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Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ)

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Definition

The Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) is a self-report inventory that assesses personality in terms of 11 lower-order (“primary”) trait scales, which load onto three higher-order factors reflecting temperament dimensions. The full-length version of the inventory is 276 items; shorter standard-wording and simplified-wording forms (155 items and 157 items, respectively) are also available. Each item of the MPQ is answered either “true” or “false.” The inventory also contains validity scales that assess for random responding, acquiescence versus “nay-saying,” and social desirability. The MPQ has proven particularly useful for clarifying how temperament-related psychological dispositions relate to normative and maladaptive behavior.

Introduction

The Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Tellegen 2003) is a normal-range personality inventory that assesses an array of basic traits

pertaining to affective sensitivity and motivation, interpersonal style, behavioral restraint and conformity, tolerance versus avoidance of risk, and capacity for imaginative engagement. Its 11 lower-order (“primary”) trait scales map onto three higher-order factors that correspond to temperament dimensions. Its content and measurement properties have made the MPQ advantageous (relative to other well-known personality inventories) for clarifying how psychological attributes with presumed bases in temperament relate to adaptive and maladaptive behavior. We first describe the development of the MPQ, the basic traits and broad factors it assesses, and alternative brief-screening and simplified-wording forms. We then discuss its associations with other personality inventories and ways it has been used to advance understanding of clinical-psychological disorders. (We thank Professor Auke Tellegen, the author of the MPQ, for his valuable input on a draft version of this article.)

Development and Description of Scales/Factors

The MPQ was developed using an iterative approach to test construction in which target constructs and scales were progressively refined across multiple rounds of data collection and analysis (for details, see Tellegen and Waller 2008). The goal was to create a set of unidimensional self-report scales, each measuring a distinctive

trait construct, which together would provide for a comprehensive assessment of normal personality. The current full-length version of the inventory (Tellegen 2003) comprises 276 items.

The MPQ contains 11 primary (first-order) trait scales that operate as indicators or facets of three uncorrelated (orthogonal) higher-order factors: Positive Emotionality (PEM), Negative Emotionality (NEM), and Constraint (CON). These higher-order factors have been interpreted as broad dimensions of temperament (Tellegen 1985). PEM and NEM reflect variations in the propensity to experience positive and negative affect, respectively, across events and situations. Each is associated with a primary trait scale that assesses general mood orientation: Wellbeing (reflecting tendencies to be happy, fun-loving, and optimistic) in the case of PEM, and Stress Reaction (reflecting tendencies to be nervous, sensitive, and worried) in the case of NEM. In addition, each is associated with other primary trait scales that index behavioral expressions of positive and negative emotionality in the interpersonal domain – i.e., agency (Achievement, Social Potency) and affiliation (Social Closeness) as components of PEM, and antagonism (Aggression) and estrangement (Alienation) as components of NEM. The Achievement and Social Potency scales assess, respectively, tendencies toward (a) ambition, work ethic, and persistence, and (b) dominance, persuasiveness, and leadership. The Social Closeness scale assesses proclivities toward sociability, warmth, connectiveness with others, and acceptance of support. The Alienation and Aggression scales (as facets of NEM) assess, respectively, proneness toward (a) mistrust, perceptions of hostile intent, and feelings of victimization and betrayal, and (b) truculence, vengefulness, exploitativeness, and enjoyment of violent images/exchanges.

The CON factor of the MPQ is marked by three primary trait scales that measure tendencies toward high versus low behavioral restraint: Control (planfulness vs. impulsivity), Harm Avoidance (intolerance vs. tolerance of danger), and Traditionalism (conventionality vs. nonconformity). A final MPQ scale, Absorption, indexes variations in openness to and

capacity for self-involving engagement in a wide range of perceptual and imaginative experiences. This scale loads modestly on both PEM and NEM, and while identified as a primary trait, attains the substantive breadth of a higher-order trait in its own right.

In addition, the MPQ includes three validity scales, two for detecting lack of consistency (semantic congruence) in responding – the Variable Response Inconsistency (VRIN) and True Response Inconsistency (TRIN) scales – and one for assessing socially desirable responding, the Unlikely Virtues. The two inconsistency scales each comprise several pairs of items, which are used to assess for inattentive/random responding (VRIN) and acquiescence and “nay-saying” biases (TRIN). The Unlikely Virtues scale assesses tendencies to claim uncommon positive attributes or to deny common vices, and as such, is viewed as indexing proneness to impression management (“other-deception”), as opposed to psychological defensiveness (“self-deception”).

Alternate Forms

In addition to the current 276-item full MPQ, and the original 300-item version that preceded it, two shorter-length versions exist – the 155-item brief-form version (MPQ-BF; Patrick et al. 2002) and the 157-item simplified-wording form (MPQ-SF; Patrick et al. 2013). The MPQ-BF was developed for large-scale screening purposes and consists of a subset of items from the 276-item full form that (a) provide for effective measurement of the MPQ’s 11 primary traits in less time, (b) retain the higher-order factor structure of the full-form MPQ, and (c) allow for evaluation of protocol validity through somewhat abbreviated VRIN and TRIN scales along with the complete Unlikely Virtues scale. The MPQ-SF was developed for use with youthful and educationally disadvantaged populations and consists of a subset of items from the 276-item full form worded to be comprehensible at a primary-school (6th to 7th grade) reading level. Like the MPQ-BF, it provides effective coverage of the 11 MPQ primary traits, exhibits the same factor structure as the

standard-wording full form, and includes versions of the MPQ's three validity scales.

Relations with Other Personality Inventories

Published research studies (e.g., Church 1994; Tellegen and Waller 2008) have documented systematic associations of primary traits and higher-order factors of the MPQ with traits and factors of other well-known inventories of normative personality discussed in this volume, including Five-Factor Model questionnaires (e.g., Big Five Inventory), the California Psychological Inventory, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, and the Temperament and Character Inventory. In addition, relationships have been documented with pathological personality inventories including the MMPI (Lee, this volume; Sellbom, this volume), the Dimensional Assessment of Personality Pathology (Livesley and Jackson 2006), and the Schedule for Nonadaptive and Adaptive Personality (Clark 1993). This body of work demonstrates conceptually meaningful associations between trait dispositions as indexed by the MPQ and traits represented in other personality inventories, and provides a basis for comparing and contrasting the coverage of trait attributes provided by different inventories.

Other work has shown that the MPQ can be useful for clarifying the content coverage, from a normative-trait perspective, of scales measuring complex personality constructs such as socialization, narcissism, sensation seeking, and empathic ability. For example, using the brief form version of the MPQ, Patrick et al. (2002) showed that the Socialization scale of the California Psychological Inventory, developed to index internalization of societal norms/values, assesses aspects of Negative Emotionality (low Alienation and Aggression) along with aspects of Constraint (high Control and Traditionalism). By contrast, Zuckerman's (1979) Sensation Seeking Scale primarily assesses lack of Constraint (low Harm Avoidance and Traditionalism, in particular, and to a lesser degree low Control). As discussed in the next section, the fact that complex personality

constructs can be estimated using trait scales of the MPQ has proven valuable in studies of psychopathology.

Associations with Psychopathology

A substantial body of research also exists on relations between traits and dimensions assessed by the MPQ and psychiatric conditions of various types. For example, drawing on the MPQ personality model, Tellegen (1985) proposed that anxiety and depression overlap as a function of their mutual association with generalized negative affect (or "demoralization"; Tellegen et al. 2003), but differ in that depression is characterized uniquely by a deficiency in positive affect. This idea served as critical inspiration for Clark and Watson's (1991) influential tripartite model of depression. Substantial research has also documented relations between psychiatric conditions involving deficient impulse control (i.e., "externalizing" disorders) and MPQ personality traits (e.g., Krueger et al. 1996). Like anxious-depressive (internalizing) disorders, externalizing conditions show positive associations with traits from the domain of NEM (though more so with Aggression and Alienation than with Stress Reaction), while also exhibiting distinct negative relations with traits from the domain of CON. In turn, knowledge of the MPQ correlates of clinical disorders has helped to reshape conceptualizations of the disorders themselves. For example, drawing on findings regarding the distinct MPQ correlates of anxiety/mood and impulse-related disorders, Miller et al. (2003) used MPQ trait-scale data to distinguish variants ("subtypes") of post-traumatic stress disorder – an internalizing variant with elevated levels of NEM traits, and an externalizing variant scoring low on CON traits as well as high on NEM traits.

The MPQ has also proven valuable in the study of personality disorders. One condition of this type that has been studied extensively using the MPQ is psychopathic personality (psychopathy). For example, the MPQ primary traits and higher-order dimensions have provided a useful framework for clarifying the nature of distinct affective-

interpersonal and impulsive-antisocial factors of psychopathy – as assessed by instruments such as the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R; Hare 2003) and the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld and Widows 2005). Researchers have also found the MPQ useful for clarifying the role of basic traits in observed associations between psychopathy factors and specific problem behaviors of concern to clinicians, including substance addictions, depression, and suicidality. More recently, MPQ-based subscales have been developed for assessing psychopathy in terms of the triarchic model of psychopathy (Patrick et al. 2009), which characterizes this construct in terms of biobehavioral constructs of boldness (fearlessness), meanness (callousness), and disinhibition (externalizing proneness). Brislin et al. (2015) created subscales for measuring these psychopathy-related dispositions and presented evidence for their validity in both offender and nonoffender samples.

Conclusion

The MPQ provides for unique assessment of personality in terms of affective, interpersonal, and behavioral traits organized around broad factors corresponding to dimensions of temperament. As such, it provides a valuable complement to personality inventories that represent traits in terms of common-language concepts. It has been used extensively in research directed at understanding the role of dispositional tendencies in psychological health and maladjustment. Given the availability of brief-screening and simplified-wording forms along with the full-length version, the MPQ is well-suited for use across a wide range of assessment populations and administration contexts.

Cross-References

- ▶ Achievement Motives
- ▶ Agency
- ▶ Aggression
- ▶ Agreeableness

- ▶ Antagonism
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Anxiousness
- ▶ Assertiveness
- ▶ Communion
- ▶ Conformity
- ▶ Conscientiousness
- ▶ Constraint
- ▶ Core and Surface Characteristics of Personality
- ▶ Depressivity
- ▶ Detachment
- ▶ Disinhibition
- ▶ Distress
- ▶ Extraversion
- ▶ Fearlessness
- ▶ Happiness
- ▶ Harm Avoidance
- ▶ Higher-Order Structures of Personality
- ▶ Hostility
- ▶ Impulsivity
- ▶ Need for Achievement
- ▶ Need for Affiliation
- ▶ Need for Power
- ▶ Negative Affect
- ▶ Neuroticism
- ▶ Nomothetic Study of Personality
- ▶ Nonaffective Constraint
- ▶ Normative Personality Development
- ▶ Novelty Seeking
- ▶ Openness
- ▶ Persistence
- ▶ Personality and Subjective Well-Being
- ▶ Personality Assessment
- ▶ Personality Disorder
- ▶ Personality Processes
- ▶ Personality Structure
- ▶ Planning Ahead
- ▶ Positive Affect
- ▶ Risk-Taking
- ▶ Sensation Seeking Scale
- ▶ Shyness
- ▶ Social Dominance Orientation
- ▶ Submissiveness
- ▶ Temperament
- ▶ Temperament Trait
- ▶ Threat Sensitivity
- ▶ Three-Factor Model of Personality
- ▶ Traditionalism

- ▶ Trait
- ▶ Trait Anxiety
- ▶ Tripartite Model of Psychopathology
- ▶ Trust Versus Mistrust
- ▶ Validity Scales

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