

# Five-Factor Personality Model: An Alternative Approach

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## Introduction to the Alternative Five-Factor Model

The Alternative Five-Factor Model (AFFM) of personality represents a significant theoretical and empirical divergence from the traditional Big Five Model (BFM) or Five-Factor Model (FFM), which has long dominated personality psychology. While sharing the common goal of identifying the fundamental, cross-culturally stable dimensions of human personality, the AFFM proposes a structurally different configuration of these traits. This model, often closely associated with the work that eventually led to the development of the **HEXACO model**, emphasizes the importance of specific factors that are sometimes conflated or overlooked in standard FFM instruments, thereby offering a more nuanced and potentially more comprehensive description of individual differences. The foundational premise of the AFFM is that a complete lexical approach--examining trait descriptors found in natural language--must account for dimensions that capture aspects of morality, sincerity, and humility, traits often poorly represented when factor analysis is strictly limited to the traditional five factors of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

The necessity for an alternative structure arose from repeated cross-cultural and lexical studies suggesting that the five-factor solution was occasionally incomplete, particularly when employing broad samples of trait adjectives derived from languages other than English. Researchers observed persistent clusters of variance that did not fit neatly into the conventional Agreeableness or Conscientiousness factors. Specifically, adjectives related to honesty, fairness, and modesty consistently formed a reliable sixth factor in many analyses, prompting a re-evaluation of the optimal number and content of the foundational dimensions. Although the AFFM itself initially focused on five factors, its intellectual lineage is inextricably linked to the discovery and validation of this sixth dimension, which would later become the **Honesty-Humility** factor in the subsequent HEXACO model. Therefore, understanding the AFFM requires acknowledging its role as a critical transitional framework that challenged the universality claims of the FFM and paved the way for more robust, six-dimensional models.

This model is not merely a renaming exercise; it involves a substantial re-rotation and redefinition of the factor space. For instance, the content traditionally assigned to the FFM's Agreeableness factor is often split or reallocated across different AFFM dimensions. This restructuring allows the AFFM to capture unique variance in socially relevant behavior, particularly concerning altruism, reciprocity, and the tendency toward exploitative behavior. The high level of detail provided by this alternative framework makes it particularly useful in applied settings, such as organizational psychology, clinical assessment, and forensic psychology, where subtle differences in moral character and interpersonal orientation are paramount. By offering a refined structure, the AFFM facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying motivational and cognitive mechanisms that drive distinct personality patterns.

## Historical Context and Development

The genesis of the Alternative Five-Factor Model is rooted in the rigorous application of the lexical hypothesis across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts during the 1990s and early 2000s. The lexical hypothesis posits that the most important individual differences in human interaction will eventually become encoded as single-word terms in language. While extensive lexical studies, primarily in English, strongly supported the traditional FFM structure, subsequent research conducted in languages like German, Dutch, Hungarian, and Korean began to consistently reveal deviations. These non-English lexical studies repeatedly found evidence for six factors rather than five when comprehensive sets of trait adjectives were utilized, suggesting that the English language might be unique or that the analytical methods previously applied had obscured crucial variance.

The work of researchers like Kibeom Lee and Michael Ashton became central to the development and articulation of the AFFM. They systematically examined these cross-cultural discrepancies and argued that the conventional FFM structure, particularly the factors of Agreeableness and Emotionality (Neuroticism), failed to fully isolate distinct underlying constructs. Their analysis demonstrated that adjectives reflecting sincerity, fairness, and lack of greed clustered separately from those related to temperament or compassion. This persistent finding led them to propose an interim model--the Alternative Five-Factor Model--that reorganized the trait space while still aiming for parsimony. Crucially, the AFFM recognized that the variance related to the eventual Honesty-Humility factor was present but needed careful extraction and definition, often by separating aspects of Agreeableness related to temper control from those related to ethical conduct.

The significance of the AFFM lies in its transitional nature. It served as a vital bridge between the FFM and the later, fully developed six-factor HEXACO model. By demonstrating that a five-factor structure could be constructed differently--one that explicitly allowed for the emergence of the Honesty-Humility content--Lee and Ashton laid the groundwork for convincing the broader psychological community that six factors might be necessary for true universality. The AFFM was essentially a refined five-factor solution derived from the same comprehensive lexical pool that ultimately supported the six-factor model, showcasing how factor rotation and specific item selection dramatically influence the resulting structure. This historical trajectory highlights the iterative nature of psychometric discovery, where initial models are continuously challenged and refined through empirical scrutiny across diverse populations.

## The Core Dimensions of the AFFM

The Alternative Five-Factor Model maintains five broad dimensions, but their conceptual content and relationship to each other differ markedly from the FFM. In the AFFM framework, the dimensions are typically labeled differently, reflecting their unique composition derived from the

lexical pool that also generated the six-factor solution. While exact terminology can vary slightly depending on the specific publication, the core structure generally involves five factors that capture **Emotionality**, **Extraversion**, **Conscientiousness**, **Openness to Experience**, and a factor that combines elements of traditional Agreeableness and the emerging Honesty-Humility dimension, often called Altruism or Interpersonal Orientation, though this is where the model is most often critiqued for its limitations.

A primary difference lies in the definition of Emotionality (E) and Agreeableness (A). In the AFFM, the Emotionality factor typically incorporates aspects of traditional Neuroticism (anxiety, depression) but is often purer, excluding the sentimentality or tenderness that sometimes loads onto Neuroticism in the FFM. Conversely, the AFFM's Conscientiousness (C) and Openness (O) factors often remain conceptually similar to their FFM counterparts, representing organization, diligence, and intellectual curiosity, respectively. However, the factor that captures interpersonal behavior is fundamentally altered. Instead of a single, broad Agreeableness factor encompassing both temper control and ethical behavior, the AFFM attempts to define a factor that maximizes coverage of prosocial tendencies while minimizing overlap with the emerging Honesty-Humility content, often resulting in a dimension focused heavily on patience, forgiveness, and gentleness.

The inherent tension within the AFFM structure arises from the deliberate attempt to force the six underlying dimensions back into a five-factor space. Researchers found that when they constrained the analysis to five factors, the sixth dimension (Honesty-Humility) did not disappear; rather, its components were distributed across the remaining five factors, primarily loading onto Agreeableness and, to a lesser extent, Conscientiousness and Emotionality. This redistribution confirmed the presence of the sixth factor's unique variance while simultaneously illustrating the structural limitations of the five-factor constraint. The resulting AFFM dimensions, therefore, represent oblique rotations that are designed to optimally capture the variance of the six-factor solution within a five-factor framework, providing a unique lens through which to view personality structure.

## Distinguishing the AFFM from the FFM (The HEXACO Connection)

The distinction between the Alternative Five-Factor Model and the traditional Five-Factor Model is best understood by examining how they handle the variance associated with moral character and sincerity. The FFM typically measures these traits within its Agreeableness and sometimes Conscientiousness factors. For example, honesty might load positively on Agreeableness (seen as trust) and negatively on Neuroticism (seen as lack of manipulation). In contrast, the AFFM, recognizing the robust existence of the Honesty-Humility dimension, structurally attempts to isolate this content as much as possible, even if it ultimately maintains a five-factor count. This structural difference means that personality profiles generated by the AFFM often provide clearer separation between traits related to empathy (which remains in the AFFM's Interpersonal factor) and traits

related to exploitation (which are often better captured by the absence of the Honesty-Humility components).

The most critical conceptual difference is the explicit recognition by AFFM proponents that the FFM's Agreeableness factor is conceptually impure, blending affective components (sympathy, patience) with ethical components (sincerity, fairness). The AFFM sought to purify the remaining five factors after the full six dimensions were identified. When the ultimate six-factor solution (HEXACO) was established, the relationship became clearer: the AFFM was essentially a five-factor projection of the six-factor space. The six dimensions of the HEXACO model are: **Honesty-Humility (H)**, **Emotionality (E)**, **Extraversion (X)**, **Agreeableness (A)**, **Conscientiousness (C)**, and **Openness to Experience (O)**. When forcing a five-factor solution (the AFFM), the H factor variance is absorbed primarily into A and C, resulting in significantly different definitions for those factors compared to the FFM.

This close relationship to the HEXACO model is why the AFFM is often discussed primarily in the context of the lexical research that validated the six dimensions. The AFFM represents the strongest argument for a five-factor structure derived from the same comprehensive, cross-culturally validated item pool that yielded HEXACO. Thus, while the FFM is based on historical factor analysis tradition and specific English-language inventories (like the NEO-PI-R), the AFFM is based on a modern, comprehensive lexical re-examination that highlighted the inadequacy of the traditional five-factor structure to fully accommodate cross-cultural variation in personality description. The AFFM, therefore, serves less as a competing final model and more as compelling evidence for the necessity of the six-factor refinement.

## Methodological Foundations and Measurement

The methodological foundation of the Alternative Five-Factor Model relies heavily on the principles of the **lexical hypothesis** and subsequent rigorous factor analytic techniques applied to vast pools of trait adjectives. The development process typically involves collecting hundreds or thousands of personality descriptors from a specific language, having large samples rate themselves or others on these traits, and then using Principal Components Analysis (PCA) or Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to identify the underlying structure. Crucially, proponents of the AFFM utilized oblique rotation methods (which allow factors to correlate) and ensured that the factor extraction process was not prematurely terminated at five factors, allowing the full six dimensions to initially emerge before attempting to collapse or reconfigure them back into a five-factor space.

Measurement of the AFFM dimensions often utilizes instrument development methodologies that intentionally sample items designed to capture the unique variance identified in the cross-cultural lexical studies. Unlike instruments designed specifically for the FFM (which often miss the critical Honesty-Humility content), AFFM-aligned measures select items that load highly on the factors

derived from the comprehensive six-factor structure. Although the AFFM itself did not spawn a widely adopted standalone inventory in the same manner as the NEO-PI-R (for FFM) or the HEXACO-PI-R (for HEXACO), its influence is seen in how researchers select and interpret items when attempting to force a five-factor solution onto a six-factor dataset. The goal is always to maximize the predictive power and structural independence of the remaining five factors, even if it means accepting a higher degree of factor content overlap or 'blending' compared to the pure six-factor solution.

A key aspect of the AFFM's methodology is its commitment to **cross-cultural replication**. The initial motivation for developing this alternative structure was the repeated failure of the traditional FFM to replicate robustly across languages outside of the Indo-European family, particularly regarding the structure of interpersonal traits. By focusing on item selection that consistently yields the six factors first, and then strategically defining the five-factor solution, the AFFM offers a structure that is arguably more robustly supported by global lexical research than the FFM. This methodological rigor emphasizes the importance of utilizing diverse language bases rather than relying solely on the historical development rooted primarily in English and Western cultural contexts.

## Applications and Empirical Support

Although the Alternative Five-Factor Model often functions as a theoretical precursor to the more widely accepted HEXACO model, it possesses significant empirical support in its own right, particularly in demonstrating the structural instability of the traditional FFM when faced with comprehensive lexical data. The primary empirical application of the AFFM is its utility in bridging the gap between historical personality theory and modern cross-cultural findings. Research employing the AFFM structure has consistently shown that a five-factor solution derived from the full lexical space provides better prediction for certain criteria, particularly those related to morality, than the FFM, even if the six-factor HEXACO model provides the best overall prediction.

Specific applications often involve predicting socially undesirable behaviors. For example, research into organizational deviance, academic cheating, and antisocial behavior has benefited from the insights offered by the AFFM's redefinition of interpersonal factors. By partially separating ethical conduct from generalized agreeableness or emotional stability, the AFFM allows researchers to more precisely identify individuals prone to manipulation, exploitation, or dishonesty. While the HEXACO model provides the dedicated Honesty-Humility factor for this purpose, the AFFM demonstrates that even within a five-factor constraint, item selection guided by the six-factor findings can significantly enhance predictive validity over traditional FFM measures in these sensitive domains.

Empirical support for the AFFM structure is often cited in meta-analyses and factor analytic studies

that compare different models of personality structure (e.g., FFM vs. HEXACO). These studies frequently use the AFFM as a crucial intermediate step to illustrate how variance is reallocated when factor extraction is constrained. The findings consistently confirm that the core dimensions of the AFFM are statistically robust and highly correlated with criterion variables related to personality pathology, political attitudes, and occupational success. This robustness validates the contention that the traditional FFM, while useful, is not the only, nor necessarily the optimal, five-factor structure available when comprehensive lexical data is considered.

## Criticisms and Future Directions

The Alternative Five-Factor Model, despite its methodological rigor and empirical justification, faces several key criticisms, primarily revolving around its relationship to the subsequent six-factor HEXACO model. The most significant critique is that the AFFM is inherently an incomplete solution. Since its proponents acknowledge that six factors consistently emerge from the most comprehensive lexical studies, forcing the structure back into five dimensions results in conceptually blended factors that are less pure and potentially less predictive than the six distinct dimensions of the HEXACO model. Critics argue that retaining the five-factor constraint sacrifices valuable information, specifically the unique variance captured by the **Honesty-Humility factor**, which must then be awkwardly distributed among the remaining factors, leading to conceptual ambiguity.

Furthermore, the AFFM suffers from a lack of standardization compared to the FFM and HEXACO. Because the model served primarily as an analytical demonstration and a transitional framework, a single, definitive, and widely adopted inventory (like the NEO-PI-R or the HEXACO-PI-R) was never universally established for the AFFM. This lack of a standardized measurement tool hinders large-scale comparative research and clinical application, making it difficult for researchers to replicate findings precisely using consistently defined AFFM factors. Consequently, the AFFM is often used theoretically to justify the existence of the sixth factor rather than operationally as a primary measurement tool in contemporary personality research.

Future directions for research stemming from the AFFM's insights involve refining the understanding of how personality structure maps onto biological and neurological substrates. The AFFM successfully highlighted that traits related to morality and resource management are distinct and fundamental, prompting increased investigation into the evolutionary and genetic basis of these traits. While the HEXACO model has largely superseded the AFFM as the preferred structure for comprehensive lexical analysis, the AFFM remains a powerful historical and methodological example, demonstrating the critical importance of utilizing cross-cultural lexical evidence to challenge and refine dominant psychological paradigms. Its legacy is the undeniable shift toward recognizing the necessity of the Honesty-Humility dimension in any truly universal model of personality.