individuals who display such behaviors, if only through a reduction in workplace distractions.

Assuming psychotic individuals make poor employees, it is important for both researchers and practitioners to consider the prevalence of psychoticism (or other MB5 traits) in the population of working adults prior to implementing a research program or selection procedure assessing these constructs. As noted by Guenole, many organizations administer the MMPI, which contains scales measuring each of the MB5 traits as well as many other clinically derived mental health constructs. Would the benefits of creating shorter, targeted measures of the MB5 outweigh the costs of test development and validation? Would the benefits of identifying or screening job applicants on MB5 traits, particularly those with low base rates, outweigh the costs of potential legal challenges to which Guenole refers?

Could MB5 Traits Be Captured by Expanding B5 Measures?

Given the conceptual overlap of the MB5 with the B5, we must consider whether an expansion of current B5 measures may be able to assess aspects of the MB5. Most B5 measures target the general population, in which the prevalence of MB5 constructs is relatively (and thankfully) low. In the rare case in which a self-aware respondent answers honestly, we would expect an agreeable individual to score quite low on a measure of antagonism, much as we would expect an antagonistic individual to score quite low on items such as “I have a calming effect on those around me.”

As an alternative to the introduction of five new traits, personality researchers should take advantage of advances in test development to expand B5 measures in a manner that would allow them to capture not only the levels of each lexical trait assessed by current assessment tools but also the levels represented by each MB5 counterpart. Item response theory allows and encourages an understanding that the assessment quality of an individual item varies as a function of the level of a latent trait. The estimation of item information curves has enhanced construct coverage and introduced computerized adaptive testing procedures in cognitive and educational assessment (see Embretson & Riese, 2000). The same procedures could easily be adapted in the realm of personality to expand current B5 measures and allow for the simultaneous assessment of their MB5 counterparts.

Are MB5 Traits Theoretically Relevant to I–O Outcomes?

Although Guenole cites some evidence of MB5 validity analyses, the question remains as to which areas of I–O psychology would benefit from the addition of MB5 trait measurement. Although many measures of B5 traits are short enough to allow researchers to assess all five traits with minimal risk of response fatigue, few personality or organizational theories require the measurement

of all five traits. Nonetheless, researchers often administer and score measures of each of the five lexical traits when assessing personality. If five new traits are added, the time and effort required to measure personality in research and selection will double. Will the benefit of assessing 10 personality traits outweigh the increased probability of test fatigue in participants and applicants?

Perhaps more researchers should consider the theoretical contribution of each individual B5 trait as opposed to measuring them as a group. Time and effort involved in assessing theoretically irrelevant personality variables would be better spent administering additional scales or expanded personality scales that cover theoretically relevant MB5 traits (see Paunonen & Ashton, 2001).

The “small validities” claim addressed by Guenole may partially be the result of personality researchers forcing personality measurement where theoretically unnecessary. The addition of five questionably relevant traits to the personality taxonomy is more likely to exacerbate this problem than to ameliorate it. Consideration of the MB5 will only enhance our understanding of personality if those traits, as well as the ones we already have, are used appropriately in empirical analysis and the formulation of organizational theory.

How Will the MB5 Traits Be Assessed?

Researchers seem to remain equivocal on the issue of whether or not respondents typically respond dishonestly (Anderson, Warner, & Spector, 1984; Ellingson, Sackett, & Connelly, 2007). It is clear, however, that transparent self-report questionnaire items such as “I complete tasks successfully” can be faked by those who choose to misrepresent themselves (see Whyte, 1956). It has also been clear for quite some time that even the most scrupulous respondents do not necessarily understand themselves or the reasons for their actions (Haidt, 2001; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

The capability of job applicants to “fake good” is particularly problematic for scales

that have demonstrated validity for predicting important organizational outcomes such as performance or counterproductive work behaviors. If job applicants want to present themselves as high on Conscientiousness and integrity, it is relatively simple to lie about their responsibility and honesty. Job applicants who are willing and able to “fake good” on such measures would likely be willing and able to “fake not bad” on transparent measures of constructs such as antagonism or psychoticism.

Researchers should address the existing issues with personality assessment prior to adding the new MB5 constructs to the taxonomy of personality variables. The forced-choice solution to faking offered by Guenole parallels similar cries for reductions in scale fakability (cf. Morgeson et al., 2007) but would likely be insufficient for use with MB5 constructs. To circumvent a respondent’s ability to “fake good” on all B5 traits, forced-choice measures allow researchers to address the question of which trait a respondent values most. On the other hand, extending this logic to “faking not bad” on MB5 traits essentially forces respondents to rank order the extent to which they identify with negative emotionality, detachment, antagonism, disinhibition, and psychoticism. If the lack of job-relevant face validity can cause respondents to take a B5 measure less seriously (or a judicial system to rule against their use), then imagine the consequences of applicants being required to endorse either “I sometimes see things no one else can see” or “I often fantasize about being the only human left on Earth.”

As an alternative solution to the faking issue, personality research should take advantage of the emerging trend of implicit measurement. Conditional reasoning, implicit association, and sentence or word completion tasks have been developed to measure many constructs outside of the traditional self-report B5 framework. Implicit measurement benefits researchers by exchanging transparency for indirect measurement. Construct redundancy with self-report measures is low because implicit

and explicit measures have negligible correlations with one another and tend to predict different types of criteria (McClelland, 1980; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). In addition, implicit measures are more resistant to faking, which allows for more accurate measurement, especially of undesirable traits such as those espoused by the focal article.

Conclusion

Much more research is needed before this field endorses the addition of the MB5 to the personality taxonomy. It is not clear that the addition of the MB5 would add anything beyond an assessment of a relatively rare personality disorder. In addition, it is unclear how applicants, human resources departments, and the legal system will react to the self-report or forced-choice assessment of maladaptive traits. Finally, it would be a mistake to introduce new constructs to the personality domain until both researchers and practitioners address the shortcomings of typical assessment methods and embrace the parallel and complementary measurement of both implicit and explicit personality.

It is encouraging to find researchers who are willing to look beyond the B5 and draw on other disciplines to enhance our understanding of personality. Researchers should think carefully about how each of the MB5 traits may influence organizational outcomes. As with any new construct, operationalization and proper scale development are crucial to both empirical and theoretical endeavors. By taking advantage of methodological advances in psychometric analysis and theoretical advances in implicit measurement, assessment of MB5 traits can circumvent many of the shortcomings of typical personality measures. Of course, these advances can (and should) be used to improve measures of existing constructs as well. It is my sincere hope that Guenole’s focal article serves as a wake-up call to I–O researchers who assess personality. By continuing to search for novel constructs to predict organizational criteria,

we enhance our understanding of the personality domain.

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