III. Interpretation

The Meaning of Scale Scores

Both domain and facet scales of the NEO-PI measure traits that approximate normal, bell-shaped distributions. Most respondents will score near the average for the scale, with a small percentage at either end. It is necessary to keep this distribution of scores in mind in interpreting the meaning of any individual’s scores.

Scales are most conveniently explained by describing characteristics of extremely high or extremely low scorers. Few individuals will obtain these scores, however, and few will show all the characteristics described. Instead, individual scores will usually represent degrees of the personality trait, and extreme scores mean a higher probability of showing the distinctive features.

Characteristics are also compared across people, rather than within the individual. Thus, a person who scores at the 75th percentile on Depression and the 25th percentile on Positive Emotions is more likely to feel depressed than most other people, and less likely to feel happiness. However, because happiness is much more common than depression, he or she is still likely to be happy more often than depressed.

Users of the NEO-PI should avoid thinking in terms of either types or categories when interpreting scores. Although it is convenient to speak of “introverts” and “extraverts,” the NEO-PI E scale represents a continuous dimension, and most respondents would best be described as “ambiverts” — that is, as showing a combination of introverted and extraverted tendencies. The same principle applies to all of the other scales as well.

Inventories like the MMPI are often interpreted in terms of diagnostic categories. If a scale exceeds a T-score of 70, for example, it may be regarded as an indication of psychopathology; scores below this cut-off are considered normal and sometimes given little attention. In conceptualizing the normal personality traits measured by the NEO-PI, a different approach should be used. No single cut-off point separates those who “have” from those who “do not have” the trait, and being low or average on a scale can be as informative as being high.

For many applications, decision rules employing cut-off points are needed, and it is certainly possible to establish useful cut-offs on one or more NEO-PI scales empirically. Clinical, vocational, and educational research along these lines will be welcome. Generally, however, the rules generated will be valid only for the special purpose for which they were intended, and should not replace the dimensional interpretation of the scales.

A THREE-DOMAIN MODEL OF PERSONALITY: N, E, AND O

The original NEO Inventory measures three broad domains, with six specific facets in each. This section describes the three domains at a global level, emphasizing crucial distinctions as well as basic definitions.

Neuroticism (N). The most pervasive domain of personality scales contrasts adjustment or emotional stability with maladjustment or neuroticism. Because individuals high on this dimension are particularly prone to experience anxiety, and because anxiety plays such a key role in theories of psychopathology, this dimension is sometimes called general anxiety (e.g., Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970; Costa & McCrae, 1976). In addition to anxiety, however, individuals high in N are more likely to experience anger, disgust, sadness, embarrassment, and a variety of other negative emotions. Indeed, Tellegen (in press) has proposed calling this domain Negative Emotionality.

However, N includes more than a susceptibility to psychological distress. Perhaps because disruptive emotions interfere with adaptation, men and women high in N are also prone to have unrealistic ideas, to be less able to control their urges, and to cope less well than others with stress.

As the name suggests, patients traditionally diagnosed as suffering from neuroses generally score high on measures of N (e.g., Eysenck & Eysenck, 1964). But the N scale of the NEO-PI (like all its other scales) measures a dimension of normal personality. High scorers may be at risk for some kinds of psychiatric problems, as correla-
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tions with other measures suggest, but the N scale should not be viewed as a measure of psychopathology. It is possible to obtain a high score on the scale without having any diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Conversely, not all psychiatric categories imply high levels of neuroticism. Psychotic and sociopathic disorders, in particular, may or may not be related to N.

**Extraversion (E).** Extraverts are of course sociable, but sociability is only one of the traits that compose the domain of Extraversion. In addition to liking people and preferring large groups and gatherings, extraverts are also assertive, active, and talkative; they like excitement and stimulation, and tend to be cheerful in disposition. They are upbeat, energetic, and optimistic. The salesman is the prototypic extravert in our culture, and the E domain scale is strongly correlated with interest in enterprising occupations (Costa, McCrae, & Holland, 1984).

While it is easy to convey the characteristics of the extravert, the introvert is less easy to portray. In some respects, introversion should be seen as the absence of extraversion rather than its opposite. Thus, introverts are reserved rather than unfriendly, independent rather than submissive, even-paced rather than sluggish. Introverts may say they are shy when they mean that they prefer to be alone; they do not necessarily suffer from social anxiety. Finally, although they are not given to the exuberant high spirits of extraverts, introverts are not unhappy or depressed. Curious as some of these distinctions may seem, they are strongly supported by research and form one of the most important conceptual advances of the NEO model. Breaking the mental set that links such pairs as “happy—unhappy,” “friendly—hostile,” “outgoing—shy” allows important new insights into personality.

Users familiar with Jungian psychology will note that the conceptualization of extraversion embodied in the NEO-PI differs in many respects from Jung’s theory (1923). In particular, introspection or reflection is not related to either pole of E. In general, the NEO-PI E scale would not be appropriate as an operationalization of Jung’s construct.

**Openness (O).** Unlike the familiar domains of N and E, openness to experience is a distinctive feature of the NEO Personality Inventory. The elements of openness — active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, receptiveness to inner feelings, preference for variety, intellectual curiosity, independence of judgment — have of course often played a role in theories and measures of personality, but their coherence into a single broad domain has seldom been recognized. In the NEO-PI, openness takes its place as a major domain of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1985).

Open individuals are curious about both inner and outer worlds, and their lives are experientially richer. They are willing to entertain novel ideas and unconventional values, and they experience both positive and negative emotions more keenly.

Openness is modestly associated with both education and intelligence (see Table 21), but is by no means equivalent to intelligence. It is also probably an ingredient of creativity. Openness, however, may also be a disadvantage, leading to a succession of poorly integrated interests.

The open person may be the proverbial jack-of-all-trades and master-of-none.

Men and women scoring low on O tend to be conventional in behavior and conservative in outlook. They prefer the familiar to the novel, and their emotional responses are somewhat muted. However, there is no evidence that closedness is a defensive reaction. Instead, it seems likely that closed people simply differ in the scope and intensity of their interests. Similarly, although they tend to be politically and socially conservative, closed people should not be viewed as authoritarians. In particular, closedness does not imply hostile intolerance or authoritarian aggression. These characteristics are more likely to be related to the domain of Agreeableness.

A related distinction must be made at the open pole. Open individuals are unconventional, willing to question authority, and prepared to entertain new ethical, social, and political ideas. But this does not mean that they are unprincipled. An open person may apply his or her evolving value system as conscientiously as a traditionalist does. Openness may sound healthier or more mature to many psychologists, but the value of openness or closedness depends on the requirements of the situation, and both open and closed individuals perform useful functions in society.

**Facets of N, E, and O**

Each of these three domains is represented in the NEO-PI by six more specific scales that measure facets of the domain. There are several advantages to the strategy of assessing a variety of facets. First, it ensures that the items used to measure the domain will cover as wide a range of relevant thoughts, feelings, and actions as possible. The N scale, for example, must include items measuring hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability to stress as well as anxiety. Domain scores for the NEO-PI are designed to reflect the broadest possible dimensions of personality.

Second, having several independent facet scales permits internal replication of findings. For example, each of the six facets of N is significantly related to negative affect and lower life satisfaction (Costa & McCrae, 1984), which gives considerable confidence that N is indeed related to psychological well-being.

Other advantages to the multifaceted approach to personality measurement arise from the fact that meaningful individual differences can be seen within domains. Openness to fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values covary to form the domain of Openness, and individuals high in one facet are likely to be high in others. But this is only a statement of probability; some individuals, for example, are open to ideas but not values, or to feelings but not aesthetics. These individual differences are captured by examining facets, which provide a more fine-grained analysis of persons or groups. In understanding an individual it may be important to recognize that an “average” N score is obtained by summing a low hostility and a high depression score; such a profile is very different from that of a person high in hostility and low in depression, who may have the same total N score.
Finally, the detailed information available from a consideration of facet scores can be useful in interpreting constructs and formulating theories. Extraversion is known to be related to psychological well-being (Costa & McCrae, 1980a), but a closer look shows that two of the facets — Warmth and Positive Emotions — are chiefly responsible for the association. Excitement-Seeking is not related to well-being (Costa & McCrae, 1984). These findings have important implications for a theory of well-being.

Six facets of Neuroticism are measured by the NEO-PI:

Anxiety. Anxious individuals are apprehensive, fearful, prone to worry, nervous, tense, and jittery. In clinical terms, the anxiety measured by this scale is manifest rather than latent, but it includes general tendencies toward both free-floating anxiety and specific fears.

Hostility. Hostility represents the tendency to experience anger and related emotional states, including irritability and hatred. Hostile people are hot-tempered. This scale does not measure aggression per se, but individuals scoring high on Hostility show a disposition that could lead to aggression.

Depression. This scale measures the tendency of normal persons to experience depressive affect. High scorers are prone to feelings of guilt, sadness, hopelessness, and loneliness. They are easily discouraged. Not surprisingly, scores on this scale are the best single predictor of overall happiness or unhappiness.

Self-Consciousness. The emotions of shame and embarrassment form the core for this facet of Neuroticism. Self-conscious individuals are uncomfortable around others, sensitive to ridicule, and prone to feelings of inferiority or low self-esteem. Self-consciousness is akin to what other researchers have called social anxiety.

Impulsiveness. In the NEO-PI, Impulsiveness refers to the inability to control cravings and urges. Desires (for food, cigarettes, possessions) are perceived as being so strong that the individual cannot resist them, although he or she may later regret the behavior. The term “impulsive” is used by many theorists to refer to many different traits; NEO-PI Impulsiveness should not be confused with spontaneity, risk-taking, or rapid decision time.

Vulnerability. The final facet of N is Vulnerability. Individuals high on this scale feel unable to cope with stress, becoming dependent, hopeless, or panicked when facing emergency situations. Low scorers perceive themselves as competent and capable of handling themselves in difficult situations.

Extraversion is represented by six more facets:

Warmth. Warmth is an aspect of extraversion which implies close emotional ties to others. Warm people are affectionate and friendly; they genuinely like people. Low scorers are more reserved, formal, and distant in manner.

Gregariousness. A second aspect of extraversion is gregariousness, the preference for other people's company. Whereas Warmth refers to the quality of interpersonal interaction, Gregariousness refers to the quantity of social stimulation desired.

Assertiveness. High scorers on this scale are dominant, forceful, and ascendant. They speak out without hesitation and often become group leaders. Low scorers prefer to keep in the background and avoid confrontations with others.

Activity. A high Activity level is seen in rapid tempo and vigorous movement, in a sense of energy, and in a need to keep busy. Active people lead fast-paced lives. Low scorers on this scale are calmer and less driven, and prefer a more leisurely lifestyle.

Excitement-Seeking. High scorers on this scale crave excitement and stimulation; they like bright colors and noisy and dangerous environments. Excitement-Seeking is akin to sensation- and stimulus-seeking (cf. Zuckerman, 1979), and in extreme cases can resemble the trait measured by the MMPI Pd scale.

Positive Emotions. The last facet of E represents the tendency to experience positive emotions. Although positive affects are usually regarded as the direct opposite of negative affects, considerable research has shown that the dispositions that lead to the experience of these emotional states are independent, not opposite. The individual who is low in Neuroticism rarely experiences anxiety, hostility, or depression, but he or she may or may not experience joy, happiness, love, excitement. Instead, these states are the expression of a facet of Extraversion, Positive Emotions. High scorers on this scale laugh easily and often; they are cheerful and optimistic. They are also more satisfied with life. Low scorers are not necessarily unhappy, they are only less exuberant and high-spirited.

Finally, Openness to Experience is assessed in six areas:

Fantasy. High scorers on this scale have an active fantasy life and a vivid imagination. They daydream not simply as an escape, but as a way of creating for themselves an interesting inner world. They elaborate and develop fantasies, and believe that fantasy contributes to a rich and creative life.

Aesthetics. Individuals open to aesthetic experience have a deep appreciation for art and beauty. They are moved by poetry, absorbed in music, intrigued by art. High scorers need not have artistic talent, nor even necessarily good taste, but their sensitivity is likely to lead them to develop a wider knowledge and appreciation of the arts.

Feelings. Openness to Feelings implies receptivity to one's own inner feelings and a positive evaluation of emotion as an important part of life. High scorers have a wider and deeper range of emotional experiences, feeling both happiness and unhappiness more strongly.

Actions. Openness is seen behaviorally in the willingness to try different activities, go new places, eat unusual foods. High scorers on this scale prefer novelty and variety to familiarity and routine. Over time, they may successively engage in a variety of hobbies.

Ideas. Intellectual curiosity is an aspect of openness which has long been recognized (Fiske, 1949). This trait is seen not only in an active interest in intellectual activity for its own sake, but also in openmindedness and
a willingness to consider new ideas. High scorers enjoy both philosophical arguments and brain-teasers. Openness to Ideas does not necessarily imply high intelligence, but it may contribute to the development of intellectual potential.

**Values.** Openness to Values means the readiness to reexamine social, political, and religious values. Closed individuals tend to accept authority and honor tradition, and in consequence are generally conservative. Openness to Values may be seen as the opposite to Dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960).

### TWO ADDITIONAL DOMAINS: A AND C

The work of Norman (1963), Goldberg (1981), and others demonstrates that there are significant gaps in the three domain NEO model. In their analyses of the English language, these investigators showed two clusters of adjectives that described aspects of personality not related to N, E, or O. Terms like cooperative, trusting, and sympathetic define a domain they called Agreeableness (A); words like punctual, responsible, and hardworking suggest a domain they called Conscientiousness (C). Scales to measure these two new domains were therefore developed (McCrae & Costa, in press-d), and research has demonstrated that the new scales correlate highly with adjective factors measuring A and C. Facets for these domains have not yet been clearly identified, and no facet scales are provided in the NEO-PI. Further, because they were developed more recently, these scales have been the subject of less research than the N, E, and O scales. However, their role in the natural language of personality description suggests that these two domains will prove to be important additions to the NEO model, and the inclusion of A and C domain scales in the NEO-PI should facilitate clinical interpretation and stimulate research.

**Agreeableness**

Dozens of sophisticated psychological theories have been created to describe how people relate to each other. A number of researchers (e.g., Leary, 1957; Wiggins & Broughton, 1985) have come to the conclusion that two major dimensions can be used to describe most kinds of social behavior. One of these can be identified as Extraversion, which determines how much an individual prefers to interact with others. The second dimension is Agreeableness (A), and it represents the positive or negative orientation toward others. The agreeable person is fundamentally altruistic; he or she is sympathetic to others and eager to help them, and believes that others will be equally helpful in return. By contrast, the disagreeable or antagonistic person is egocentric, skeptical of others’ intentions, and competitive rather than cooperative.

It is tempting to see the agreeable side of this domain as both socially preferable and psychologically healthier, and there is some evidence that agreeable individuals are more popular. But the tendency to fight for one’s interests is often advantageous, and agreeableness is not a virtue on the battlefield or in the courtroom. Skeptical and critical thinking contribute to accurate analysis in the sciences. In short, individuals scoring on both poles of this dimension have a function in society.

There is some evidence that agreeableness can be used to distinguish occupational groupings that appeal to extraverts. Whereas Social occupations like teacher or clinical psychologist (Holland, 1985) appeal chiefly to agreeable extraverts, Enterprising occupations such as sales manager or advertising executive appeal more to disagreeable extraverts. Agreeableness may also be a contributor to social and political attitudes (Conley, 1984). The agreeable person is by nature concerned with others’ welfare and tends to be tender-minded; the antagonistic person is concerned with power and is tough-minded in attitudes. Wiggins and Broughton (1985) point out that Bem’s (1974) dimension of Femininity is akin to Agreeableness. Among the Murray (1938) needs, Agreeableness is associated with nurturance and succorance (Digman, 1979).

Just as neither pole of this dimension is intrinsically better from society’s point of view, so neither is necessarily better in terms of the individual’s mental health. Horney (1945) discusses two neurotic tendencies — moving against and moving toward — that resemble extreme forms of antagonism and agreeableness. In its neurotic manifestation, disagreeableness is seen as hostility, suspicion, and alienation; but agreeableness can also assume a pathological form, in which it is usually seen as dependency.

**Conscientiousness**

A great deal of personality theory, particularly psychodynamic theory, concerns the control of impulses. During the course of development most individuals learn how to manage their desires, and as noted earlier, the inability to resist impulses and temptations is generally a sign of high N, at least among adults.

But there is another side to control, an active as well as an inhibiting self-discipline. This active form corresponds to Norman’s domain of Conscientiousness (C). The conscientious individual is characterized by such adjectives as persistent, businesslike, scrupulous, and reliable. He or she is purposeful and well-organized, seeing much of life in terms of tasks to be accomplished. Highly conscientious people are strong-willed and determined, and probably few individuals become great musicians or athletes without a reasonably high level of these traits. Digman and Takemoto-Chock (1981) refer to this domain as “Will to Achieve.”

Because they are able to structure their lives tightly, highly conscientious men and women may be scrupulously honest, punctual, and neat. If, however, their overriding goals lead them in other directions, they can abandon those principles. Because high C persons in fact exercise considerable control over their lives, they probably have an internal locus of control. Because the achievements they aspire to generally require and motivate activity, conscientious people share with extraverts a high activity level. High scorers on this domain are known to be high in academic achievement (Digman &
Takemoto-Chock, 1981) and more diligent in studying (McCrae, 1976).

Some recent research (McCrae, Costa, & Busch, in press) suggests that individuals low in Conscientiousness are hedonistic and pleasure-seeking, and have stronger interests in sex. Conscientious people may be more puritanical in attitudes and values.

The Influence of A and C on the N, E, and O Facets

Factor studies discussed below clearly demonstrate that the 18 facets of the NEO model empirically define the three higher order factors of N, E, and O. But when measures of A and C were developed, it became possible to examine the relation of the 18 facets to these two new domains. Preliminary findings suggest that some correlations are likely to be found, and these shed new light on the N, E, and O facets.

Hostility, for example, appears to be related to low agreeableness as well as neuroticism. Conceptually, the disruptive emotions characteristic of N would lead to a hot-blooded form of hostility, marked by anger and rage in extreme cases. The antagonism and mistrust of those low in Agreeableness is less distressing to the individual, and would be seen as a more cold-blooded hostility. Empirically, these two forms may be difficult to distinguish, especially for external observers, who see the behavior but cannot experience the inner motivation. Conversely, Self-Consciousness and Vulnerability may be related positively to Agreeableness, since a high need for approval can make high A scorers too dependent on others.

Warmth is positively related to A, while Assertiveness is negatively related. These two facets share the social focus and vigorous expression of Extraversion, but are contrasted in attitude toward others. A disagreeable extravert is likely to be domineering and high in Assertiveness; an agreeable extravert may be compliant and score high in Warmth.

An element of Conscientiousness is also seen in several facets. In particular, the organization, persistence, and goal-directed behavior of conscientious people contribute to higher scores on both Assertiveness and Activity. There are also reasons to believe that Impulsiveness, Excitement-Seeking, and Fantasy are influenced by C. Individuals who are low in conscientiousness may be weak-willed, distractible, or prone to daydream.

New scoring approaches that capitalize on the secondary associations of N, E, and O for the assessment of A and C are under investigation. In the meantime, users may wish to adopt an integrative, multivariate approach to the interpretation of scale scores, especially at the level of the individual case. For example, in assessing leadership potential, it may be useful to consider to what degree a high Assertiveness score is indicative of Extraversion, low Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

INTERPRETING PROFILES

The set of scores an individual receives can be plotted on a profile sheet to see the overall configuration of his or her personality. The most distinctive and salient facets can then be identified, both within and across domains. Familiarity with the correlates of NEO-PI scales allows the interpreter to make predictions about important aspects of the individual’s life, such as coping styles, vocational interests, and life satisfaction.

This Manual summarizes the theory and research on which interpretive statements can be based. In the section that follows, several hypothetical cases are presented which give examples of interpretations based on individual scale elevations.

These interpretive reports were generated by applying a set of decision rules to the profile of scores for each case. If the scores exceed certain cut-off points, a statement is included in the report that summarizes its meaning and possible implications. The statements are based on scale content and on research findings, and footnotes in Case 1 cite relevant studies; the cut-off points chosen are based on the judgment and experience of the authors. These interpretive reports should be viewed as a set of probabilistic inferences that an interpreter, well-versed in the literature on the NEO-PI, might make given the observed scores.

Interpretive reports such as these, which compile a portrait through the application of a series of decision rules, sometimes appear to be incongruous. For example, an individual may be described as both affectionate and ruthless; another might be called both high-spirited and dejected. Each of these descriptions may be accurate, but the apparent contradictions involved call for additional explanations that the decision rules cannot make. In the former example, it might be the case that the individual is very affectionate toward family or friends, but ruthless in business; in the latter, that the person shows cyclic variations in mood. Apparent inconsistencies in interpretive reports should not be seen as errors, but as issues that require clarification and further individualized interpretation.

Finally, it should be recalled that no single set of test scores can be considered a complete basis for the assessment of an individual’s personality, and all test interpretations must be evaluated in the context of other information on the history and behavior of the respondent.

Case 1: A 35-Year-Old Man

Figure 2 presents the hypothetical profile of a 35-year-old man, using self-report data. The interpretation for this profile follows:

Based on research with normal populations, the test responses of this client suggest the following personality description. Overall, the individual can be seen as emotionally unstable and prone to experience disruptive affects and their cognitive and behavioral consequences. The profile indicates a person who is extraverted, outgoing, enthusiastic, high-spirited and spontaneous, but closed to experience and most comfortable with the familiar, routine, and conventional. He is very agreeable, basically altruistic, and prone to