

Post-conference Symposium
Thursday 1st September 2022, 9.00-11.00

Social cognition and personality: On the relation between personality and evaluative conditioning

Chairs:

Jan De Houwer (Ghent University)

Marco Perugini (University of Milan-Bicocca)

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There have been relatively few interactions between the research fields of Social Cognition and Personality. The interactions have been even more sporadic if one considers research on the relation between, on the one hand, personality traits and, on the other hand, evaluative and social learning. Still, there is much that the two fields of research can learn from each other. This symposium, inspired by the EU project “LEARNVUL” of which the three organizers are partners, will include contributions at the intersection between the two fields, showcasing research on how personality moderates evaluative conditioning, halo effects, and other feature transformation effects. Considering insights about basic processes and individual differences relevant to these processes is bound to shed new light on both personality and social cognition. The symposium starts with a conceptual talk by De Houwer who explores different ways in which conditioning research and personality can interact, with a focus on the relation between Neuroticism and conditioning. As such, it sets the stage for three empirical papers. First, Casini presents evidence showing that anxious and vulnerable people (i.e., facets of neuroticism) show stronger evaluative conditioning (EC) effects. Second, Bunghez presents evidence showing that in contexts with ambivalent stimuli, neurotic people transfer more negative than positive valence to the conditioned stimuli. Finally, Huzoica shows that Neuroticism facilitates valence-congruent inferences (i.e., halo effects) for the conditioned stimuli. The four presentations illustrate the broader point that there is still considerable merit in relating personality and evaluative conditioning research.

Presentation 1

Title: A roadmap for future interactions between research on personality and learning

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Despite close interactions between learning and personality research in the mid-20th century, there has been little interaction between these fields of research in recent years. Still, there is much that the two research fields can learn from each other. Personality could moderate (a) learning effects (e.g., stronger fear conditioning in highly neurotic individuals), (b) effects of other moderators (e.g., a bigger impact of US intensity on fear conditioning in highly neurotic individuals), (c) mental processes that mediate learning (e.g., more stimulus attributions in highly neurotic individuals). The impact of personality could itself depend on situational factors (e.g., how ambiguous a situation is). These individual differences in learning also inform us about personality. Personality dimensions could not only be characterized in terms of learning processes (e.g., reinforcement sensitivity) but also assessed using learning paradigms (e.g., reinforcement). We discuss how such interactions between learning and personality research could be facilitated.

Presentation 2

Title: New insights on the moderating role of Neuroticism on Evaluative Conditioning: The role of stimulus evaluation and intolerance of uncertainty

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Evaluative Conditioning (EC) is a change in evaluative responding to a neutral stimulus due to its pairing with a valenced stimulus (US). In this contribution, we focus on how this EC effect can be moderated by Neuroticism, a trait characterized by a high focus on valence. In the first study, participants (298 Ss) completed an EC procedure and a comprehensive battery for assessing Neuroticism. Multilevel analyses indicated a stronger EC effect for people high in anxiety and vulnerability, two Neuroticism facets. A multilevel moderated mediation model suggested that this effect can be explained by a tendency of anxious people to evaluate stimuli as more valenced than they normatively are. A second study is underway investigating whether the amplifying effect of anxiety on EC can be explained by intolerance of uncertainty. The two studies will shed light on the relationship between Neuroticism and EC.

Presentation 3

Title: Does the relation between Neuroticism on Evaluative Conditioning depend on ambivalence?

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Recent research examined whether Neuroticism moderates evaluative conditioning (EC), that is, the way in which valence is transferred from a positive or a negative stimulus (unconditioned stimulus; US) to a neutral one (conditioned stimulus; CS). Contrary to the classical perspective on Neuroticism, people scoring high on Neuroticism not only transferred more negative valence to CSs, but also evaluated the CSs paired with positive USs as significantly more positively. To shed light on these previous findings, the present research introduced ambivalent USs (i.e., a positive picture and a negative picture merged into one image; Experiment 1, N=556) and ambivalent contingencies (i.e., CSs paired in 50% of exposures with positive USs and 50% of exposures with negative USs; Experiment 2, N=306). Our findings converge with the traditional perspective on Neuroticism, revealing a negativity bias in evaluating new stimuli.

Presentation 4

Title: Neuroticism and Agreeableness as moderators of feature transfer in an Evaluative Conditioning paradigm
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Inspired by previous work on the relation between evaluative conditioning (EC) and impression formation (e.g., Halo effects), we investigated whether the pairing of a neutral conditioned stimulus (CS) and a valenced unconditioned stimulus (US) changes not only the valence of the CS but also judgements about other CS features (e.g., friendliness). We also assessed whether Neuroticism and Agreeableness moderate these effects. Eighty-two participants filled in two personality measures (NEO PI-R; Costa & McCrae, 1992; HEXACO-100; Lee & Ashton, 2018), performed the EC task, and completed a post-experimental assessment (i.e., judgements about various CS features). The EC effect predicted feature transfer for other CS features, both in positive and negative directions, accounting for 25% of the variance. Hence, this might be relevant in determining the "grid" through which distinct individuals learn to create a sense of their environment. We also found bigger transfer effects for people with high levels of Neuroticism.