

In Hot Water: How Personality Affects Getting In and Out of It

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to examine the effects of personality, specifically degree of extraversion (E) and neuroticism (N) and their relationship to the frequency of experiencing dilemmas and the participants' perceived success in escaping those dilemmas. Consistent with the research of Bono, Terry, Timothy and Lauver (2002), Pascarella (1998), and Gomez, Gomez and Cooper (2002), the researchers hypothesized that participants with a higher degree of E would experience dilemmas more frequently and escape dilemmas without punishment frequently. Those with a high degree of N were hypothesized to be less likely to escape dilemmas without punishment. Surveys with personality scales and dilemma questions were distributed to 96 college students. Regression analysis revealed that extraverts are generally more likely to escape from dilemmas, while neurotics were less likely to experience the dilemmas altogether. The results suggest that E facilitates the avoidance of punishment, while N inhibits involvement in dilemma-like situations.

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Extraversion is a common and accurately diagnosed personality trait. The ability for most people to accurately recognize an extravert is thought to have been evolutionarily adaptive, as extraverts were more likely to be leaders in a hunter-gatherer societies, and thus more likely to successfully organize food acquisition, and subsequently more likely to produce viable offspring (Lord, 1997).

The modern-day version of the extravert is more likely to be dominating, bold, ambitious, and show enthusiasm openly (Lord, 1997). Based on these traits, it seems reasonable to infer that these same people might be more likely to find themselves in conflict situations, as their vociferous and perhaps meddling personality might land them in sticky situations. In fact, this inference is supported in research conducted by Bono, Terry, Timothy and Lauver (2002), who found that the higher an individual scores on an extraversion scale, the more likely he or she is to end up in relationship conflicts.

Skills for successful persuasion were reviewed by Pascarella (1998). One of the most crucial ways to build a foundation for persuasion, according to Pascarella, is to develop credibility with the audience. Pascarella maintains that the way to develop credibility in a short period of time is to display a confident posture, a steady tone of voice, and by self-assuredly declaring beliefs. These tendencies are more characteristic of extraverts than introverts (Lord, 1997).

Another study by Gomez, Gomez, and Cooper (2002) looked at the relationship between extraversion and the processing of positive and negative information. The study found that extraversion is positively correlated with the processing of positive information, meaning that the more extraverted one is, the more quickly and efficiently he or she will be able process positive

thoughts. This may lead to a more frequent belief in the possibility of success when faced with an ambiguous situation.

This same study also found that the personality trait neuroticism was positively associated with the processing of negative information, meaning that the greater one's tendency toward neuroticism, the more efficient s/he will be at processing negative information (Gomez, Gomez, Timothy & Lauver 2002). The neurotic personality trait is associated with high levels of anxiety, restlessness, and sometimes irrationality (Lord 1997). Additionally, neuroticism has been associated with pessimism (Marshall & Wortman 1992) and high anxiety in social situations (Schmidt & Riniolo 1999). This begs two questions: 1) Is it possible that extraverts and neurotics process information and act in those situations differently, based on their personalities? 2) Do personality traits have an influence on what types of situations people find themselves in?

The present study was conducted to determine the relationship between the personality traits of extraversion and neuroticism to the involvement and escape from dilemmas. The predictor variables were degree of extraversion and degree of neuroticism. The dependent variables were frequency of involvement in dilemma situations and success in escaping these situations without punishment. Data on success in escaping the situation was gathered solely from participant self-reports. Based on previous research, we hypothesized a positive correlation between extraversion and dilemma involvement such that the higher the degree of extraversion that one possesses, the more likely that he or she will be involved in dilemmas. Similarly, we hypothesized a positive correlation between extraversion and success in escaping dilemmas such that the more extraverted one is, the more likely it is that he or she will perceive a successful escape from a dilemma situation without punishment. Furthermore, we hypothesized a negative

correlation between neuroticism and frequency of experiencing dilemmas such that the higher the degree of neuroticism one possesses, the less likely it is that he or she will be involved in a dilemma. Similarly, once in a dilemma, we hypothesized a negative correlation between neuroticism and success in escaping punishment such that the more neurotic one is, the less likely that he or she would escape the situation without punishment.

Method

Participants

There were 96 total participants (58 women and 38 men) ranging in age from 19 to 38 ($M = 21.65$, $SD = 3.15$). The ethnicity of the participants was divided as follows: 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 30.2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Black not of Hispanic Origin, 9.4% Hispanic, 46.9% White not of Hispanic Origin.

Materials

Participants received packets containing each of the following: demographic questions (age, gender, and ethnicity); an Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) scale (Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett, 1985). to measure extraversion and neuroticism; a Rosenberg scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure self-esteem; and the 20 dilemma questions (see Appendix A), which contained five questions each from the social, academic, romantic, and family domains. The EPQ measures degree of extraversion, neuroticism, and introversion with 24 questions that explore attitudes and tendencies. The results of the Rosenberg scale were not included in the final analysis, as we determined that those data would not be relevant to the construct being researched in the present study.

The questions in the survey were written by the researchers and intended to be situations in which the average college student will likely have experienced.

Design

The predictor variables were degree of extraversion and degree of neuroticism. These personality traits were measured using the EPQ scale, and scores were correlated with the criterion variables. The dependent variables were frequency of experiencing dilemmas and perceived success in escaping the dilemma situation without punishment. Frequency of experiencing dilemmas was measured as a raw score out of 20, as there were 20 dilemmas listed in the survey. Perceived success in escaping punishment was measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 7, with 7 being most successful in escaping punishment. A mean was taken for perceived success in escaping punishment based only on the dilemmas that the participant had experienced.

The 20 items were evenly divided, by the researchers, into four sub domains: social, academic, romantic, and family. The results for social frequency, social mean, academic frequency, academic mean, romantic frequency, romantic mean, family frequency, and family mean, correlated with extraversion and neuroticism.

Results

Personality traits extraversion and neuroticism were included as predictors in a linear regression with frequency of experience in dilemmas and the mean score for perceived success in escaping punishment as a result of the dilemma as dependent variables. The analysis was performed on all categories of dilemmas as an aggregate, as well as each category individually (social, academic, romantic, and family). Table 1 illustrates the significant negative correlation between degree of neuroticism ($b = -0.28$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, a significant positive correlation exists between degree of extraversion and perceived success in escaping punishment as a result of a dilemma ($b = 0.24$, $p < 0.05$). Within the social domain, a significant negative correlation exists between degree of neuroticism and frequency ($b = -0.30$, $p < 0.01$). The results

did not indicate a relationship between: degree of extraversion and frequency; degree of extraversion or neuroticism and social mean. In the academic domain, there was no relationship between degree of extraversion or neuroticism and academic frequency. However, there was a significant positive correlation between degree of extraversion and academic mean ($b = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$). There was no significant relationship between degree of neuroticism and academic mean. In the romantic domain, there was a significant negative correlation between degree of neuroticism and romantic frequency ($b = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$). The results did not indicate a relationship between degree of extraversion and romantic frequency. The analyses demonstrated a significant positive correlation between degree of neuroticism and romantic frequency ($b = 0.26$, $p < 0.05$). There was no significant relationship between degree of extraversion and romantic frequency. In the family domain, the analysis yielded a significant negative correlation between degree of neuroticism and family frequency ($b = -0.24$, $p < 0.05$). There was no significant relationship between degree of extraversion and family frequency. The analysis also yielded a trend toward a negative correlation between degree of neuroticism and family mean ($b = -0.19$, $p < 0.10$).

Discussion

The results indicate a significant positive correlation between extraversion and academic mean as well as total mean, which are consistent with the hypothesis that those with a high degree of extraversion are more likely to experience and escape punishment surrounding dilemmas. The results also indicate a significant or a trend toward a negative correlation between neuroticism and total frequency, social frequency, romantic frequency, family mean, and family frequency, which are consistent with the hypothesis that those with a high degree of neuroticism will be less likely to experience dilemmas and escape punishment surrounding those

dilemmas. Conversely, neuroticism was significantly positively correlated with romantic mean, which was inconsistent with the hypothesis. The present study lends support to the findings of Bono, Terry, and Timothy (2002), which stated that extraverts are more likely to be involved in a relationship conflict. Support was also established in relation to the assertions of Pascarella (1998), who stated persuading is linked to establishing credibility, which is done by acting confidently. Lord (1997) established that confidence is a distinctly extravert trait.

Additionally, the finding that neurotics are less likely to experience dilemmas and escape dilemmas without punishment (with the exception of neuroticism being positively correlated with romantic mean) supports the findings of Gomez, Gomez and Cooper (2002).

The finding that those with a high degree of neuroticism are positively correlated with romantic mean is an interesting incongruity worth examining. It is possible that the romantic domain is distinct from the others in that the escape from dilemmas in that domain requires traits possessed by a neurotic, such as anxiety or restlessness. Since this result seems illogical, future research should re-examine the established link between neuroticism and romantic mean to ensure that the finding is replicable, then delve further into the finding to determine mechanisms and mediators of the effect.

The multiple negative correlations between neuroticism and the likelihood of experiencing and escaping from dilemma situations could elucidate further the personality trait of neuroticism. The interpretation of this finding could be that neurotics are so uptight and nervous that they think about the repercussions of experiencing a dilemma and preventatively decide not to act in a way that would result in a dilemma. For example, a neurotic could be faced with the opportunity to use a fake ID to get into a bar, think about the possible punishment for acting on the opportunity (being kicked out, having the ID confiscated, being reported to the

police, etc.), and simply decide not to participate. Further, if a neurotic did end up in a situation either by accident or purposefully, he or she would not be very likely to process the negative information of being in trouble effectively (Gomez, Gomez & Cooper 2002).

The present study is limited in its ability to be generalized. Foremost, participants were asked to *subjectively* rate how successful they were in escaping punishment in dilemma situations. Therefore, it is possible that the data gathered from these questions is inaccurate because we did not record exactly what transpired in those situations, only what the participant remembered from them. Accordingly, future research might set up an experimental situation in which those with a high degree of extraversion are placed in dilemmas with the assistance of confederates, and the experimenters could rate their reaction in the situation so that the same subjective rating system would apply to all of the participants.

A second limitation of the study was that by design, we could have excluded a subset of extraverts, neurotics, or both, who had been involved in the mentioned dilemmas several times, but had never been caught. Future research could mitigate this problem by adding a component to each question that explored the number of times that participants had been involved in the dilemmas without being caught.

A final limitation was the number of times experiencing each dilemma was not recorded. Had this been recorded, it could have further elucidated differences between each domain, and possibly more differences between extraversion and neuroticism. This problem could be erased by including another component with each question to record number of times experiencing each dilemma.

The results of this study could be applied therapeutically. For those extraverts that find themselves in dilemmas frequently, it may be useful to realize that neurotic traits seem to prevent

the experience of dilemmas in the first place. Thus, slightly higher degrees of anxiety may inhibit encounters with undesirable situations.

Table 1

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Mean Number of Dilemmas Experienced (N = 96)

Variable	B	t	p
Extraversion			
Social	0.09	0.88	0.38
Academic	0.29	2.59	0.01
Romantic	0.10	-2.34	0.22
Family	0.11	1.08	0.29
TOTAL	0.11	1.09	0.28
Neuroticism			
Social	-0.30	-3.01	0.003
Academic	0.04	0.40	0.69
Romantic	-0.24	1.01	0.32
Family	-0.24	1.08	0.29
TOTAL	-0.28	-2.76	0.007

Table 2

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Success in Escaping Dilemmas (N = 96)

Variable	B	t	p
Extraversion			
Social	0.10	0.81	0.42
Academic	0.29	2.59	0.11
Romantic	-.025	-0.23	0.82
Family	0.07	-0.68	0.50
TOTAL	0.24	2.26	0.026
Neuroticism			
Social	0.05	0.41	0.68
Academic	0.10	0.92	0.36
Romantic	0.26	2.37	0.02
Family	-0.19	-1.76	0.08
TOTAL	-0.03	-0.26	0.79

Appendix A

1.) I have lied in a social situation. YES NO

If yes, how successfully did you escape punishment for your lie?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

2.) I have stolen (from friends, parents, store). YES NO

If yes, did you escape this situation without punishment?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

3.) I have refused to pay a bill. YES NO

If yes, were you successful in having the charge removed from my statement without penalty?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

4.) I have snuck into a movie. YES NO

If yes, were you punished for doing so?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

5.) I have been pulled over by a police officer. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in escaping punishment?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

6.) I have been tardy to a class where tardiness is punished. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in escaping punishment for being tardy?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

7.) I have tried to get a grade changed on a test or in a class. YES NO

If yes, in general, how successful have you been in getting the grade changed?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

8.) I have cheated in school. YES NO

If yes, how successful have you been in avoiding punishment for cheating?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

9.) I have missed a deadline for a school assignment. YES NO

If yes, how successful have you been in being allowed to turn in the assignment without penalty?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

10.) I have received detention at school. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding serving the detention(s)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

11.) I have cheated in a romantic partner. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding being punished by your partner?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

12.) I have lied to a romantic partner. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding being punished for the lie?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

13.) I have forgotten an important date (anniversary, birthday, etc.) surrounding a romantic relationship. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding punishment from your partner for forgetting?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

14.) I have been asked out by someone I have no desire to date. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding a date with this person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

15.) I have been asked for my phone number by someone I don't want to give it to.

YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in not releasing your number to this person?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

16.) I have received a verbal invitation to a family gathering that I did not want to attend.

YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding attendance of the event?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

17.) I have lied to a family member. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding punishment for the lie?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

18.) I have been assigned chores at home that I did not want to do. YES NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding performing the chores?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not			Marginally			Very
Successful			Successful			Successful

19.) I have stayed out past my curfew.

YES

NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding punishment for breaking the curfew rule?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

20.) I have broken an important family rule (getting a tattoo, piercing, etc.)?

YES

NO

If yes, how successful were you in avoiding punishment for breaking the rule?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not		Marginally			Very	
Successful		Successful			Successful	

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