



## **Trait-Level Personality Variability and Dissociative Phenomenology in Non-Clinical Young Adults: Implications for Subclinical Psychopathological Vulnerability**

<sup>1</sup>**Shubhr Arora**, *Student, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida*

<sup>2</sup>**Dr. Shivani Bhambri**, *Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida*

**Abstract:** Personality traits are a set of psychological characteristics or tendencies that are stable and influence the way in which people express emotions, cognitions, and behaviors in a variety of life situations. Personality has been viewed as a stable construct in adults, although current research acknowledges the dynamic interplay between individual differences and environmental experiences, developmental changes, and stressors. Dissociation, or the separation of consciousness, identity, memory, perception, or emotion, has been a focus of study in the context of trauma-related psychopathologies; however, new models of understanding suggest a continuum of dissociative experiences in non-clinical samples. The current research aims to investigate the relationship between trait level personality differences and the phenomenology of dissociation among non-clinical young adults. The current research is different in context of it as this is based on the experience of the occurrence of dissociation as a coping response, which is influenced by emotional sensitivity, attentional styles, and pressures of the environment, as opposed to the view of the experience of dissociation as a pathological response. It is already established that personality traits can have an impact on the processing of emotional stress, storage of memory, and the level of psychological investment in response to negative experiences. The purpose of the research is to investigate personality traits as independent variables, predicting

dissociative experiences as a dependent psychological outcome. The significance of personality traits and their relationship with dissociative experiences will be beneficial for the development of prevention strategies for university students.

**Keywords:** *Personality Traits, Dissociative Experiences, Emotional Regulation, Emerging Adulthood, Coping Mechanisms, Non-clinical Population, Big Five Personality Traits*

## 1. Introduction

Human psychological functioning is a reflection of a dynamic interaction between a relatively stable personality dispositions which is continuously evolving in terms of experiential contexts. Personality traits have influence on how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to internal and external stimuli, shaping emotional reactions, coping strategies, and interpersonal behaviour. At the same time, individuals can and usually differ significantly in context to their responses to stress, uncertainty, and emotional challenges, and such variability which often follows recognizable personality-based patterns (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Hardesty, 2023).

Dissociation represents one such experiential phenomenon which might be closely linked to the dispositional variability. Although it is traditionally associated with trauma and dissociative disorders, the contemporary perspectives of clinical and abnormal psychology conceptualize dissociation as a continuum which can extend into normative psychological functioning. Everyday experiences of day-to-day life such as absorption in internal imagery, reduced awareness of one's surroundings, or transient emotional detachment demonstrates that dissociation can occur even in non-clinical populations (Kluft, 2016; Lynn et al., 2019).

Among young adults, dissociative experiences may not emerge solely as responses to trauma but can also emerge as an adaptive reaction to the developmental stressors. Academic demands, identity exploration, interpersonal changes, and increased autonomy, all these through which usually young adults go through can contribute to heightened emotional pressure during this period. Under such conditions, dissociation may function as a coping mechanism that allows individuals to manage overwhelming affective states, particularly when emotional regulation capacities are exceeded and very high (Dorahy et al., 2017; Soffer-Dudek, 2019).

Personality traits play a central and very significant role in shaping how individuals engage with or disengage from these specific or general stressors. Individuals who are characterized by emotional instability in context to neuroticism tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity to stress and

greater interpersonal difficulties, which may increase their vulnerability to dissociative coping strategies (Santangelo et al., 2018; Weinreich Petersen et al., 2022). In contrast, traits which are associated with behavioral organization such as, social engagement and interpersonal connectedness are more likely to facilitate adaptive coping strategies, leading to reduction in the need for psychological disengagement (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Hardesty, 2023).

The predictability of psychological response is one of the mechanisms that connect personality traits and dissociation. Personality traits are a laid framework for understanding the patterns of human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Personality traits influence how an individual interprets a stressful or ambiguous situation. Individuals who experience high levels of emotional reactivity caused by emotional overload may be more likely to utilize psychological distancing as a brief regulation strategy. However, if they have access to organized coping mechanisms and social support networks, they may be more likely to utilize problem-focused strategies, which will minimize dissociation (Weinreich Petersen et al., 2022).

The formation of these patterns is moderated by biological and environmental factors. The role of individual differences in emotional sensitivity, attention, and cognitive flexibility in making one vulnerable or resilient to stress is an important factor. The role of environmental factors, such as interpersonal interactions and social support systems, is another crucial factor in this regard as the interplay between dispositional sensitivity and environmental demands is itself crucial in understanding dissociative processes (Schimmenti & Caretti, 2017; Dimitrova et al., 2020).

The role of autobiographical memory processing in linking personality traits and dissociation is also important. Emotional experience is crucial in forming a sense of identity.

However, if emotional experiences are not processed enough to form a cohesive sense of identity, individuals may experience disruptions in their identity. These disruptions in memory processing have been associated with dissociation. This indicates that dissociation is related to disruptions in memory rather than deficits in memory (Baker et al., 2019; McKinnon et al., 2018).

Cognitive and attentional processes are closely related to dissociation. Those individuals who report higher levels of absorption and fantasy proneness tend to have more expansive inner worlds of experience. While such factors can be beneficial in terms of creativity and engagement in various situations, they can also make individuals more prone to dissociation in the face of emotional difficulty (Giesbrecht et al., 2017; Merckelbach & Patihis, 2018). Alterations in

attentional focus have been associated with dissociation, such as the constriction of attentional focus inwards and away from external reality (Dimitrova et al., 2020).

Emotional regulation is a critical mechanism that underpins the experience of dissociation. When emotional demands exceed individual capacity for emotional regulation, individuals may experience involuntary disengagement of attention. This can manifest as depersonalization and derealization. Although this coping mechanism of dissociation may temporarily reduce emotional distress, but chronic reliance on this coping mechanism can hinder emotional integration significantly and also hinder the processing in the long term (Vonderlin et al., 2018; Ford, 2025).

Environmental factors have similar implications in the manifestation of dissociation in the real world as well. Sleep deprivation is a common aspect in the lives of young adults due to their academic and social responsibilities. This has the potential to impact their attention and emotional control, thereby increasing the dissociative symptoms (Soffer-Dudek, 2019).

In addition, if there is lack of social support networks, accompanied with poor expression of emotional issues, this could lead to severe stressful factors in the lives of young adults, which may impact their disengagement in a negative manner.

In summary, it appears that, based on the current body of research, dissociation in non-clinical groups is a complex construction influenced by dispositional, cognitive, emotional, and situational factors. From this perspective, it is possible to conceptualize dissociation as a non-pathological, yet adaptive or non-adaptive, response depending on its rate and situational context in which it is expressed.

The relationship between personality traits and dissociation can be conceptualized in terms of a framework in which personality traits act as a dispositional regulator of experience. Personality traits are seen to regulate emotional sensitivity, attention, and coping, thus affecting dissociation. From this perspective, dissociation is seen to be a functional outcome of trait-related differences in processing environmental and emotional demands, rather than a direct outcome of personality traits. Thus, personality traits are seen to be indirectly related to dissociation. This perspective on personality traits and dissociation has been offered by several researchers, including Carver and Connor-Smith (2010) and Hardesty (2023).

In this study, dissociative experiences are seen to be outcomes of personality traits and emotional demands in non-clinical young adults. Personality traits, in terms of Five-Factor Model, are seen to be relatively stable predictors of emotional and cognitive processing styles, whereas

dissociative experiences are seen to be dynamic outcomes of dissociation that vary in terms of experiences of awareness, attention, and self. (Hardesty, 2023).

By exploring the population outside of a clinical environment, the study hopes to understand the link between patterns of vulnerability and resilience and personality differences. For instance, emotional instability could increase the likelihood that a person would resort to the coping mechanism of dissociation, while characteristics such as interpersonal relatedness and well-ordered behavior could function as a buffer against the experience of dissociative behaviors. Understanding the patterns of vulnerability and resilience has significant implications for the development of preventive mental health interventions and the expansion of the theoretical base of the construct of dissociation beyond the boundaries of the clinically identified population.

Overall, the construct of dissociation has been portrayed as a psychological construct that is the product of the interplay between the personality characteristics of the person and the pressures that they experience in the environment. Such a construct highlights the importance of the integration of personality studies and the construct of dissociation in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of mental processes in the non-clinical population. Thus, in conclusion, dissociative symptoms in non-clinical young adults can be understood as context-dependent psychological reactions resulting from interactions between personality traits and emotional demands. In addition, dissociative symptoms can be viewed not only as symptoms of pathological processes but also as an adaptive reaction in situations where internal resources are not sufficient for effective stress regulation. At the same time, personality differences in emotional sensitivity, attentional styles, and interpersonal styles can affect not only the development of dissociative symptoms but also their tendency to be adaptive or maladaptive over time (Vonderlin et al., 2018; Lyssenko et al., 2018).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Aim of the Study**

The present study aims to find the relationship between personality traits and dissociative experiences.

### **2.2 Objectives of the Study**

1. To find personality traits among non-clinical young adults using the five-factor model.
2. To find the quantification of dissociative experiences among university students.

3. To find the relationship between personality traits and dissociative experiences.
4. To find if personality traits predict dissociative experiences among young adults.

### **2.3 Hypotheses**

H1: Neuroticism will demonstrate a significant positive relationship with dissociative experiences.

H2: Agreeableness will demonstrate a significant negative relationship with dissociative experiences.

H3: Conscientiousness will demonstrate a significant negative relationship with dissociative experiences.

H4: Extraversion will demonstrate a negative association with dissociative experiences.

H5: Openness to Experience will demonstrate a significant association with dissociative experiences.

H6: Personality traits will significantly predict dissociative experiences among non-clinical young adults.

### **2.4 Sample Size**

A total of  $N = 205$  participants voluntarily participated in the research. The age range of the participants was between 17 and 24 years ( $M = 20.3$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). The participants were both male and female individuals from various academic fields.

### **2.5 Research Design**

The design of the study is quantitative, cross-sectional correlational in nature. The purpose of the quantitative study is to investigate the correlation between personality traits and dissociative experiences among non-clinical young adults. In quantitative study, personality traits act as an independent variable, and dissociative experiences act as a dependent variable.

### **2.6 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria**

The participants consisted of young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 years. They were required to be enrolled as students or associated with a similar developmental level, can understand English, and give informed consent. Individuals who have diagnosed psychiatric disorder or those undergoing psychiatric treatment were not included in the study. In addition, incomplete response data was not considered for further analysis.

## 2.7 Measures

**NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI):** To assess the personality traits of individuals NEO-FFI Was used the BIG FIVE Factor Personality Assessment developed by Costa and McCrae. This is a standardized self-report questionnaire assessment which is designed to assess personality functioning domains such as Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness. Consisting of 60 items rated on a Likert-type response, in this research Likert scale was used for a range of (1-7) which was format ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. The NEO-FFI demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency across personality domains, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients generally ranging between .70 and .86. Research supports its construct validity, convergent validity, and cross-cultural applicability across clinical and non-clinical populations.

**Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES- II):** Dissociative experiences were assessed using the Dissociative Experiences Scale II developed by Bernstein and Putnam. The DES-II is a widely used self-report instrument designed to assess dissociative phenomena also this can be especially used in non-clinical population to assess dissociative experiences occurring within everyday psychological functioning. The instrument consists of 28 items. Participants indicate the percentage of time they experience each dissociative phenomenon ranging from 0% (never) to 100% (always). The DES-II demonstrates excellent internal consistency reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values frequently exceeding .90 in community samples.

## 2.8 Statistical Analysis

For data analysis, jamovi was used, and descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression were conducted. Prior to conducting the data analysis, assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and no multicollinearity were met.

## 2.9 Procedure

This study made use of a cross-sectional study design. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling approach within the university and across. Before the study, participants were made aware of the purpose of the study, and they were asked to for their participation consent. Data was collected with the help of standardized self-report methods. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their personality traits and dissociative symptoms. Participants were required to complete the questionnaires within a single setting all forms were physically filled in an offline setup, with an estimated completion time of 15 to 20 minutes.

### 3. Result

**Table 1:** *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

| Variable           | Mean | SD   | Minimum | Maximum |
|--------------------|------|------|---------|---------|
| Age                | 20.3 | 1.45 | 17      | 24      |
| Neuroticism        | 49.9 | 10.7 | 29      | 84      |
| Extraversion       | 50.6 | 8.69 | 23      | 74      |
| Openness           | 51.4 | 8.93 | 16      | 76      |
| Agreeableness      | 51.1 | 8.75 | 19      | 72      |
| Conscientiousness  | 54.7 | 11.6 | 25      | 82      |
| Dissociation (DES) | 35.3 | 20.8 | 0.00    | 92.5    |

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine central tendency and variability across study variables. The total sample consisted of  $N = 205$  participants. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 24 years ( $M = 20.3$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ).

Personality trait scores demonstrated moderate variability across participants. Neuroticism scores ranged from 29 to 84 ( $M = 49.9$ ,  $SD = 10.7$ ), whereas extraversion scores ranged from 23 to 74 ( $M = 50.6$ ,  $SD = 8.69$ ). Openness to experience demonstrated a mean score of 51.4 ( $SD = 8.93$ ), while agreeableness demonstrated a mean score of 51.1 ( $SD = 8.75$ ). Conscientiousness demonstrated the highest mean score among personality traits ( $M = 54.7$ ,  $SD = 11.6$ ). Dissociative experiences measured using the Dissociative Experiences Scale demonstrated substantial variability across participants, ranging from 0.00 to 92.5 ( $M = 35.3$ ,  $SD = 20.8$ ).

**Table 2:** *Correlation Matrix Between Personality Traits and Dissociative Experiences*

| Variable          | DES Mean (r) | p-value |
|-------------------|--------------|---------|
| Neuroticism       | .278         | < .001  |
| Extraversion      | -.172        | .014    |
| Openness          | -.095        | .175    |
| Agreeableness     | -.354        | < .001  |
| Conscientiousness | -.274        | < .001  |

#### *Correlation Analysis*

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine associations between personality traits and dissociative experiences. Neuroticism demonstrated a significant

positive relationship with dissociative experiences ( $r = .278, p < .001$ ), indicating that higher emotional instability was associated with increased dissociative tendencies. Extraversion demonstrated a significant negative relationship with dissociative experiences ( $r = -.172, p = .014$ ),

suggesting that greater sociability and external engagement were associated with lower dissociative tendencies. Openness to experience demonstrated a non-significant relationship with dissociative experiences ( $r = -.095, p = .175$ ). Agreeableness demonstrated a significant negative relationship with dissociative experiences ( $r = -.354, p < .001$ ), indicating that interpersonal warmth and cooperation were associated with reduced dissociative detachment. Similarly, conscientiousness demonstrated a significant negative association with dissociative experiences ( $r = -.274, p < .001$ ).

**Table 3: Model Summary**

| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>F</b> | <b>df1</b> | <b>df2</b> | <b>p</b> |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|----------|------------|------------|----------|
| <b>.192</b>          | .172                          | 9.46     | 5          | 199        | < .001   |

#### **Multiple Regression Analysis**

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether personality traits significantly predicted dissociative experiences. The overall regression model was statistically significant,  $F(5, 199) = 9.46, p < .001$ . The model explained approximately 19.2% of the variance in dissociative experiences ( $R^2 = .192$ ), with an adjusted  $R^2$  value of .172.

**Table 4: Regression Coefficients Predicting Dissociative Experiences**

| <b>Predictor</b>         | <b>B</b> | <b>SE</b> | <b>Beta</b> | <b>t</b> | <b>p</b> |
|--------------------------|----------|-----------|-------------|----------|----------|
| <b>Neuroticism</b>       | 0.381    | 0.129     | .197        | 2.94     | .004     |
| <b>Extraversion</b>      | -0.007   | 0.166     | -.003       | -0.04    | .965     |
| <b>Openness</b>          | -0.072   | 0.153     | -.031       | -0.47    | .641     |
| <b>Agreeableness</b>     | -0.636   | 0.165     | -.268       | -3.85    | < .001   |
| <b>Conscientiousness</b> | -0.253   | 0.125     | -.142       | -2.02    | .045     |

Regression coefficients indicated that neuroticism significantly positively predicted dissociative experiences ( $B = 0.381, \beta = .197, p = .004$ ). Agreeableness significantly negatively predicted dissociative experiences ( $B = -0.636, \beta = -.268, p < .001$ ). Conscientiousness also

demonstrated a significant negative predictive relationship with dissociation ( $B = -0.253$ ,  $\beta = -.142$ ,  $p = .045$ ). Extraversion ( $p = .965$ ) and openness to experience ( $p = .641$ ) did not demonstrate statistically significant predictive contributions within the regression model.

#### 4. Discussion of Results

This research investigated about correlation between personality traits & dissociation and dissociative experiences among non-clinical young adults and the predictability of personality traits for dissociation. Six hypotheses were tested.

**Hypothesis 1** posited a positive relationship between neuroticism and dissociation which was confirmed. With their lack of emotional stability and high stress sensitivity, leading to disengagement as a coping response, individuals' abstractions were shown to report more dissociative experiences if they were high in neuroticism.

**Hypothesis 2** Predicted a negative correlation between agreeableness & dissociation. The statistics confirmed and supported the above statement, implicating that individuals with higher agreeableness showed comparatively fewer dissociative experiences, possibly due to better support and emotional expression.

**Hypothesis 3** Proposed a negative relationship between conscientiousness & dissociation; the following statement was also supported by the statistics. Individuals who were high in conscientiousness reported lower dissociation, likely due to structured coping or better self-regulation which is usually found in people with high conscientiousness.

**Hypothesis 4** It was found that there is a negative association, but it was insignificant, suggesting that social engagement can buffer dissociation but is not a strong independent predictor for it.

**Hypothesis 5** Examination of openness to experience was not supported by the statistics and was inferred that imagination may not alone be the predictor of dissociation without emotional distress

**Hypothesis 6** was evidently supported by statistics showing that personality traits can significantly predict dissociative experiences. Neuroticism emerged as a major vulnerability factor, whereas conscientiousness acted as a protective factor in context to dissociation.

The study results show that dissociation occurs in non-clinical groups because people with different personalities use distinct emotional control methods together with their coping strategies. Dissociation functions as a psychological process that depends on specific contextual factors.

#### **4.1 Future Implications**

Future research must use longitudinal study methods to investigate how personality traits affect dissociative experiences over extended periods. The study will achieve deeper understanding through the inclusion of emotional regulation, attachment, and stress as additional variables. The research study would achieve better generalizability if it included participants from non-university settings. The findings show that personality-based preventive interventions enable young adults to acquire adaptive coping skills and emotional regulation abilities.

#### **4.2 Conclusion**

This current study demonstrated a significant relationship between the dissociative experiences of a sample of non-clinical young adults and their personality traits; it found that personality has a significant impact upon the degree of dissociation. Those participants who scored high on Neuroticism had a higher incidence of dissociative experiences than participants who scored low on this trait (Neuroticism is a risk factor); agreeableness and conscientiousness were found to be protective factors (resilience) against experiencing dissociative symptoms. Thus, the findings provide support for the role of regulation of emotions and coping skills as a means by which an individual's personality can impact his/her experiences of dissociation.

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