

Unveiling the Evolutionary and Ecological Underpinnings of People-Pleasing:

An Exploratory Study

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This study will explore the evolutionary and ecological roots of people-pleasing behaviors. They may present as an individual's innate desire to appease, be liked by, and gain the validation of others, at the expense of personal values and needs. Svoboda (2008) labeled people-pleasers as "Doormats," highlighting the derogatory way the term is often used. Yet, when analyzed empirically, data may challenge the predominantly negative portrayal of people-pleasing in pop-psychology. A nuanced understanding may acknowledge both the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of said behaviors and conclude that people-pleasing is more than agreeableness, lack of assertiveness or the societal pressure to conform and/or comply.

Culture and context matter.

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Currently in the data collection phase, this study is a part of my doctoral dissertation at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, CA, under the supervision of Lynn E. O'Connor, Ph.D and Jack W. Berry, Ph.D.

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Clinical Relevance:

The construct of people-pleasing is rapidly gaining traction in pop-psychology, particularly among younger audiences on social media platforms. TikTok, a platform with an estimated one billion monthly active users, has seen a significant surge in discussions of people-pleasing. Various related hashtags, such as #PeoplePleaser and #PeoplePleasing, have amassed hundreds of millions of views, indicating a growing engagement with this topic, predominantly a younger demographic (Gilmore et al., 2022). Similarly, on Instagram, a platform with over 168.6 million active users in the United States alone, content tagged with #PeoplePleaser and related hashtags has garnered significant attention (Bagadiya, 2024).

However, this rising popularity contrasts starkly with the scarcity of peer-reviewed research on people-pleasing behaviors. At its core, people-pleasing is intertwined with personal self-assessment and cultural identity. Therefore, this study will aim to dissect the complexities of people-pleasing, understanding its psychological and cultural dimensions within clinical practice.



Health Equity Impact Statement:

By cross-culturally examining people-pleasing behaviors through the lens of their evolutionary and ecological origins, it may be useful to consider a more holistic understanding of this social behavior, directly addressing health and social inequities in the mental health field. Currently the prevailing clinical emphasis on encouraging people to cease people-pleasing behavior may overlook the collectivist cultural values intrinsic to many minority groups. It may be possible to shift the narrative to understanding the 'why' behind people-pleasing. A change in perspective may enhance cultural sensitivity and improve the effectiveness of interventions.



Primary Hypothesis: It is predicted that participants with higher scores in collectivism, measured by the Individualism-Collectivism Measure, will have a more positive attitude towards people-pleasing, measured by the Attitude towards People-Pleasing Scale.

Hypothesis 2: It is predicted that there will be a positive correlation between collectivism, measured by the Individualism-Collectivism Measure, and people-pleasing, measured by the 'pleasing others' and 'concern about what others think' sub-scales of the Personal Styles Inventory II.

Hypothesis 3: It is predicted that there will be a positive correlation between people-pleasing and empathy, measured by the 'empathic concern' sub-scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index.

Hypothesis 4: It is predicted that there will be a positive correlation between the Big 5 trait of agreeableness, measured by the Mini-IPIP, and people-pleasing.

Hypothesis 5: It is predicted that there will be a positive correlation between interpersonal guilt, measured by the 'survivor guilt' and 'omnipotent guilt' sub-scales of the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67, and people-pleasing.

Hypothesis 6: It is predicted that the correlation between people-pleasing and satisfaction with life will be moderated by scores on collectivism. Higher scores in collectivism will be associated with a stronger positive relationship between people-pleasing and satisfaction with life, measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale.

Relevant Studies:

- In individualistic cultures, people choose their affiliations voluntarily, while in collectivistic cultures, affiliations are often imposed, emphasizing obligations to one's lineage or extended family. (Beugelsdijk & Welzel, 2018)
- A relatively recent study found that collectivistic cultures were significantly more likely to have individuals carrying the short (S) allele of the 5-HTTLPR. This finding suggests a correlation between the prevalence of this genetic variation and cultural values that emphasize group harmony and interconnectedness. (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010)
- The Neurocognitive Model of Emotional Contagion (Prochazkova & Kret, 2017) emphasizes the evolution of empathy, suggesting that the ability to empathize and engage in emotional contagion has significant survival benefits in social species.
- Individuals exhibiting high levels of agreeableness are typically characterized as altruistic, generous, trusting, kind, and forgiving. (John & Srivastava, 1999)
- Modell (1965, 1971) suggested that feelings of guilt, even from less catastrophic events, are evolutionary remnants, indicating that our ancestors who exhibited higher empathy and social conformity had better survival rates.
- Over time, the concept of survivor guilt expanded, encompassing feelings of guilt even in non-catastrophic circumstances, like being better off than others. (Weiss, 1986, O'Connor et al., 1999)

Inclusion Criteria:

- Adult participants aged 18 years and above.
- Currently residing in the United States.
- Comfortable with the English language to understand and respond to the survey.
- Have access to the internet to complete the online survey.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals under the age of 18 (minors).
- Individuals not comfortable or proficient in the English language.
- Individuals without access to the internet, rendering them unable to participate in the online survey.

Participant Recruitment and Retention Strategies:

- Utilizing social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram & LinkedIn) and online forums to reach potential participants.
- Ensuring the survey is user-friendly and time-efficient to reduce drop-off rates.

Measures that will be used:

- **Attitude towards People-Pleasing Scale**
- **Personal Styles Inventory II;** 'Pleasing Others' and 'Concern About What Others Think' sub-scales (Robins et al., 1994)
- **Individualism-Collectivism Measure** (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998)
- **Mini-IPIP Personality Scale** (Donnellan et al., 2006)
- **Interpersonal Reactivity Index;** 'Empathic Concern' sub-scale (Davis 1980)
- **Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67;** 'Survivor Guilt' & 'Omnipotent Guilt' sub-scales (O'Connor et al., 1997)
- **Satisfaction with Life Scale** (Diener et al., 1985)

Attitude towards People-Pleasing Scale - Do you believe people-pleasing is a positive characteristic for a person or a negative characteristic?

Scan this QR code for cited references and the PDF format for this poster.

What do you think?

