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The Ego States and the “Big Five” Personality Factors

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Abstract

The objective of this pilot study is to explore the possibility of existence of relations between the Ego States as defined in Transactional Analysis and the “Big Five” Personality Factors. The study’s sample was represented by 42 school psychologists and counsellors. The Big Five Inventory and the Ego States Questionnaire were used as data collection tools. The results highlighted positive correlations between *Adapted Child* and *Consciousness*, and *Natural Child* and *Extraversion*. Also negative correlations between: *Critical Parent* and *Agreeability*, *Adapted Child* and *Emotional Stability*, *Natural Child* and *Agreeability*, were found. Being only preliminary results, a future research with a larger volume sample will be conducted.

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1. Introduction

This research is a pilot exploratory study in seeking for the possibility of existence of relations between the Ego States as defined by Eric Berne in Transactional Analysis and the “Big Five” Personality Factors. If the possibility of the above mentioned relations exists, the assumption if the level of an individual’s “Big Five” factors can be predicted by behaviorally observing the Ego States the person is showing the most through further studies would be researched. This research is based on the work of Berne [1] and Boholst [2] on Ego States and on the work of Florin-Alin Sava [3] on the “Big Five” personality factors. No previous empirical researches approaching the relations between Transactional Analysis Ego States and the “Big Five” Personality Factors in the existing research literature were found.

The “Big Five” personality model is one of the most used personality description methods (Costa and McRae, 1992) [4]. It can be said that all the characteristics of personality can be described in an adequate way by the combination of the five factors: Openness, Extraversion, Consciousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability

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(Sava, 2008) [5]. Eric Berne, the founder of Transactional Analysis, observed that individuals manifest three certain sets of thoughts, feelings and behaviors at different moments of time [6]. Berne called these sets Ego States: Child, Adult and Parent. Later, Dusay indicated that Ego States divide as follows: Critical Parent and Nurturing Parent, Adapted Child and Natural Child [7]. The Adult Ego State does not divide. Berne's definition of an Ego State is: "a consistent pattern of feeling and experience directly related to a corresponding consistent pattern of behavior." It is very important to make the difference between the Ego States as concepts, and the real biological parent, child or adult. That is why the Ego States are written using first capital letter. Each individual has all these three Ego States few months from birth until the end of his/her life and they are observable. Depending on the social situation and on the person we are talking to, we can shift energy in any part of the three Ego States (consciously or unconsciously). There are five criteria by which one could diagnose an Ego State: words used, tone of voice, gesture, posture, and facial expression (Steiner et al., 2003)[8].

The Child Ego State – when one is in this Ego State, the person experiences, acts, feels, thinks, hears and reacts as the child the person was at a certain moment in his/her childhood and reenacts that experience in the present. The *Child Ego State* represents all one's life events filtered through his/her personal subjective experience. The *Child Ego State* is the source of feelings, intuition, needs, creativity, creation, procreation and life energy (physis) (Wadsworth and Divincenti, 2003) [9]. The *Child Ego State* has all the feelings one can express. When the *Child* is loving, spontaneous, intuitive or playful it is called the positive *Natural Child*. When hateful, impulsive, angry, selfish and self-pleasing – one shows the negative part of the *Natural Child*. When it is adaptive, thoughtful, creative, imaginative, good executant, thorough, it is called the positive part of the *Adapted Child* (Kahler, 2008) [10]. At the same time, a high level of *Adapted Child* is linked with emotional instability. When in a negative *Adapted Child* Ego State, a person can show discouragement or irritation in facing an obstacle, fear and helplessness, more stress in accomplishing tasks. The person can be angry, fearful, guilty or ashamed, turning the anger inwards (leading to psychosomatic illnesses) and being self-discounting, or outwards, exposing a rebel (passive-aggressive) behaviour (Kahler, 2008) [11].

The Adult Ego State – it is the so called "computer" part of ourselves. When in the *Adult Ego State*, an individual offers and asks for information, and based on the data, he/she takes decisions. The function of the *Adult* is a fact-based one. When in the *Adult Ego State* the person uses logical thinking to solve problems, being also an mediator between the *Child Ego State* and the *Parent Ego State* (Stewart & Joines, 2007) [12].

The Parent Ego State – is a collection of rules, codes, norms, prejudices, assessments, taken from the individual's parents or significant persons. The *Parent Ego State* is like a tape recorder: in our childhood we store what we hear, even if these things have no meanings for us. The *Parent* decides how one should live, behave, what's good and what's bad, how to react to different situations. The function of the *Parent* is a value-based one. The *Parent's* judgments and behaviours can be supportive, warm, nurturative, and then we see the positive part of the *Nurturing Parent*. If the *Nurturing Parent* becomes overprotecting, discouraging personal development of others, it shows it's negative part. When the *Parent's* behaviours are controlling and critical, but with a positive role in supporting others, we see a positive part of the *Critical Parent*. When these traits are abusive and with no respect to others, even attacking individuals, the person is exposing the negative part of the *Critical Parent* (Kahler, 2008) [13]. Each person has a "favourite" Ego State which the person shows the most, or energizes the most (depending on the person he/she interacts with and on the situation the person experiences).

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective and research hypothesis

The objective of this research is to explore the possibility of existence of relations between the Ego States and the "Big Five" Personality Factors. The exploratory research hypothesis is: there are correlations between the Ego States and the "Big Five" Personality Factors. Establishing the possibility of existence of the above

mentioned relations, by further studies we could formulate and verify assumptions about a person's personality profile by observing the Ego State(s) the person is showing the most (since Ego States are externally observable) (Thomson, 1972) [14].

2.2. Sample and respondents

The research sample consists of 42 school psychologists and counselors randomly selected from Timișoara middle schools (gymnasiums). The research is an exploratory cross-sectional non-experimental study. All participants voluntarily participated in the research. All participants were female. The average age was 34.31 years (minimum 24 and maximum 54).

2.3. Psychological instruments used in the research

DECAS Big Five Inventory – author: Florin-Alin Sava. Production and distribution license for Romania is owned by SC PsihoProiect SRL. DECAS Personality Inventory is a tool built on the “Big Five” model of personality comprised of 97 items distributed in 8 scales that can be divided in content scales (*Openness, Extraversion, Consciousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability*) and scales of validation (*Social desirability, Random Answers, and Approval*) (Sava, 2008) [15].

Ego States Questionnaire – the Ego States assessed are: *Critical Parent, Nurturing Parent, Adult, Adapted Child and Natural (Free) Child*. The questionnaire has 40 items with 4 response options on a Likert scale. The author and owner of the questionnaire is AD International, owned and managed by Julie Hay [16].

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Results

For the statistical processing of data, the SPSS 13.0 program was used.

Table 1. Statistics for Personality Factors and Ego States

Ego States	Mean	Std.dev.	Personality Factors	Mean	Std.dev.
Critical Parent	10.21	2.67	Openness	54.41	9.78
Nurturing Parent	13.57	3.81	Extraversion	52.78	9.63
Adult	14.74	2.73	Consciousness	44.63	9.37
Adapted Child	10.05	2.85	Agreeableness	60.65	9.00
Natural Child	15.50	3.08	Emotional Stability	58.90	10.49

Note: N=42

Following the statistical processing of data, the Bravais-Pearson “r” correlation test was applied. Positive significant correlations were found between: *Adapted Child* and *Consciousness*, and *Natural Child* and *Extraversion*. Also significant negative correlations between: *Critical Parent* and *Agreeability*, *Adapted Child* and *Emotional Stability*, *Natural Child* and *Agreeability*, were found (see table 2). The exploratory hypothesis was partially confirmed.

Table 2. The results for the correlation between Ego States and “Big Five” Personality Factors

Variable	Critical Parent	Nurturing Parent	Adult	Adapted Child	Natural Child
Openness	.260	.018	-.008	.105	.242
	.097	.911	.962	.507	.123
Extraversion	.204	.248	-.092	.012	.353(*)
	.194	.113	.564	.941	.022
Consciousness	.248	.244	.162	.395(**)	-.122
	.113	.120	.305	.010	.442
Agreeableness	-.406(**)	-.262	-.148	-.253	-.313(*)
	.008	.093	.348	.106	.044
Emotional	.004	-.193	.185	-.502(**)	-.192
Stability	.980	.221	.241	.001	.222

Note: N=42; *p<0.05; **p<0.01 (2-tailed)

These results are just an indication of a possible relation between Ego States and “Big Five” Personality Factors, which relational possibility is next described. People showing mostly the *Adapted Child* Ego State characteristics are likely to show a high level of *Consciousness* and a low level of *Emotional Stability* (that means they are showing a degree of emotionally instability). Individuals using frequently the *Natural Child* Ego State traits could be perceived having a high level of *Extraversion* and being less agreeable. The last relation indicates that people who are perceived with strong *Critical Parent* Ego State features could also be viewed as less agreeable persons.

3.2. Discussion

Taking into account as results of this study the possibility of existence of the relation between Ego States and “Big Five” Personality Factors, a future study with two sets of questionnaires for each of the two dimensions will be conducted. One of these questionnaire will be a new built version of the Ego States Questionnaire, which will assess both the positive and negative parts of the *Critical* and *Nurturative Parent*, and of the *Adapted* and *Natural Child*.

Using the Chi-square test the confirmation or ruling out of the Kahler based suppositions made in the present study would then be verified. This way we could verify the association of both positive and negative part of an Ego state with a certain “Big Five” Personality Factor, e.g. the correlation between the positive part of the *Adapted Child* and *Consciousness* (positive correlation) and the negative part of the *Adapted Child* and *Emotional Stability* (negative correlation).

4. Conclusions

Due to the limits of this research, the results of this study have to be seen and interpreted as a preliminary exploratory research regarding the existence of relations between the Ego States and the “Big Five” Personality Factors. The conclusions of the study are just an indication of a possible relation between the Ego States and the “Big Five” Personality Factors, and may be considered being in line in some degree with other researches which studied the relation between Ego States and some personality characteristics (both positive and negative) (Stansbury, 1990) [17]. Based on the study’s findings and on Kahler’s work [18], the following suppositions may be issued. People who are frequently energizing their *Natural Child* Ego State are expansive, enthusiastic, are

showing sociability, boldness in relationships, optimism and self-confidence. They often tend to seek for new sensations in their social group context. They like to take initiative, to act rapidly, and to spend time in social activities. All above mentioned traits are also describing extraverted people, exhibiting their *Natural Child* (possibly the positive part) [19]. People with a pronounced *Natural Child* Ego State are also perceived as being less agreeable by often putting their interest first and being insensitive to the need of others, with indifference and lack of tact in relating to others, these traits describing the *Natural Child* (possibly the negative part) [20]. Some similar findings are presented by Novey in his work [21]. Individuals who most frequently invest energy in their *Critical Parent* Ego State are perceived as dominant, opinionated, judgmental, controlling and critical, stating norms and rules, having behaviours that are opposite to those of an agreeable person, thus, *Agreeability* negatively correlating with a high energetic level of the *Critical Parent* (possibly the negative part) [22].

The confirmation of the above suppositions will be researched in a future study, in which the association between the positive and negative parts of Ego States (*Critical* and *Nurturative Parent*, the *Adapted* and *Natural Child*) and the respective “Big Five” Personality Factor will be specifically verified. The findings of this pilot exploratory study if confirmed by future researches could represent a way to identify some personality traits, in situations when a personality questionnaire assessment is inappropriate or impossible to apply. The results of this study (if sustained by future researches) could have direct application in organizations: in HR assessment/interviews when employees negatively perceive psychological assessment, in negotiations, team building, communication, and motivation. Other domain where the results of the study can be successfully applied is in clinical work, in counselling and psychotherapy, by studying the nonverbal language (Kahler, 2008) [23], when the psychologist has no access to psychological questionnaires, or in a early stage of the therapeutic relationship, when it isn’t yet established.

The limitations of this study are the sample’s small volume and the fact that all the participants are of the same sex (women). Another important limitation of this study is that the Ego State Questionnaire used in the research does not assess the positive and the negative parts of the Ego States. For more sustainable results, future research with a larger and more representative volume sample and using two sets of questionnaires for each of the two dimensions will be conducted.

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