

A Gender Difference in Personality Traits in Terms of Big Five

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Editorial

Many people, including Bill Cosby, perceive the differences between men and women to be large – so large, in fact, that communication between genders may be difficult. Countless examples from popular culture reinforce this view of extreme differences between the sexes – but are they accurate? Men and women have obviously different biological roles when it comes to propagation of the species, but how much they differ psychologically is a more controversial question, one that requires empirical research to answer adequately. Whether the underlying causes of psychological gender differences are evolutionary or socio-cultural, understanding how men and women differ in the ways in which they think, feel, and behave can shed light on the human condition.

The study of personality is particularly useful in attempting to examine psychological differences between genders. Personality is often conceptualized as the extent to which someone displays high or low levels of specific traits. Traits are the consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviours that a person exhibits across situations [1]. That is, someone who scores high on a trait will exhibit psychological states related to that trait more often and to a greater extent than individuals who score low on that trait.

Gender differences in personality traits are often characterized in terms of which gender has higher scores on that trait, on average. For example, women are often found to be more agreeable than men [2]. This means that women, on average, are more nurturing, tender-minded, and altruistic more often and to a greater extent than men. However, such a finding does not preclude the fact that men may also experience nurturing, tender-minded, and altruistic states, and that some men may even score higher in these traits than some women. The goal of investigating gender differences in personality, therefore, is to elucidate the differences among general patterns of behaviour in men and women on average, with the understanding that both men and women can experience states across the full range of most traits. Gender differences in terms of mean differences do not imply that men and women only experience states on opposing ends of the trait spectrum; on the contrary, significant differences can exist along with a high degree of overlap between the distributions of men and women [3].

A core mission of personality psychology has been the development of an adequate taxonomy of personality traits. Drawing on trait descriptors used in natural language (selected from dictionaries) and in personality questionnaires, a five factor structure has emerged to explain covariation among traits. The five factor model or Big Five categorizes traits into the broad domains of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness/Intellect [4].

Gender differences in personality are often examined in terms of the Big Five. However, the Big Five do not exhaust all of the important distinctions among personality traits. Traits are hierarchically organized such that more specific traits that vary together are grouped within higher-order factors, like the Big Five. In the study of gender differences, therefore, one can investigate gender differences in personality traits at multiple levels of resolution. Most trait research

has focused on two levels of traits: (1) the broad Big Five domains and (2) many more specific traits, called facets, which are grouped together within the Big Five. Currently, there is no consensus as to the identity and number of facets within the Big Five. Different approaches have identified different sets of facets, based on rational review of psychological constructs [5] or by systematic sampling from the space defined by pairs of Big Five factors [6]. In the present study, we utilized an empirically identified level of personality traits that falls between narrow facets and broad domains. This level of personality organization has the potential to characterize gender differences with a finer grain of detail than the Big Five, revealing differences that are obscured in the Big Five. Additionally, it provides an empirically based taxonomy of lower-level traits that is more likely to represent an adequate taxonomy of traits than existing facet models [7].

If the Big Five constituted the level of the personality hierarchy immediately above the facets, only one factor should be necessary to explain the shared variance of the facets within a given Big Five domain. However, a large behavioural genetic study revealed that two distinct factors were necessary to account for the shared genetic variance among the facets within each domain [8]. In a separate study using factor analysis of 15 different facets within each domain, two phenotypic factors similar to the genetic factors were found for each of the Big Five dimensions. This research indicates that each of the Big Five contains two separable, though correlated, aspects, reflecting a level of personality below the broad domains but above the many facet scales. De Young et al. characterized these aspects by examining their factor-score correlations with over 2000 items from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP). The aspects were labelled as follows: Volatility and Withdrawal for Neuroticism; Enthusiasm and Assertiveness for Extraversion; Intellect and Openness for Openness/Intellect; Industriousness and Orderliness for Conscientiousness; and Compassion and Politeness for Agreeableness. The aspect level of traits may be especially useful for the investigation of gender differences because these differences are sometimes unclear at the Big Five level and can be large and in opposite directions at the facet level [9]. The aspects provide a non-arbitrary and parsimonious system for examining gender differences at a level of traits more specific than the Big Five.

Gender differences have been documented for a number of personality traits. Most meta-analyses and reviews examine gender differences in self-reports of personality on questionnaires that measure

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the Big Five, as well as facets within each [10]. To our knowledge, however, no analyses have specifically examined the two aspects of each Big Five trait.

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Conflict of Interest

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