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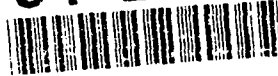# PERSONALITY PROFILES OF U.S. NAVY

SEA-AIR-LAND (SEAL) PERSONNEL

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Personality Profiles of U.S. Navy
Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) Personnel

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SUMMARY

Problem.

High (50-70%) attrition rates among U.S. Navy Sea-Air-Land commando (SEAL) trainees are common. Although SEAL volunteers are selected for intelligence, maturity, combat skills and physical performance, these characteristics are insufficient for predicting success or failure during training.

Objective.

The primary objective of this study was to collect baseline demographic and personality data on SEALs for developing a profile that may be used to improve selection and training.

Approach.

Demographic and personality data were collected from 139 SEAL personnel (aged 20-45) assigned to five different duty stations. The NEO Personality Inventory was employed because of its breadth and applicability. This inventory categorizes personality by five major domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Data were analyzed for effects of age, rank and experience in Naval Special Warfare. SEAL data were also compared to those collected from adult males in the general population.

Results.

The more-experienced SEALs scored higher on Conscientiousness and lower on Extraversion than the less-experienced SEALs. However, these effects were shown to be explained by increased age, not Special Warfare experience *per se*. Commissioned officers scored significantly higher on both Extraversion and Conscientiousness than Enlisted SEALs. SEALs scored lower in Neuroticism and Agreeableness, average to lower in Openness, and higher in Conscientiousness and Extraversion compared to the norms for adult males.

Conclusions.

Based on the personality data collected, a general profile for the "average" SEAL was created. This profile may be useful in developing future recruitment, selection, and training programs. One consideration for further study is the question of whether the differences found between SEALs and the general population norms are due to self-selection or to personality changes caused by the demands of military and SEAL training.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) personnel are special warfare operators who frequently conduct missions in the harshest environments. Motivation, training, and the high quality of these personnel contribute to their readiness for specialized missions of national or global significance (Stiner, 1992). The SEAL training course is so arduous that 50-70% attrition rates are common.

Select groups of Army Special Forces (SF) and SEAL personnel have distinctly different personalities than the average civilian (CDR Peter Graham- Mist, MSC, USN, personal communication, 1993). However, little formal investigation addressing the personality of these personnel has been conducted. One study of U.S. Army SF personnel employed an interview process (Manning & Fullerton, 1984). Another study recorded comparative biographic histories, focusing on social development, of Navy divers (Biersner, 1973). These authors reported no significant differences between the personalities of these personnel and those of conventional military personnel.

A few studies suggest that personality inventories are more useful than interviews in predicting success in challenging military training programs. Jessup and Jessup (1971) found a relationship between the success of British Royal Air Force trainees and scores on Eysenck's Personality Inventory, which measures degrees of extraversion and neuroticism. The Dynamic Personality Inventory, which measures social dimensions of personality, effectively determined characteristics of successful bomb disposal trainees in Northern Ireland (Cooper, 1982). The Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) (Hogan, 1986) was used to predict success of U.S. Navy personnel during a winter tour in Antarctica (Biersner & Hogan, 1984). The HPI consists of six primary scales of broad personality characteristics, six empirical scales of occupational performance, and one scale to validate testing protocols.

McDonald, Norton, and Hodgdon (1988) administered the HPI, along with several other questionnaires, to a group of Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) students at the beginning of training, and again to those who completed training six months later. Those students who graduated scored significantly higher on the HPI scales for Adjustment, Likability, Service Orientation, and Managerial Potential than those who dropped out of training. Surprisingly, when graduates were retested later, they showed significant decreases in scores for

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Likability, Reliability, Service Orientation, and Validity compared to pretraining scores. The authors suggested that these results may have been due, in part, to inflated pretraining scores from subjects who felt compelled to respond as they judged BUD/S students would be expected to, and that this pressure diminished by graduation. Other studies have compared HPI results among BUD/S dropouts, BUD/S graduates, and experienced SEALs (McDonald et al., 1988; Beckett, M.B., Hodgdon, J.A. & Goforth, H.W., unpublished data). SEALs scored significantly higher than both other groups on Adjustment, and higher than BUD/S dropouts on Intelligence, Prudence, Likability and Validity. Interestingly, SEALs scored lower than BUD/S graduates on Ambition.

The NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI) is a more recently developed inventory based on 25 years of research focusing on a five-factor model of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1989a; 1989b). This model divides personality traits into five broad domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Personality is described in terms of the degree to which each domain is exhibited, and of the combination of scores across domains. This personality model has received strong empirical validation by both researchers and clinicians (Conoley & Kramer, 1989), and has been judged as a useful tool in the fields of personnel selection, training and development, and performance appraisal (Barrick & Mount, 1991). The NEO-PI also incorporates several scales that relate to those of the HPI found to discriminate between successful and unsuccessful BUD/S students (McDonald et al., 1988). The HPI Adjustment scale purports to measure "self confidence and freedom from anxiety." Similarly, the NEO-PI Neuroticism scale measures "adjustment vs. emotional instability," including anxiety. HPI's Likability scale measures "the extent to which individuals are cordial and even tempered." The NEO-PI's Extraversion and Agreeableness scales also address interpersonal interactions and sociability. Finally, the HPI's Managerial Potential scale predicts "leadership ability, planning and decision-making skills"; and the NEO-PI's Conscientiousness scale purports to measure "degree of organization, persistence and motivation in goal-directed behavior."

Since the NEO-PI is now well established in personality profiling and is shorter than the HPI, it seemed a logical instrument to profile SEALs. The NEO-PI manual supplement (Costa & McCrae, 1989b) includes a personality profile derived from a large sample of adult males (21-

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85 years). These norms were selected as standards against which data collected from SEALs would be compared.

This study examined the personality profiles of U.S. Navy SEALs. The purpose was to provide accurate baseline data from which SEAL selection and training programs could be designed. In the future, the NEO-PI may be used in the selection of applicants most likely to succeed during training as SEAL operators.

METHODS

Subjects

Potential subjects at Naval Special Warfare (NSW) commands were briefed on the background and purposes of the study . A total of 139 SEALs from SEAL Teams Two (ST-2), Three (ST-3), Four (ST-4), Five (ST-5), and SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team Two (SDVT-2) volunteered as subjects, giving written informed consent. The sample consisted of 114 (82%) enlisted and 25 (18%) commissioned officers. They were equally distributed between East (n = 68) and West (n = 71) Coast SEALs.

Measures

Prior to completing the NEO-PI, each subject provided basic demographic information. Subjects were given as much time as needed to complete the NEO-PI, Form-S (Self-Report) (Costa & McCrae, 1989a). The NEO-PI consists of 181 items answered on a five-point scale: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree. The NEO-PI measures five domains or dimensions of personality. Costa and McCrae (1989a) describe the domains as follows:

1. **Neuroticism** assesses adjustment vs. emotional instability. Identifies individuals prone to psychological distress, unrealistic ideas, excessive cravings or urges, and maladaptive coping responses.
2. **Extraversion** assesses quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction, activity level, need for stimulation, and capacity for joy.
3. **Openness** assesses proactive seeking and appreciation of experience for its own sake, and toleration for and exploration of the unfamiliar.
4. **Agreeableness** assesses the quality of one's interpersonal orientation along a continuum from compassion to antagonism in thoughts, feelings, and actions.
5. **Conscientiousness** assesses the individual's degree of organization, persistence, and motivation in goal-directed behavior. Contrasts dependable, fastidious people with those who are lackadaisical and sloppy.

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The Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness domains are further divided into measurable facets in the NEO-PI.

Analyses

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each domain and facet. Profiles of enlisted SEALs were compared to commissioned officers, and the effects of age and experience among SEALs were considered as well. SEAL domain scores were converted to McCall's T values using the NEO-PI manual means and standard deviations for adult males. Data were analyzed using SPSS-X (SPSS Inc.; Chicago, IL). Two-tailed t-tests or analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed, as appropriate, for comparison among groups. A probability level of 0.05 was selected to evaluate statistical significance.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

The SEALs participating in this study had a mean (± SD) age of 27 (± 6) years ranging from 20 to 45 years. The average age on entering military service was 19 (± 2) years. These SEALs' NSW experience ranged from 1 to 27 years with an average of 5 (± 5) years.

The age distribution of SEALs reflects the U.S. Navy's enlistment and NSW selection criteria. The youngest enlistment age in the U.S. military is 17 years, and the maximum age for selection for SEAL training is 28 years. Thus, the age distribution for SEALs is positively skewed. The distribution of number of years of NSW experience was skewed as well, a pattern typical for many military populations. Once joining NSW, SEALs have an obligation of six years. Those with more than six years of NSW experience had chosen to re-enlist.

A majority (58.8%) of these SEALs joined the military with a high school diploma (Table 1). Approximately 23% had college experience when they joined the military, and approximately 11% held a degree. At the time of the study, 28% had some college experience, and nearly 31% held either an Associate's or Bachelor's degree.

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Table 1. Education levels of U.S. Navy SEALs (percentages based on those responding).

EDUCATION LEVEL	AT ENLISTMENT (n=114) NO. REPORTING (%)	CURRENT (n=134) NO. REPORTING (%)
G.E.D.	8 (7.0)	4 (3.0)
High School Diploma	67 (58.8)	51 (38.1)
1 year of College	14 (12.3)	18 (13.4)
2 years of College	10 (8.8)	16 (11.9)
Associate's Degree	1 (0.9)	9 (6.7)
3 years of College	2 (1.8)	4 (3.0)
Bachelor's Degree	12 (10.5)	32 (23.9)

NEO-PI

Analyses of variance of the demographic data revealed only one significant difference among personality domains or facets on the NEO-PI among Agreeableness scores obtained from SEALs at different locations ($p < 0.05$). A Duncan's multiple range test revealed that Agreeableness scores from SEALs at both ST-2 and SDVT-2 (East Coast) were significantly ($p < 0.05$) lower than those from SEALs at ST-3 (West Coast).

The subjects were divided into two groups, based on NSW experience, to identify differences in NEO-PI responses. Group I (n = 107) was comprised of those with up to and including six years experience, and Group II (n = 31) of those with seven or more years of NSW experience. The mean age of the two groups (25 and 35 years, respectively) differed significantly ($p < 0.01$); therefore, a two-factor ANOVA was performed using age as a concurrently processed covariate with experience.

Group II scored significantly higher on the Conscientiousness domain than Group I ($p < 0.01$). However, the difference was solely attributable to the increased age ($p < 0.01$), not experience, of Group II. The difference between the Extraversion scores of the two groups approached significance ($p < 0.06$); the lower score for Group II was again due to age ($p < 0.05$). The difference in Extraversion scores was attributable to lower scores for the Excitement-Seeking

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($\underline{p} < 0.05$) and Gregariousness ($\underline{p} < 0.01$) facets among Group II. Differences found within these two facets were also attributable to age, not experience ($\underline{p} < 0.01$ and $\underline{p} < 0.01$, respectively).

NEO-PI results of commissioned officers were compared to those of enlisted personnel using a two-tailed t-test (Table 2). Commissioned officers scored significantly higher on both Extraversion ($\underline{p} < 0.01$) and Conscientiousness ($\underline{p} < 0.01$). The difference on the Extraversion domain was attributable to significantly higher scores for Assertiveness ($\underline{p} < 0.01$) and Activity ($\underline{p} < 0.01$).

Table 2. Mean scores for Enlisted and Commissioned Officers on NEO-PI Extraversion and Conscientiousness domains.

DOMAIN/Facet	ENLISTED (n=114)	COMMISSIONED (n=25)
EXTRAVERSION	118.72	129.36
Assertiveness	19.68	23.60
Activity	20.21	22.04
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	53.08	58.40

The domain and facet means and the statistical significance of comparisons between SEALs and adult males are presented in Appendix A.

Most comparisons show significant differences in mean values of domains/facets between SEALs and adult male norms. However, since the range of scores which are classified as "very high," "high," "average," "low," or "very low" by Costa & McCrae (1989b) are very broad, a significant difference in means does not necessarily indicate a difference in the general category into which the means fall. Much depends upon how the SEAL data were distributed. Mean SEAL domain scores were converted to T-scores and their distribution compared to the T-scores provided for adult males (Costa & McCrae, 1989b) (Figure 1).
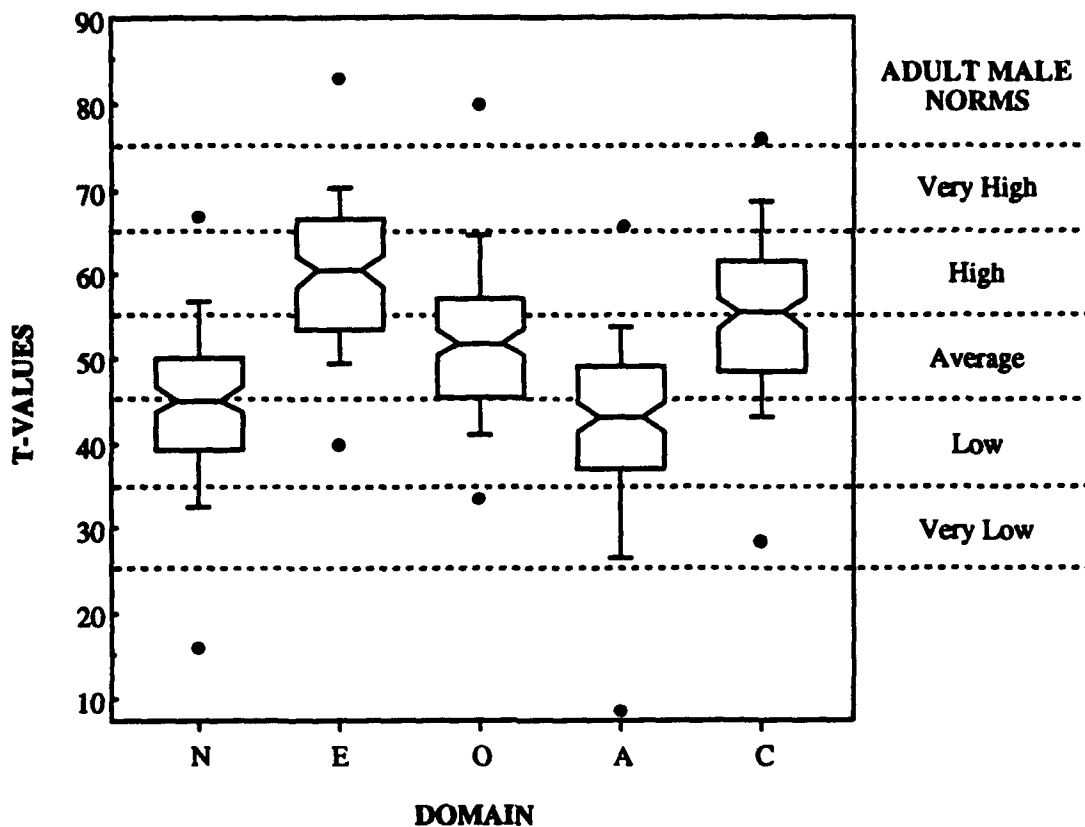
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Figure 1. Box plot of SEAL T-score distribution against profile norms for adult males. Raw scores were converted to T-scores using norm mean and standard deviation. The line through the box represents the median value, and the notch in the box is the 95% confidence band about the median. The bottom and top of the box represent the 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively. The bottom and top vertical lines correspond to the 10th and 90th percentiles, respectively. The black circles represent the lowest and highest scores. On the x-axis, N = Neuroticism; E = Extraversion; O = Openness; A = Agreeableness; C = Conscientiousness.

DISCUSSION

The results of the NEO-PI provide important data relevant to the construction of a personality profile of the successful U. S. Navy SEAL. When interpreting results from the NEO-PI, however, several points should be kept in mind. As with the HPI, the NEO-PI domain and facet scales approximate normal distributions. A high score suggests a higher probability that the feature/behavior associated with that trait will be apparent. However, a low or average score on any scale can be as informative as a high score. The overall profile is derived from a combination of scores from all domain and facet scales, not from one isolated score.

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The most meaningful differences between less experienced and more experienced SEALs were most likely attributable to maturity, rather than NSW experience. The more mature SEALs scored slightly lower in Extraversion. This appeared to be attributable to lower scores in Gregariousness and Excitement-Seeking, suggesting that the more mature SEALs did not seek as much social stimulation or excitement as the younger SEALs. The more mature SEALs also scored significantly higher on the Conscientiousness scale, suggesting that they may have been more persistent, dependable, and/or well-organized than the younger SEALs.

Interestingly, SEAL officers scored higher than enlisted personnel on the Extraversion domain. In this case, however, the differences in Extraversion were apparently due to higher scores in the Assertiveness and Activity facets. Note that the aforementioned decrease in Extraversion among more mature SEALs was due to their lower scores for Gregariousness and Excitement-Seeking. These data suggest that SEAL officers are more assertive, confident, and forceful than enlisted SEALs; manifesting a more active, vigorous personal style. SEAL officers also scored higher on the Conscientiousness scale, indicating they are more organized, persistent, and reliable than enlisted personnel. These results do not indicate that enlisted personnel are unreliable, rather that commissioned officers appear to display these characteristics to a greater extent. Officers, especially SEAL officers, need to be assertive, active, and conscientious since they assume responsibility for the lives of those they command. Determining whether these differences reflect self-selection or the influence of officer candidate school and SEAL training on officer personality traits was not addressed by this study.

The mean SEAL score for Openness, while significantly higher than that of adult males, fell within the "average" range when plotted on the adult male profile. Openness is especially important in training indicating an individual is "training ready" (Barrick & Mount, 1991). This is important considering the dynamic training requirements of the Navy SEAL. The SEALs' high Extraversion score was attributable to high scores in the Assertiveness, Activity, and especially the Excitement-Seeking facets (Table 3). Excitement-Seeking was the only SEAL domain or facet score in the "very high" region of the adult male profile. Only six SEALs scored at or below the adult male mean, and the SEAL mean was nearly eight points higher. However, Excitement-Seeking scores for SEALs appeared more normally-distributed than those of the Vulnerability facet, and extreme scores did not appear truncated, suggesting that this scale covers

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the range of SEAL responses. Generally, SEALs scored lower in Neuroticism and Agreeableness, average in Openness, and higher in Extraversion and Conscientiousness compared to the norms for adult males. The low scores in Neuroticism are most extreme within the Depression and Vulnerability facets. These scores indicate that SEALs are less prone to feelings of guilt, sadness, or loneliness, and are more independent and capable of handling difficult situations than males in the general population. The low SEAL scores in Agreeableness were not surprising, because a low score indicates a tendency for one to fight for one's interests, an integral characteristic of NSW personnel. The high Extraversion score of SEALs is due primarily to high scores on the Assertiveness, Activity and Excitement-Seeking facets. Extraversion has been reported to be important in training procedures especially in tasks requiring high energy activity such as police academy training. These characteristics indicate that SEALs are more likely to be forceful, energetic, and to become leaders than men of the general population. The average SEAL is also more persistent, reliable, and scrupulous, viewing life as a series of task-oriented challenges, as suggested by their high scores on the Conscientiousness domain.

SEAL scores were similar to adult male scores in four areas: the Hostility and Impulsiveness facets of the Neuroticism domain; and the Feelings and Values facets of the Openness domain. These similarities might indicate that SEALs present an average range of self-control, temperament, and demeanor in their personalities.

The results of this study offer useful insight for those designing training programs for SEALs, and point out important differences between SEALs and males of the general population. The data also support the er ier work by McDonald, et al. (1988) suggesting certain characteristics of a SEAL candidate, such as the amount of extraversion, vulnerability, activity, and excitement-seeking, might predict success or failure during training.

Barrick and Mount (1991) found that Conscientiousness was a consistently valid predictor for job performance among many occupational groups (professionals, police, managers, sales, skilled/semi-skilled). Individuals who scored high on measures of persistence, obligation, and sense of purpose generally performed better on the job than those who did not. As Barrick and Mount (1991) also pointed out, Openness was a valid predictor for training proficiency and might be useful in determining SEAL applicant selection. Ryman and Biersner (1975) have found that higher scores in Openness were an indicator of success in Navy Dive School Training.

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Individuals who score high on Openness are likely to have positive attitudes toward learning experiences in general. There was no correlation found in the 1991 study between Agreeableness scores and job performance. Thus, traits such as courtesy, compassion, and generosity may be less important than assertiveness, confidence, and activity to job performance in general, and to the successful SEAL student in particular.

Using guidance provided by the NEO-PI authors (Costa & McCrae, 1989a), the following description of "average" U.S. Navy SEALs was generated:

> This subset of SEALs appear to be calm, hardy, secure, and not prone to excessive psychological stress or anxiety. They are level-headed, practical and collected even under very stressful or dangerous situations. They are rarely impulsive and have strong control over cravings or urges. Active and assertive, they prefer being in large groups and are usually energetic and optimistic. They seek excitement and stimulation and prefer complex and dangerous environments. They are very competitive, skeptical of others' intentions, and are likely to aggressively defend their own interests, but are not hostile. Finally, they are purposeful, well-organized, persistent, and very reliable.

One intriguing question is left unanswered: Are the differences between SEALs and the general male population due to self-selection or to the intense demands of military and SEAL training? It is possible that the lure of such a dangerous, exciting lifestyle attracts those predisposed to succeed in that environment. On the other hand, it is also possible that the intense training and lifestyle itself might influence the personality of those experiencing it. The results of McDonald, et al. (1988) suggest, inconclusively, that some personality changes may occur during SEAL training. Future research should attempt to verify these conclusions using the NEO-PI. The data collected could be more definitive and useful if the tests were administered to SEAL individuals applying for BUD/S at initiation of BUD/S training, those who drop out of training, graduates, and finally, to non-SEAL military personnel at corresponding stages of their careers. The results of such studies, when controlled for the effects of increasing age, would elucidate the effects, if any, of SEAL training on personality changes, and help identify the essential personality traits of the successful SEAL.

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APPENDIX A

Means ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviations (sd) of NEO-PI domain and facet scores for U.S. Navy SEALs compared to norms provided for adult males by Costa and McCrae (1989b). Two-tailed t values and significance levels (p) shown for comparisons of SEAL means to the adult male norms (ns = nonsignificant).

DOMAIN/Facet	SEALs (n=139)		Adult Male Norms (n=502)			
	$\bar{x}$	sd	$\bar{x}$	sd	t	p <
NEUROTICISM	62.9	17.8	73.0	19.3	5.8	.001
Anxiety	11.2	4.3	12.8	5.2	3.7	.001
Hostility	11.4	4.7	10.7	4.4	1.6	ns
Depression	8.2	3.6	11.5	5.0	8.7	.001
Self-Consciousness	11.3	3.8	13.6	4.1	6.2	.001
Impulsiveness	14.8	4.0	14.9	4.2	0.3	ns
Vulnerability	5.9	3.5	9.5	3.5	10.4	.001
EXTRAVERSION	120.6	15.3	102.6	18.0	11.8	.001
Warmth	20.7	4.2	22.2	3.9	3.8	.001
Gregariousness	15.8	4.7	14.8	4.3	2.3	.05
Assertiveness	20.4	4.1	16.7	4.6	9.2	.001
Activity	20.5	3.5	16.1	4.5	12.3	.001
Excitement-Seeking	22.9	4.0	15.0	4.7	15.1	.001
Positive Emotions	20.2	4.0	17.9	4.6	5.8	.001
OPENNESS	112.6	17.0	109.2	17.4	2.1	.05
Fantasy	17.5	4.6	16.5	5.0	2.2	.05
Aesthetics	15.6	5.8	16.8	5.2	2.2	.05
Feelings	20.2	4.4	19.5	3.9	1.7	ns
Actions	18.0	3.5	15.7	3.7	6.8	.001
Ideas	20.6	5.1	19.6	4.9	2.1	.05
Values	20.6	3.5	20.9	4.1	0.9	ns
AGREEABLENESS	43.0	6.4	48.4	6.1	8.0	.001
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	54.0	7.8	49.8	8.2	5.6	.001

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13. ABSTRACT (Maximum 200 words)

One hundred thirty-nine U.S. Navy Sea-Air-Land (SEAL) personnel completed the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI). The average profiles were compared to adult male norms for five broadly defined domains. SEALs scored lower in Neuroticism and Agreeableness, average in Openness, and higher in Extraversion and Conscientiousness compared to these two populations. High Extraversion and Conscientiousness scores have been shown to predict job performance in other professions. SEALs seek excitement and dangerous environments, but are otherwise stable, calm, and rarely reckless or impulsive. Although this average profile may not characterize any individual SEAL, we believe this study provides the most comprehensive personality profile of Navy SEALs to date.

14. SUBJECT TERMS

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