

A3 The German case: personality correlates of emotional reactivity

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A3.1 Person characteristics and emotion: theoretical considerations

The discussions in the results chapters focussed mainly on the different characteristics of the emotional situations reported, such as antecedents, reactions, physiological symptoms, and control attempts, or configurations of these different aspects, either in terms of general differences between the emotions or in terms of differences between country samples. So far, the effects of personality traits have not been discussed in detail (with the exception of Chapter 10) since personality tests were not administered in all countries. Yet, the particular characteristics of the individual must be considered to be an important factor in shaping the nature of emotional experience.

The idea that the experience of emotional situations might be influenced by personality traits can be inferred from recent trends in personality research, for example from Mischel's (1979) cognitive social learning model of personality or from other theories which consider person-situation as a single system (Lewin, 1936; Murray, 1938; for an overview see Forgas, 1982). In particular, personality factors like extraversion and neuroticism, but also social desirability, seem to be significantly related to episode representations in 'social episode' research (see e.g. Forgas, 1979; Battistich & Thompson, 1980; Forgas, 1982).

For the German sample we had decided to include some personality measurements. Some major personality traits were assessed via questionnaire: we measured the personality dimensions of extraversion and neuroticism with the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck, 1956, in the German translation of Brengelmann & Brengelmann, 1960), and social desirability on the scale developed by Crowne & Marlowe (1960; German translation by Lück & Timaeus, 1969). Together with the information collected via the background questionnaire, these data provided a unique opportunity to test whether the situation descriptions for the different emotions were influenced by major personality traits.

A3.2 The effect of personality traits on emotional experience

Table A3.1 lists all the significant correlations between the personality traits measured and the coded characteristics of emotional situations separately for the four emotions studied. The correlations with the antecedent categories and the reaction/symptom categories were based on 0/1 data. Though some significant correlations were found, most of the relations between personality traits and situation codes were low and insignificant. We were not too surprised, however,

Table A3.1. *Significant correlations of personality traits with antecedent, control, and response characteristics (only significant correlations mentioned; West German sample, N = 90)*

	Emotion			
	Joy	Sadness	Fear	Anger
Neuroticism				
Intensity		0.24	0.30	
Duration			0.28	
Familiarity		-0.23		
Behave differently				0.32
Antecedent groups				
News				0.19
Permanent separation			0.25	
Response groups				
Voice reactions	0.21			
Hand movements	0.27			
Freezing	0.19			
Chest/breathing problems	-0.18		0.18	0.25
Changed face		0.25		
Laughing/smiling		0.20		
Normal movements of body parts		0.25		
Changed movements of body parts		-0.17		
General unrest			-0.18	
Perspiration			-0.28	
Blood pressure rise			-0.28	
Stomach sensations			0.21	
Crying				0.21
Unpleasant rest sensations				0.18
Extraversion				
Intensity	0.21			0.42
Amount of verbal behaviour		-0.19	0.21	
Familiarity			-0.22	
Control of reactions			-0.21	
Antecedent groups				
Achievement			0.20	
Response groups				
Hand movements	0.18			
Chest/breathing problems		-0.22		
Freezing			-0.18	
Muscle symptoms			-0.22	
Instrumental actions				0.18
Social desirability				
Duration	0.20	0.22		
How long ago?	0.25			
Behave differently	-0.29			
Antecedent groups				
News	0.23	-0.25		
Pleasure/pain			0.26	
Novel, unknown situations			0.18	
Social institutions				-0.17
Injustice				0.19
Response groups				
Changed speech quality	0.20	0.23		
Voice reactions	-0.18			-0.27
Chest/breathing problems	0.23			
Crying		0.18		
Speech reactions				0.18
Changed voice quality				-0.23
Freezing				0.19

because in reports we had found in the literature correlations between personality measures and behavioural measures also often only reached values of about 0.30 (Mischel, 1979). In general however, these results indicate that personality factors are less important for predicting reports on emotional situations than we expected (see Appendix A5, where similar results are reported for the Swiss sample).

In terms of neuroticism the correlations indicate that subjects high on this trait reported higher intensities for sadness and fear, but not for joy and anger. This implies that highly neurotic persons experienced the 'passive' negative emotions more intensely than subjects low on neuroticism. Furthermore, for these subjects fear was of longer duration and they seemed to experience sadness more often in the company of unfamiliar persons. The only antecedent that was important with respect to neuroticism was 'permanent separation' as an antecedent of fear. Highly neurotic subjects reported more incidents of this antecedent as a source of fear than did the other subjects. Another significant correlation indicates that highly neurotic subjects tended to react differently in similar situations when they experienced anger. These people seemed to be 'scrupulous' concerning their anger experiences and reactions. In terms of non-verbal reactions and physiological symptoms the correlations were usually relatively low and do not allow any conclusive argument with respect to differences between highly and less neurotic subjects. On the whole, the correlations we found do make some sense, because they indicate that highly neurotic subjects seemed to have different experiences from less neurotic subjects, especially for the negative emotions and especially in terms of intensity and duration.

Significant correlations with extraversion were also sparse. The most interesting finding seems to be that extraverted subjects reported stronger intensities for joy and anger than introverted subjects, that is for the 'active' emotions compared to the 'passive' emotions, sadness and fear, whose intensities were related to neuroticism. Furthermore, extraverts verbalised less when they were sad but more when experiencing fear compared to introverts. Extraverts also controlled their reactions less when experiencing fear and they experienced fear more often in situations with unfamiliar persons. In terms of antecedents, however, no significant differences indicating that extraverts and introverts experienced different situations were found. The only difference between extraverts and introverts in terms of antecedents was that extraverts reported more 'achievement situations' as sources of fear. Again, we will not discuss the correlations with reactions/symptoms here because the few significant results seem difficult to interpret. Thus, there were even fewer correlations between extraversion-introversion and situation characteristics than for neuroticism. The most interesting result seems to be that again intensity was related to this personality trait for joy and anger.

The data for social desirability were not very conclusive. Social desirability, that is the tendency to behave and describe oneself in a socially accepted manner, was associated with only a few situation characteristics, the larger number being for joy. For this emotion subjects with high social desirability described situations that were of longer duration and occurred further in the past than those described by subjects with low social desirability, and also said that they would not behave differently in such joy situations. For the negative emotions few important correlations could be observed in terms of social desirability, although one might have expected that, for instance, control of anger and other factors associated with anger and social norms might have been affected by this personality trait. The correlations with situation

antecedents were also quite low. Subjects high in social desirability reported more news situations for joy, but fewer news situations for sadness than those low in social desirability. For fear, 'pain' situations and 'novel' experiences seemed to be more important for subjects high in social desirability than for those low in social desirability. For anger, high scorers reported more situations involving 'injustice', but fewer situations involving 'social insitutions' than low scorers. For non-verbal reactions and physiological symptoms high scorers reported a low number of reactions/symptoms, but only for the emotions joy and anger. This might be due to subjects high in social desirability not being willing to report on their reactions and symptoms in much detail, especially for joy and anger, probably because of their fear that such reports might be evaluated negatively. But again the correlations were too low to state any conclusive explanations for the findings (furthermore, most of the results reported here were not replicated with the Swiss sample; see Appendix A5).

Since these results for personality traits were not very impressive in terms of both the number of significant correlations found and the magnitude of these correlations, a last attempt was made to look at personality differences by using Eysenck's (Eysenck, 1956) personality model proposing the two independent dimensions of neuroticism and extraversion. With a median split technique groups of subjects who were high in both extraversion and neuroticism ('choleric'), high in extraversion and low in neuroticism ('sanguinics'), low in extraversion and high in neuroticism ('melancholics'), and low in both extraversion and neuroticism ('phlegmatics') were distinguished. The 'old' and much discussed terminology stemming from the Greek physician Galen, who lived in the second century of our time (see Eysenck, 1956), was used here to highlight the results found.

Three significant effects emerged, indicating that Eysenck's proposed typology captures individual differences in emotional experience. All these results centred on the emotions fear and anger. For the duration of fear, phlegmatics and sanguinics obtained very low scores, while, on the other hand, choleric and melancholic reported a significantly longer duration of fear. For the intensity of fear there was a marked difference between phlegmatics and the other three groups, indicating that phlegmatics reported a lower intensity of fear. Thus, phlegmatics in particular reported a shorter duration and lower intensity of fear, than the other groups, proving the common stereotype about this group of people being not very much affected by emotional, especially negative emotional situations. This was supported by the results for the intensity of anger. Again, a significant effect indicated that phlegmatics reported a lower intensity of anger than the other three groups. Thus, phlegmatics, as compared to the other groups, were affected to a lower degree by the negative emotions fear and anger, or at least they reported lower intensities and durations. Sanguinics, on the other hand, reported fear and anger situations of high emotional intensity but short duration. Thus, they reacted in a very 'impulsive' way, which is in fact often described as being a characteristic of this group of people. The significant effects for the personality groups are summarised in Figure A3.1.

A3.3 Conclusions

Even though the results reported at the end of section A3.2 provide some support for Eysenck's (1956) notion concerning personality differences, in general the

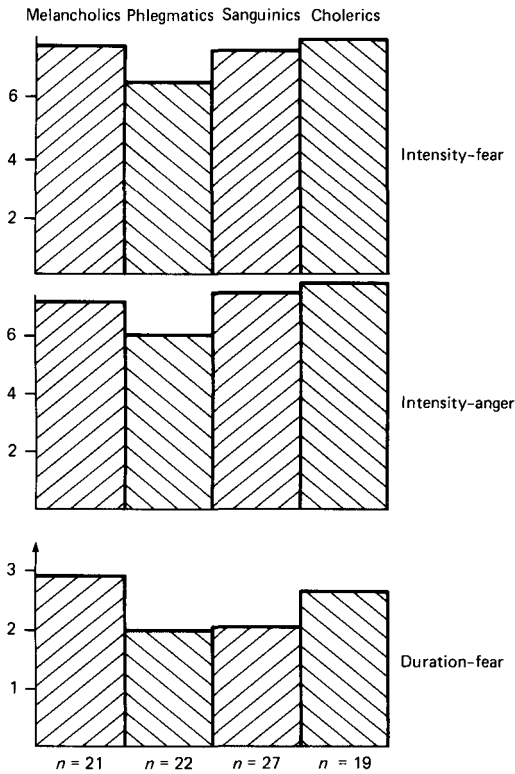


Figure A3.1 Significant relations between personality types and emotion characteristics (for the German sample)

pattern of results reported in this note does not support our assumption of the importance of personality traits and person characteristics as determinants of emotional experiences. While there are in fact some significant relations for some of the personality traits measured, on the whole these results are not very impressive. The personality characteristics discussed above do not seem to be very important predictors of emotional experiences. Subjects described more or less the same emotional situations irrespective of personality traits such as extraversion or neuroticism (see Appendix A5 for similar results).

Together with the finding that country differences seem to be less important for the experience of emotion than expected, this lends strong support to the hypothesis that the experience of emotion, in terms of the antecedents, the reactions, and the control attempts in a situation is a very general phenomenon, despite possible mediation by person factors. Situations in which subjects experienced joy, sadness, fear, or anger were more or less the same, irrespective of the background and personality factors of these people. This might imply that the 'universals' found for facial expressions (see Ekman, 1972) might find a parallel in terms of 'situation universals' and other 'reaction/symptom universals' besides facial expression. Although these results are limited, because only the German sample was analysed

here and only a few personality measures were used, these findings seem to be important. Emotional experiences are affected to some degree by personality traits, like extraversion and neuroticism, but the role of 'emotional universals' seems to be much more prominent. If in fact the experience of emotions is not much affected by country and person differences but proves to be a general 'human characteristic', this would be an important finding for the theory of emotion.