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Emily Shipman

Ouachita Baptist University

Madison Atchley

Ouachita Baptist University

Hannah More

Ouachita Baptist University

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BIASES IN PERSONALITY TEST RESULTS

MADISON ATCHLEY, HANNAH MORE, EMILY SHIPMAN, AND JENNIFER
FAYARD, PH.D.
OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Background

- Personality assessments offer insight into who we are and different aspects of ourselves.
- The Barnum effect is the idea that people are gullible and will believe general statements that supposedly describes them (Forer, 1949).
- There are many personality assessments out there (such as the Big Five and Enneagram), but do all of them give an accurate description of our personalities? Or do they lead people to fall for the Barnum effect?
- The Big Five is considered a valid measure of personality because of its internal consistency (Schmukle, 2008).
- The Enneagram on the other hand, does not have enough research at the present time to back up its validity (Hook et. al., 2021).
- This difference of validities for the different kinds of personality assessments is something of great interest to many people.
- The Enneagram tends to give more general feedback, that could apply to lots of people.
- The Big Five gives results on a spectrum, and explains what people high or low on the spectrum would be like, which gives more variability and specificity for individuals.
- Many people fall for the Barnum/Forer effect because they want to fulfill the concept of self-serving bias.
- Our research question was looking at whether there was a difference in perceived accuracy of general or specific results.
- Our hypothesis was that people would believe general results described them more accurately than specific results.

Method

- We had 89 undergraduate participants, who were recruited through Psychology courses and social clubs.
- Participants were offered compensation through extra credit and support credits for social clubs.
- As each participant arrived to their prospective time slots, they received a consent form, and filled out a demographic form before beginning their test.
- We had to deceive participants into thinking they were taking a personality test created by us, and would be rating its accuracy.

- Participants took either the Big Five or Enneagram test, randomized through Qualtrics
- They then received their results, which were randomized as specific or general based on the time in which each individual participated in the study.
- General results were the same for each participant in the general level. It was a short description of a personality that could be applied to anyone; "You are outgoing with your friends, but more reserved around strangers," etc.
- Specific results were the actual Enneagram and Big 5 results .
- They rated how well they thought it fit their personality on a 1-5 scale.
- They were also asked questions about their understanding of either the Big Five or Enneagram tests.

Results

- An Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare general vs. specific feedback on personality tests, $t(85)=2.96, p=.004$, Cohen's $d=0.71$. The general results group had a significantly higher ($M=3.74, SD=0.69$) rate of believability than the specific group ($M=3.24, SD=0.78$).

Conclusions

- Our results supported our hypothesis; that participants would rate the general results as more accurate than the specific results.
- These results support the idea that personality tests can have a Barnum effect.
- This means people often look at their results with a self-serving bias. They want their results to tell them all their positive traits, without any negative.
- Future studies could research whether or not different personality tests have stronger/weaker Barnum effects.
- This could aid us in discovering if there is a reliable personality test that exists, which doesn't indirectly deceive people through their own self-serving biases.

References

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