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The Big Two

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Introduction

Across many areas of social and personality psychology, scholars have dichotomized the content of self and social perception into two fundamental dimensions (the “Big Two”), which underlie the way in which we perceive, process, and understand ourselves and others. These “Big Two” have been conceptualized and examined across and beyond psychology. Though the “Big Two” share many core similarities across domains, they are often uniquely labeled, being called: “toughness” and “tenderness” (James 1907), “agency” and “communality” (Eagly 1987), “competence” and “warmth” (Fiske et al. 2002), “masculinity” and “femininity” (Bem 1981), “instrumentality” and “expressiveness” (Parsons and Bales 1955), “competence” and “morality” (Wojciszke 2005), “plasticity” and “stability” (DeYoung et al. 2002), or simply “beta” and “alpha” (Digman 1997), among others (see Abele et al. 2008). Despite their different nomenclature, these “Big Two” dimensions share similar properties, where the former (agency, competence, toughness, plasticity) revolves around

judgments of self-interest, goal-pursuit, and achievement; the latter (communality, warmth, tenderness, stability) revolves around other-focus, social-orientation, and desire for acceptance, connection, and community (Ybarra et al. 2008). These dimensions underlie many facets of the social world, including social cognition, self-perception, stereotyping, values, motives, and personality (Abele et al. 2016; Dieh et al. 2004; Koch et al. 2016), and have distinct substrates (Hehman et al. 2017).

These dimensions contain functional meaning and are core dimensions necessary for surviving in and navigating a social world. For example, in explaining individual behavior, it is argued that these dimensions represent two core challenges (and trade-offs) that underlie human survival: the need to be socially connected and the need to pursue goals (Abele et al. 2008; Ybarra et al. 2008). These elements are thought to be necessary to navigate and survive in a social world by answering two critical questions: What are someone’s intentions towards me (i.e., morality, trustworthiness)? And do they have the capabilities and motivation to pursue their intentions (i.e., competence, efficacy)?

The Big Two as Gendered

We note an interesting trend in these labels. Though these labels are all-encompassing, spanning groups, individuals, and judgments across a

variety of domains, initially these dimensions were explicitly tied to the two sexes and their accompanying qualities (masculinity/toughness, femininity/tenderness). This makes sense when seen through the lens of the necessity of gender (i.e., sex) to human survival. Indeed, the “Big Two” map onto historic gender roles (Martin and Slepian 2017a). Humans have survived across millennia through the interdependence of men and women, where their respective roles were necessary for procreation, protection, and provision (Eagly 1987, 1997). The first dimension aligns with the male social role, where men’s greater size and strength made them better suited for behaviors involving action-orientation, goal-pursuit, and independence (such as hunting and defending); whereas, the second dimension aligns with the female social role, where women’s child-bearing ability made them better suited for behaviors involving nurturing, relationality, and expressivity (such as child-rearing and gathering; Eagly 1987; Wood and Eagly 2012). Though these roles are no longer necessarily required for human survival, these stereotypes and categorizations of men and women persist, being pervasive, persistent, and resistant to change (Heilman 2001). As such, “gender” (i.e., masculine vs. feminine which is just one of pairing of labels for the “Big Two”) is argued to be the primary schema through which individuals perceive, process, organize, and understand information about their world (Bem 1981). That is, society’s ubiquitous insistence on the functional importance of gender renders the gender schema more cognitively accessible and available – in both salient and remote contexts – than many other schemas (Bem 1981, 1993).

Indeed, as the “Big Two” modes of human perception, these gendered associations are transposed onto all facets of human experience. In fact, no other dichotomy has as many entities assimilated to it as the distinction between male and female (Bem 1981). Thus, gender is a common thread across the many theories, conceptualizations, and operationalizations of the “Big Two.” Regardless of its label, we argue that one dimension clearly better represents the stereotypical male role, while the other better represents the stereotypical female role.

Consequences of Gendering the “Big Two”

The qualities associated with the first dimension are aligned with *individual* ideals, highly rewarded by society (Broverman et al. 1972), and required for power, status, and self-actualization (Bandura 2001; Eagly and Karau 2002). Although these qualities are “valued” in human beings overall (see Broverman et al. 1972), they are aligned with the traditional male role. As such, men are rewarded for enacting this dimension while women tend to be penalized, often keeping women from achieving power and success, and maintaining inequality. Similarly, the qualities we associate with the second dimension are aligned with *social* ideals, being required for cooperation, equality, and community. Though these qualities are socially desirable (Abele and Wojske 2013), they are aligned with the traditional female role. Thereby, these qualities are expected of women and stigmatized for men, proscribing men from engaging in these behaviors and similarly preventing equality.

Since sex has evolved to be a basic category for perception, “gender” is accessible in contexts devoid of human connection (Bem 1981, 1993; Martin and Slepian 2017b). That is, gender extends beyond humans and can be applied to almost any entity due to the myriad attributes that are encompassed within the “Big Two.” For example, people are perfectly capable of categorizing numbers (Wilkie and Bodenhausen 2012), species (e.g., eagle, butterfly; Bem 1981), and sounds (Slepian and Galinsky 2016) by gender, despite the fact that these concepts have no clear gendered content. We argue (Martin and Slepian 2017a) that “gender” (as opposed to sex), which is the bifurcation of masculine from feminine, is just one set of labels in the “Big Two,” but clearly a highly prominent one that everyday lay people use (unlike “agency” and “communion”). The very fact that gender can be ascribed to many gender-irrelevant entities gives credence to the notion that this is a primary dimension for understanding the world, as it extends beyond men and women themselves; or in other words, people apply the “Big Two” labels far and wide.

Conclusion

The “Big Two,” which diverge in subtle distinctions but converge on their content, are fundamental dimensions of social perception. However, as we have argued, regardless of nomenclature, these share a fundamental gender core, where one dimension maps onto the traditional male role and the other maps onto the traditional female role. In line with past theorizing, we propose that the “Big Two” have clustered into these dimensions due to their functionality for human survival, both psychologically (balancing needs; understanding others) and sociologically (role interdependence). Necessity for human survival, both biological necessity (procreation) and gender role functionality (division of labor), we suggest, leads the “Big Two” to become a primary schema through which we understand the world.

Cross-References

- [Agency](#)
- [Communion](#)
- [Femininity](#)
- [Masculinity](#)

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