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Personality and the Structure of Affective Responses

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A common observation about people in emotional situations is the great variability of their reactions. For example, faced with rude service in a restaurant, one person may get extremely upset, brooding about the episode for hours, another might get momentarily furious, whereas a third might just be slightly irritated for a minute or two. Even if these people construe the situation in essentially similar terms, the magnitude and the duration of their reactions can vary significantly. Moreover, the structure of their reactions seems to transcend any particular situation. Thus, if the restaurant incident had occurred to our friend, we could make an "educated guess" as to his probable reaction. In other words, it appears that the structure of individuals' responses to emotion-inducing events is to some extent a consistent and coherent feature of personality.

The obvious questions arising from these everyday observations have led to the investigation of the relationship between personality and affect, or more specifically between personality and emotional responses. It is our contention that the examination of discrete emotional episodes can enrich our understanding of both personality and emotions. In particular, we believe that the comparison of positive and negative emotional responses may shed some light on emotional mechanisms per se, as well as on individual differences in affective reactions. However, before examining these claims in more detail, it will be helpful to review briefly relevant aspects of personality theory and emotion theory, as well as some of the more recent research on the relation between personality and affect.

A consistent conclusion from the growing body of literature on the structure of personality is the identification of five main dimensions (Digman, 1990).

