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DANIEL R. GRANGAARD

Personality Characteristics and Favorite Topics of Students Enrolled in Introduction to Psychology, Honors

DANIEL R. GRANGAARD
AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

The Honors Program at Austin Community College (ACC) is relatively new. Admission to the Honors Program is by invitation and is separate from admission to ACC, which currently enrolls 32,000 students. Students are invited to join on the basis of criteria set each year by the Honors Coordinator and the Honors Council. A major goal is to produce a program membership of the top 8-10 percent of the students entering ACC each semester. There are approximately 350 students who have been accepted into the Honors Program. The program's mission is to provide an enhanced and supportive learning climate that encourages community involvement for outstanding students who meet the criteria for admission into the Honors Program. Admission to the program requires that an applicant meet one of the following criteria: top 10% of graduating high school class, cumulative high school GPA of 3.5 or higher on a 4-point scale, ACT score of 26 or higher or SAT score of 1170 or higher, or a cumulative college GPA of 3.25 or higher.

The first honors psychology class was offered during the fall 2002 semester at the Rio Grande Campus, which enrolls approximately 7,500 students and is located in close proximity to downtown, the state capital, and The University of Texas. The class reflected the cultural diversity of the college and the campus. The initial class contained ten students, including three females and seven males. The ethnicity make-up of the class follows: 5 White, 3 Hispanic, 1 African-American, 1 Native-American. The chronological age of class members ranged from 18 to 51 (mean = 24, median = 19, mode = 18). Two students were dropped from the class by the professor for excessive absences and missing assignments.

There is an interest among faculty associated with the Honors Program to better understand the students. A study was conducted to investigate the personality characteristics of students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology, Honors at ACC as well as to survey the popularity of topics covered during the semester. Although the sample

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size is very small, the methodology and results of this study may be of general interest to honors faculty and administrators.

RELATED STUDIES

Larry Clark (2000) pointed out that the literature on personality characteristics of collegiate honors students is limited. He also noted the range of honors programs (i.e. admissions criteria and program goals) that exist on college campuses. Clark found in his review of the literature that most studies involved administration of the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) to students described as academically gifted. Studies have also employed the *Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire* (16 PF), the *Edwards Personal Preference Schedule* (EPPS), or Jackson's *Personality Research Form* (PRF). The present study utilized the EPPS.

The EPPS (1959) is presented in a forced choice format that includes 225 pairs of statements. The test developer assumed that each of the statement pairs is equal with respect to their social desirability. Test takers must choose the statement in the pair that is more characteristic of them. For example:

A. I like to talk about myself to others.

B. I like to work toward some goal that I have set for myself.

Normative data were developed for two groups of subjects: college students and adults who were household heads in the United States. There are separate norms for men and women. The college sample was composed of high school graduates with some college training, including 760 college men and 749 college women, ranging in age from 15 to 59. Students in the 20-24 and 15-19 age groups were especially well represented. Colleges denoted in the sample were diverse in terms of school size and included public and private institutions from every region of the United States. Although the EPPS has not been updated in the past four decades, it is still in popular use with college students. The test has withstood extensive testing for reliability and validity, and it is particularly useful for career counseling.

The EPPS norms supply percentiles and standard scores for college students. EPPS scales are those identified and named by Murray (1938). Scales that are particularly useful in studying the personality profiles of honors students include: achievement (ach), deference (def), order (ord), exhibition (exh), autonomy (aut), affiliation (aff), intraception (int), succorance (suc), dominance (dom), abasement (aba), nurturance (nur), change (chg), endurance (end), and aggression (agg).

In the only other available study of honors students who took the EPPS, Palmer and Wohl (1972) found that honors students scored higher on introversion and on autonomy than non-honors program students. The honors students scored lower on affiliation needs.

PROCEDURES

PERSONALITY MEASURES

During a unit of study on the topic of personality, all students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology, Honors during the fall 2002 semester took advantage of an opportunity to earn bonus points added to their score on a previous unit achievement test by taking the *EPPS*. Booklets containing *EPPS* test items and answer forms were distributed during a Wednesday class. Students were read instructions for taking the *EPPS* and informed that the completed *EPPS* forms and test booklets were to be returned on Friday. The course instructor hand-scored the answer forms and plotted the personality profiles over the weekend. The following Monday, individual personality profiles and a chart outlining behaviors associated with personality terms related with each *EPPS* scale were returned to the students. The course instructor conducted a group interpretation of test data. The class spent the entire 50-minute class session discussing the test results.

FAVORITE TOPICS MEASURES

Students were given bonus points on the last achievement test for completing a favorite topics survey, which was given on the last day of class and may be viewed in Table A of the appendix. Students were asked to rank each topic from 1 to 15, placing a 1 next to their favorite topic, a 2 next to their second favorite topic, and so forth, until all topics were ranked. All students taking the test elected to complete the survey. Results of the survey were posted on the instructor's web site (Grangaard, 2002).

RESULTS

PERSONALITY MEASURES

Student raw scores for each *EPPS* scale were converted to T scores. Descriptive statistics of students' T scores were analyzed with *SPSS 10.0 for Windows*. Results of mean, standard error of the mean, median, mode, minimum, maximum, and the range of T scores for each variable are in tabular form in Table B of the appendix. The data were qualitatively analyzed using interpretation guidelines provided in the *EPPS* manual. T scores in the 41 to 59 range are considered average. Table C illustrates the number of student T scores that fell above, below, or within the average range.

Based on the above interpretation guidelines, none of the honors students scored above average on the following traits: ach, def, and ord. According to the *EPPS* manual, ach (achievement) involves attempting to do one's best, to do a difficult job well, to do things better than others, and to accomplish something of great significance. Examples of def (deference) include getting suggestions from other people, doing what is expected, or accepting the leadership of others. Making plans in advance, arranging things so that they will run smoothly, and producing work that is neat and organized are examples of tasks associated with the ord (order) personality variable. Five out of eight students scored below average on ord, which contributed to below average mean, median, and mode T scores on the ord variable. If the mode T score is

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used to interpret the EPPS personality data, most students taking Introduction to Psychology, Honors during the fall 2002 semester were only average in their need to achieve and openness to seeking the opinions of other people. Two students were below average on these traits.

Half of the students scored above average on the *exh* (exhibition) variable, which is associated with talking about personal experiences, being noticed by others, being the center of attention, and talking about one's personal achievements. Only one student scored average on *exh*. Three out of eight students scored below average on this trait.

Five out of eight scored average, and two students scored above average on *aut* (autonomy), which is associated with being independent of others in making decisions and criticizing those in positions of authority. All of the students scored average to above average on *aff* (affiliation). *Aff* involves doing things for friends, forming new friendships, forming strong attachments, and doing things with other people rather than alone.

Half of the students displayed average *intr* (intrapersonal) needs. *Intr* is associated with analyzing motives and feelings and understanding how other people feel about problems. The rest of the students were equally split above or below average on this trait.

Seven out of eight students scored average on *suc* (sustenance), which encompasses a need for feedback and to be encouraged. All of the students displayed an average to above average need to engage in novel activity (*chg*). Meeting new people, participating in new fads and fashions, and travel are activities associated with the change personality trait on the EPPS.

Nearly two-thirds of the students described themselves as having average *end* (endurance). *End* is associated with sticking with a task until completion. A quarter of the students viewed themselves as above average on this trait.

agg (aggression) is a personality trait incorporated in the EPPS that is associated with arguing for one's point of view, attacking contrary points of view, blaming others when things go wrong, or criticizing others publicly. Five out of eight students scored average, two students scored above average, and one student scored below average on *agg*. *aba* (abatement) is an EPPS trait associated with guilt and a tendency to accept blame when something goes wrong. All but one student scored average on this dimension.

dom (dominance) is a trait that is associated with leadership qualities. Behaviors encompassed by *dom* include settling arguments and disputes between others, supervising and directing the actions of others, and persuading and influencing others to do what one wants. One student scored above and one student scored below average on this trait. The remainder of the class scored average.

FAVORITE TOPICS RESULTS

SPSS was used to generate distributive statistics and to conduct nonparametric Spearman rank correlations. Mean rankings are compared in Table D of the appendix. The lower the mean ranking, the greater the popularity of the item is assumed.

The lowest mean ranking (4.28) was produced by the topic of social psychology. The next most popular topics included the topics of sleep/hypnosis (5.42) and motivation (5.71). All of these topics were ranked as high as #1 by at least one student, as were the topics of developmental, neurobiology, and therapy. There was a wide distribution of responses for the rankings. For example, the overall favorite, social, was ranked as low as 13th. The topic of research projects, which involved study of research methods, APA writing style, and personal development of a research project, received an overall mean ranking (9.71) that placed it second to last on the list of favorite topics.

Mean rankings of favorite topic items as voted by students taking traditional (i.e., non-honors) sections of Introduction to Psychology are featured in Table E. Students enrolled in traditional sections favored different topics. For example, social psychology came in 8th place with traditional students as compared to 1st place with honors students. Both groups enjoyed studying sleep and hypnosis, and neither group particularly enjoyed topics associated with written student projects. The topics of intelligence and stress/health found more favor with students taking traditional course sections.

Results of 2-tailed tests revealed a number of significant correlations at the .05 level. Honors students who enjoyed studying the topic of abnormal psychology also enjoyed studying sleep and hypnosis ($r=+.771$). Significant positive correlations were also found between therapy and a study of settings where psychologists are employed ($+.817$), between work settings and personality ($+.849$) and between the study of personality and therapy ($+.757$).

Significant negative correlations were found at the .05 level between the following topics: neurobiology and personality ($-.821$), work settings and sleep/hypnosis ($-.766$), therapy and sleep/hypnosis ($-.786$), and abnormal and therapy ($-.755$). Significant rank correlations at the .01 level were found between the topics of neurobiology and therapy ($-.883$) and work settings and abnormal ($-.934$).

Results of 2-tailed tests of data associated with student rankings in traditional course sections produced only one positive correlation of statistical significance: intelligence and learning ($r=+.311$). The following negative correlations were significant at the .01 level: memory and social ($-.545$), abnormal and learning ($-.539$), abnormal and memory ($-.447$), and stress and health with study of self-help books ($-.413$). Significant negative correlations at the .05 level were obtained for sleep/hypnosis and memory ($-.330$), personality and neurobiology ($-.380$), developmental and social ($-.329$), and personality and memory ($-.318$).

DISCUSSION

Results of the study support the findings of Palmer and Wohl (1972) that students enrolled in honors sections have a strong need to exert their autonomy. Their findings that such students tend to be introverted and exhibit low affiliation needs are contradicted in the current study. A number of observations of students enrolled in Introduction to Psychology, Honors, at ACC are offered along with implications for instruction.

PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND FAVORITE TOPICS

The format of the honors class (i.e., small class size with extensive opportunity for oral and written expression) has attracted students who have average to above average affiliation needs, like to be autonomous, do not particularly seek the opinions of others but love to express their own point of view. Half of them exhibit above average needs to talk about their personal experiences and achievements. They are not prone toward attacking opinions and positions of others on a given issue or blaming others. They enjoy engaging in novel activity and have as much need for feedback and encouragement as average college students.

Three traits stand out. The students view themselves as average to below average in being organized, average in achievement motivation, and average on traits associated with effective leaders.

A number of recommendations are offered to instructors planning to teach an honors course. A significant course component should entail teaching organizational skills as they are related to preparation of assignments and for tests. In this respect, Introduction to Psychology, Honors students are similar to most undergraduates. Both groups ranked tasks associated with major written assignments among their least favorite topics. It would be an error to assume that students enrolled in an honors section already have such skills. Honors students seemed to enjoy studying and critiquing classic psychology research studies more than acquiring a taste for engaging in their own research.

Although students in honors classes may have a history of earning excellent grades, academic achievement is not likely at the etiology of their choice of an honors section of a college course over a traditional section. Traditional sections contain a significant number of scholarly students who may be equally or more motivated to achieve scholastic excellence. Students in the honors section appear socially driven; they anticipate and appreciate frequent opportunities for dialogue and involvement in discussions and debates, especially over issues that are controversial. This is exemplified in the results of the exit survey of favorite topics in which social psychology prevailed. Social psychology (i.e., the study of the effect of groups on individuals and individuals on groups) may be related to student needs for affiliation and autonomy. Students were fascinated with ethical issues associated with classic experiments that often involved deception.

Although class discussions and debates are popular, instruction should promote development of postformal thought, which recognizes that one's own perspective is only one of many potentially valid views and that life entails many inconsistencies. It also promotes dialectical thinking, which involves considering both sides of an idea simultaneously and then forging them into a synthesis of the original idea and its opposite. Assuming an active role in discussions of this type may contribute to the development of leadership skills.

FUTURE STUDIES

Additional studies that encompass a larger sample of students enrolled in the ACC Honors Program may produce data that may be generalized to the population of students eligible for the program. Research that compares the personality profiles

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of students enrolled in the Honors Program with students eligible for admission to the program but who choose to enroll in traditional sections of the same courses may lend additional insight into the personality characteristics of students in the Honors Program.

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TABLE A

Dr. Dan Grangaard
Psychology 2301H
Introduction to Psychology, Honors
Test 4, Fall 2002

Student Name: _____

Bonus Question (5 points added to test score, if completed)

Please rank the following topics studied this semester in Introduction to Psychology. Place a 1 next to the topic that was your favorite, a 2 next to the one that was your second favorite, and so on until all topics have been ranked.

- _____ Work of Psychologists (i.e., settings where psychologists are employed)
- _____ Brain and Behavior (i.e., parts of the brain, study of the nervous system)
- _____ Developmental Psychology (i.e., prenatal development, moral development, Piaget)
- _____ Sensation and Perception (i.e., structure of the eye, phi phenomenon)
- _____ Sleep/Hypnosis (i.e., dream research, sleep disorders, stages of sleep, hypnosis)
- _____ Learning (classical and operant conditioning, Pavlov, Skinner)
- _____ Memory (i.e., how to study, causes of forgetting)
- _____ Intelligence and Language (i.e., IQ tests, validity, reliability, language development)
- _____ Motivation (i.e., hierarchy of needs, need to achieve)
- _____ Stress and Health (i.e., general adaptation syndrome, stress index, physiology of stress)
- _____ Personality (i.e., Freud, Rorschach, TAT, trait-and-factor theories)
- _____ Abnormal Psychology (i.e., DSM-IV, personality disorders, psychopathology)
- _____ Therapy (i.e., psychoanalysis, reality therapy, cognitive therapy, time-limited therapy)
- _____ Social Psychology (i.e., power of the situation, Milgram studies, altruism)
- _____ Research Projects (i.e., studying APA style, conducting research, term paper)

TABLE B
PSYC 2301 HONORS EPPS T SCORES*, FALL 2002

Scale	Mean	Std. Err.	Median	Mode	Std. Dev.	Range	Min.	Max.
Ach	42.75	2.75	44.50	46.00 ^a	7.77	23.00	28.00	51.00
Def	44.12	2.89	44.00	41.00	8.18	25.00	30.00	55.00
Ord	40.37	3.44	39.00	31.00 ^a	9.75	25.00	31.00	56.00
Exh	50.25	4.62	57.00	57.00	13.07	31.00	32.00	63.00
Aut	51.00	3.19	50.00	38.00 ^a	9.03	27.00	38.00	65.00
Aff	54.12	3.82	49.50	45.00	10.82	26.00	45.00	71.00
Int	47.37	3.45	47.00	50.00	9.78	28.00	34.00	62.00
Suc	52.00	2.56	54.00	59.00	7.25	19.00	40.00	59.00
Dom	48.25	2.74	48.00	39.00 ^a	7.75	24.00	39.00	63.00
Aba	50.25	2.87	49.50	42.00	8.11	20.00	42.00	62.00
Nur	55.62	3.83	53.00	40.00 ^a	10.83	35.00	40.00	75.00
Chg	56.75	1.57	56.00	51.00 ^a	4.46	13.00	51.00	64.00
End	51.87	4.41	54.50	28.00 ^a	12.48	40.00	28.00	68.00
Agg	50.00	4.33	46.00	40.00	12.27	33.00	37.00	70.00
Con	50.75	3.49	49.00	42.00 ^a	9.89	28.00	40.00	68.00

* Average Range T score = 41-59

^a Multiple modes exist. The lowest value is shown.

TABLE C

**EPPS PERSONALITY T-SCORES
NUMBER OF HONORS STUDENTS
ABOVE AVERAGE, AVERAGE, AND BELOW AVERAGE
FALL 2002 SEMESTER**

Scale	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Ach	0	6	2
Def	0	6	2
Ord	0	3	5
Exh	4	1	3
Aut	2	5	1
Aff	3	5	0
Int	2	4	2
Suc	1	7	0
Dom	1	6	1
Aba	1	7	0
Nur	3	5	0
Chg	2	6	0
End	2	5	1
Agg	1	5	2

TABLE D

**FAVORITE TOPICS END OF SEMESTER SURVEY
INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY, HONORS (PSYC 2301H)
FALL 2002 SEMESTER**

Number of valid questionnaires = 7

Variable	Mean Ranking	Highest Ranking	Lowest Ranking
Social	4.28	1	13
Sleep/Hypnosis	5.42	1	12
Motivation	5.71	1	11
Learning	6.14	2	13
Developmental	7.28	1	13
Abnormal	7.42	2	15
Personality	7.57	3	13
Brain (Neurobiology)	8.28	1	15
Therapy	8.57	1	14
Memory	8.57	4	14
Sensation/Perception	8.85	4	13
Intelligence	8.85	6	11
Stress & Health	9.28	5	12
Research Projects	9.71	3	15
Work Settings	14.00	11	15

TABLE E

**FAVORITE TOPICS END OF SEMESTER SURVEY
INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY (PSYC 2301)
NON-HONORS SECTIONS, FALL 2002 SEMESTER**

Number of valid questionnaires = 41

Variable	Mean Ranking	Highest Ranking	Lowest Ranking
Sleep/Hypnosis	4.01	1	13
Personality	5.75	1	14
Abnormal	6.29	1	15
Memory	6.60	1	14
Learning	6.65	1	15
Intelligence	7.26	1	15
Motivation	7.48	1	14
Stress & Health	7.85	1	15
Developmental	7.95	1	15
Social	8.34	1	15
Therapy	8.73	1	15
Brain (Neurobiology)	9.26	1	15
Sensation/Perception	9.39	3	15
Self-help book report	10.31	1	15
Work Settings	12.43	2	15