

Exploring Character Personality and Behavioral Dynamics in Biographical Cinema: A Big Five Approach to Milk (2008)

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	Abstract
	<p>This study examines the personality traits of key characters in the biographical film Milk (2008) through the lens of the Big Five personality theory, which includes Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. The research focuses on five central figures—Harvey Milk, Dan White, Anne Kronenberg, Scott Smith, and Mayor George Moscone—to explore how their behaviors, interpersonal interactions, and decision-making reflect distinct personality dimensions. Data were collected through qualitative analysis of character actions, dialogue, and pivotal scenes, followed by categorization according to Big Five traits. The findings reveal significant contrasts among the characters: Harvey Milk demonstrates high openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, coupled with moderate neuroticism; Dan White exhibits low openness and agreeableness but high neuroticism, explaining his impulsive and destructive behavior; Anne Kronenberg exemplifies organizational competence and emotional stability; Scott Smith shows introversion and moderate neuroticism reflecting personal conflict; and Mayor Moscone illustrates emotional steadiness and cooperative leadership. This study contributes to the understanding of character psychology in biographical cinema, highlighting how personality traits influence both individual behavior and relational dynamics within socio-political contexts. Implications for film studies, psychology, and leadership research are discussed.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Biographical films provide a powerful medium for exploring the psychological complexity of real-life figures, allowing audiences to reflect not only on external events but also on the internal motivations that drive protagonists. In Milk Van Sant (2008) The life and activism of Harvey Milk offer a rich opportunity for character analysis: his political leadership, interpersonal relationships, and emotional resilience are central to the film's narrative. By applying a personality-psychological lens, scholars can better understand how individual traits influence both public behavior and private struggles (Jiménez et al., 2024).

To analyze personality precisely, this study draws on the Big Five personality model, which is widely accepted for its reliability and validity in personality psychology (McCrae & Costa, 1991; McCrae & John, 1992). The Big Five framework—comprising Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism—provides a structured taxonomy for interpreting how people think, feel, and behave. Prior research has linked Big Five traits to leadership, decision-making, and social interactions, demonstrating their relevance across organizational, educational, and social contexts (Antonakis & House, 2014; Judge & Bono, 2000). Applying this model to film characters

bridges cinematic representation and psychological theory, providing a systematic method to analyze personality, leadership, and social engagement.

Previous studies have applied Big Five profiling to fictional and biographical characters in films to uncover personality structures and narrative dynamics. For example, Jiménez et al. (2024) used Big Five analysis to evaluate characters in movie scripts, demonstrating its usefulness for understanding motivations and behavior. Other studies have analyzed animated and literary film characters, such as Sing (Syamsul Bahri et al., 2024), Alice in Wonderland (Syamsul Bahri et al., 2022), and Forrest Gump (Manggalasari & Luthiyati, 2018), showing how personality traits shape plot progression, interpersonal relationships, and emotional responses. These studies suggest that Big Five analysis can provide meaningful insights into both fictional and real-life character portrayals.

Despite these contributions, a research gap remains regarding biographical films that focus on political activism and leadership, where multiple central characters interact in high-stakes social and political contexts. Most existing studies focus on fictional characters or single biographical figures without comparing multiple personalities within the same film. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding how personality traits influence leadership style, decision-making, interpersonal dynamics, and activism within historically significant narratives (Cai & Liu, 2022; Yang, 2023).

This study addresses the gap by conducting a comprehensive Big Five personality analysis of five main characters in *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008): Harvey Milk, Dan White, Anne Kronenberg, Scott Smith, and Mayor George Moscone. By mapping their personality traits to key scenes, the research provides novel insights into the psychological dimensions of leadership, social activism, and interpersonal dynamics in a cinematic narrative. The purpose of this study is to examine how these traits shape behavior and relationships, offering contributions to film studies, personality psychology, and leadership research, while establishing a model for systematic character analysis in biographical and political cinema (Kennedy et al., 2021; Se'u et al., 2023; Sufya, 2022).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze the personalities of key characters in the biographical film *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008). The research focused on five central characters—Harvey Milk, Dan White, Anne Kronenberg, Scott Smith, and Mayor George Moscone—examining their behaviors, interactions, and decision-making as depicted in the film. By using a qualitative approach, the study aimed to capture the complexity of character traits and their manifestations within social and political contexts, allowing for a nuanced understanding of personality dynamics in cinematic narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The primary data source was the film *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008) (2008), directed by Gus Van Sant. Specific scenes were selected for analysis based on their relevance to character development, social interaction, and decision-making. Secondary sources included film scripts, critical reviews, and scholarly literature on personality psychology and film studies, which provided additional context for interpreting character behavior and Big Five traits (Jiménez et al., 2024).

The study applied the Big Five personality model—comprising Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism—as the primary analytical framework. Each character's actions, dialogue, and key decisions were examined in relation to these five dimensions. Openness was identified through receptiveness to new ideas and social change; Conscientiousness through organization, planning, and persistence; Extraversion through social engagement and public charisma; Agreeableness through empathy and cooperative behavior; and Neuroticism through emotional stability, stress responses, and impulsivity (Judge & Bono, 2000; McCrae & John, 1992).

Data collection involved systematic viewing of the film, scene-by-scene note-taking, and

coding of character behavior relevant to Big Five traits. Each character's personality indicators were documented alongside specific scenes that demonstrated trait manifestations. Triangulation was conducted using secondary sources such as film reviews, interviews, and scholarly analyses to validate interpretations and minimize subjective bias.

The study employed deductive content analysis, where observed behaviors were classified according to pre-determined Big Five categories. Tables were constructed to present the traits, brief analyses, and representative scenes for each character. Patterns and contrasts among characters were identified to explore the interplay of personality, leadership, social influence, and interpersonal dynamics within the film narrative. This analytical process ensured transparency, reproducibility, and a structured interpretation of qualitative data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

As the research involved publicly available film material, no human subjects were directly involved, and ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, careful attention was paid to accurately represent characters based on observable evidence and reliable secondary sources, avoiding subjective judgment beyond what was presented in the film and literature.

RESULT

Harvey Milk

The character of Harvey Milk plays a central role in the narrative of *Milk* (2008), serving as the driving force behind the film's political and social themes. To understand the depth of his personality and leadership qualities, this section presents a detailed analysis using the Big Five personality framework. By categorizing Harvey Milk's traits across openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, the table summarizes observable behavioral patterns and key scenes that illustrate these characteristics. This structured overview provides a foundation for further interpretation of how Milk's personality contributes to his activism, leadership style, and influence within the LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Table 1. Big Five Personality Analysis of Harvey Milk

Big Five Dimension	Brief Analysis	Scene in Movie
Openness	Open to new experiences and progressive ideas; advocates for social change and LGBT rights.	When Harvey attends his first LGBT community meeting and delivers an inspirational speech.
Conscientiousness	Disciplined and consistent in political activism; carefully plans campaigns and strategies.	When Harvey organizes his mayoral campaign and strategizes with his team.
Extraversion	Extroverted and charismatic; easily interacts with others and inspires the community.	When Harvey speaks publicly during his campaign and attends community parties.
Agreeableness	Empathetic and caring; consistently fights for the rights of minority groups.	When Harvey comforts a fearful community member and provides moral support.
Neuroticism	Experiences stress and fear due to political threats yet remains focused on goals.	When Harvey receives threatening phone calls and faces escalating hostility from political opponents, leading him to express fear and concern to his close allies while still pushing forward

with his campaign.

As shown in the table, Harvey Milk demonstrates a personality profile strongly aligned with traits commonly associated with effective social and political leaders. His high openness and conscientiousness are evident in his strategic approach to advocacy and his willingness to embrace new ideas that challenge societal norms. His extraversion and agreeableness reinforce his ability to mobilize communities, build alliances, and inspire collective action. Although moments of neuroticism appear in response to political threats and personal stress, these emotional experiences humanize his character and highlight the psychological toll of activism. Overall, the analysis suggests that Milk's unique combination of personality traits played a crucial role in shaping both his leadership effectiveness and his enduring legacy as a civil rights figure.

Character Analysis of Dan White

Dan White is portrayed as one of the most complex and conflicted figures in *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008). His character reflects deep internal struggles between personal values, political pressures, and emotional instability. To better understand his behavioral patterns and psychological tendencies, his character was analyzed using the Big Five personality dimensions. This table outlines the dominant traits expressed by Dan White throughout the film, supported by key scenes illustrating his behavioral tendencies.

Table 2. Big Five Personality Analysis of Dan White

Big Five Dimension	Brief Analysis	Scene in the Movie
Openness	Closed to new ideas; conservative in political and social views.	Shows resistance toward social change and progressive policies.
Conscientiousness	Responsible in his role as a supervisor, but sometimes impulsive in decision-making.	His sudden decision to resign and then request to return to his position.
Extraversion	Tends to be introverted; rarely engages publicly or socially.	Limited interactions with colleagues and the public.
Agreeableness	Low empathy; frequently experiences conflict with colleagues and the LGBT community.	Tense interactions with Harvey Milk and other board members.
Neuroticism	High emotional instability; easily angered and impulsive.	The assassination of Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone.

The analysis reveals that Dan White scores low on Openness and Agreeableness, which aligns with his conservative worldview and interpersonal conflict throughout the film. His elevated Neuroticism is the most defining trait, contributing to emotional volatility and ultimately culminating in violent actions. These traits collectively frame White as a character overwhelmed by psychological tension, political frustration, and personal insecurity.

Character Analysis of Anne Kronenberg

Anne Kronenberg emerges in the film as a strong, progressive, and collaborative figure who significantly contributes to Harvey Milk's political movement. Her personality reflects openness to diversity, strong organizational skills, and emotional stability. The following table presents an analysis of her character based on the Big Five dimensions, capturing how her traits support her role in the campaign and interactions with other characters.

Table 3. Big Five Personality Analysis of Anne Kronenberg

Big Five Dimension	Brief Analysis	Scene in the Movie
Openness	Highly open to new experiences and progressive ideas; supports gender equality and LGBT rights.	Joins Milk’s campaign and promotes inclusivity.
Conscientiousness	Highly organized and dedicated; key contributor to campaign strategy.	Manages logistics and communication efforts.
Extraversion	Extroverted and charismatic; easily builds connections.	Engages with diverse groups and community members.
Agreeableness	Empathetic and supportive toward colleagues.	Provides emotional support to Harvey and the team.
Neuroticism	Low; remains composed under pressure.	Handles campaign conflicts with calm and focus.

Anne Kronenberg’s Big Five profile highlights her as an emotionally grounded, open-minded, and pro-social leader. Her high Conscientiousness and Extraversion make her an effective organizer and communicator, while her low Neuroticism enables her to navigate political tension without becoming overwhelmed. Her traits contribute significantly to the stability and cohesion of Harvey Milk’s campaign team.

Character Analysis of Scott Smith

Scott Smith, as Harvey Milk’s partner, provides emotional depth and personal grounding to the narrative. His character reflects a quieter, more introspective personality, shaped by his relationship with Harvey and the intense public scrutiny surrounding their lives. The table below examines Scott Smith’s personality traits through the lens of the Big Five dimensions, illustrating how his characteristics influence both his personal decisions and his relationship dynamics.

Table 4. Big Five Personality Analysis of Scott Smith

Big Five Dimension	Brief Analysis	Scene in the Movie
Openness	Open to new experiences; supports Harvey’s activism despite personal challenges.	Accompanies Harvey in both personal and political environments.
Conscientiousness	Responsible, but sometimes overwhelmed by public pressures.	Chooses to withdraw and focus on personal well-being.
Extraversion	Introverted; prefers private life over public attention.	Avoids media and campaign spotlight.
Agreeableness	Warm and empathetic; shows affection and emotional sensitivity.	Supports Harvey during difficult moments.
Neuroticism	Moderate; experiences internal conflict related to public and private life.	Struggles with tension in their relationship and eventual withdrawal.

Scott Smith’s Big Five profile portrays him as emotionally sensitive, supportive, and introverted. His moderate Neuroticism suggests inner conflict, particularly regarding his discomfort with Harvey’s increasingly public lifestyle. These traits help explain his eventual decision to distance himself from the political spotlight while remaining emotionally connected to Harvey. His character adds a layer of personal vulnerability to the film’s larger political narrative.

Character Analysis of Mayor George Moscone

Mayor George Moscone is depicted as a progressive, collaborative, and stable political leader who plays a crucial role in supporting Harvey Milk’s activism. His leadership style reflects openness to diversity, social reform, and cooperative policymaking. The table below analyzes his personality traits using the Big Five framework, highlighting how his traits shape his political decisions and interactions with other characters.

Table 5. Big Five Personality Analysis of Mayor George Moscone

Big Five Dimension	Brief Analysis	Scene in the Movie
Openness	Open to social and political change; supportive of LGBT rights.	Endorses and collaborates with Harvey Milk.
Conscientiousness	Responsible and dedicated in his role as mayor.	Implements progressive administrative decisions.
Extraversion	Extroverted; active in public and political engagements.	Participates in events and community gatherings.
Agreeableness	Cooperative and empathetic; works well with others.	Shows support in joint projects with Harvey.
Neuroticism	Low; demonstrates emotional stability.	Remains calm amidst political pressure.

Mayor Moscone’s traits reflect those of a socially progressive and emotionally stable leader. His high Openness and Agreeableness align with his commitment to equality and collaborative governance. His Extraversion enables public engagement, while his low Neuroticism supports his ability to manage city-level political challenges without significant emotional distress. These characteristics position him as an essential ally in Harvey Milk’s political journey.

DISCUSSION

The Big Five personality analysis of the main characters in *Milk (Van Sant, 2008)* reveals distinct personality structures that influence both their individual behaviors and interpersonal dynamics. Harvey Milk demonstrates high openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, coupled with moderate neuroticism. These traits reflect his visionary leadership style and proactive advocacy for LGBT rights, as well as his resilience under political pressure (Judge & Bono, 2000; McCrae & John, 1992). His openness enabled him to embrace progressive ideas, while conscientiousness and extraversion facilitated strategic planning, public engagement, and community mobilization. Moderate neuroticism accounts for the emotional challenges he faces, yet his focus on goals demonstrates emotional regulation and determination.

In contrast, Dan White exhibits low openness and agreeableness, combined with high neuroticism. This personality configuration explains his resistance to social change, interpersonal conflict, and eventual impulsive behaviors, culminating in the tragic assassination of Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone. White’s high neuroticism and low agreeableness highlight the detrimental consequences of emotional instability and inflexibility in leadership or organizational settings (Cai & Liu, 2022; Yang, 2023). His character illustrates how maladaptive personality traits can lead to destructive outcomes when combined with sociopolitical power and unaddressed stressors.

Anne Kronenberg exemplifies a highly organized and emotionally stable personality. High conscientiousness and low neuroticism underpin her effectiveness as a campaign manager, while openness and agreeableness support her collaborative approach and empathy toward others. These traits facilitate not only practical campaign logistics but also morale support within the team, illustrating the importance of emotional intelligence and cooperative leadership in social movements

(Antonakis & House, 2014). Kronenberg's character demonstrates how supportive leadership and personal stability are crucial in sustaining high-pressure political initiatives.

Scott Smith presents a more introverted and moderately neurotic profile. His high agreeableness and moderate openness reflect loyalty and emotional support toward Harvey Milk, but his introversion and moderate stress sensitivity lead him to withdraw from public life when demands become overwhelming. Smith's personality highlights the tension between personal well-being and the pressures of activism, demonstrating that personality traits can influence coping strategies and decisions to prioritize private versus public responsibilities (Jiménez et al., 2024).

Mayor George Moscone's personality is characterized by openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and low neuroticism. His cooperative and emotionally stable demeanor enables him to support progressive policies and collaborate effectively with Harvey Milk and other allies. Moscone's traits exemplify how leadership effectiveness is influenced not only by strategic decision-making but also by emotional stability and interpersonal cooperation, reinforcing established links between personality traits and leadership outcomes (Judge & Bono, 2000; Kennedy et al., 2021).

Overall, the comparative analysis highlights the interplay between personality traits, social influence, and leadership effectiveness in both personal and political contexts. The findings confirm that the Big Five personality model provides a valuable lens for understanding character behavior in biographical films, offering insights into how psychological traits drive decision-making, interpersonal conflict, and cooperative strategies. This study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by linking personality psychology, leadership theory, and film analysis, emphasizing the importance of character traits in shaping narrative outcomes and social impact.

CONCLUSION

This study applied the Big Five personality model to analyze the key characters in the biographical film *Milk (Van Sant, 2008)*, providing insights into how personality traits shape behavior, decision-making, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics. Harvey Milk's high openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion, coupled with moderate neuroticism, enabled him to inspire social change, advocate for LGBT rights, and navigate political challenges effectively. In contrast, Dan White's low openness and agreeableness, combined with high neuroticism, contributed to interpersonal conflicts and destructive behaviors. Anne Kronenberg's conscientiousness, emotional stability, and agreeableness facilitated effective campaign management and team support, while Scott Smith's introversion and moderate neuroticism highlighted the personal challenges of balancing private life with public activism. Mayor George Moscone demonstrated emotional stability, openness, and cooperative leadership, reinforcing the link between personality traits and effective governance.

The comparative analysis underscores that personality traits are critical determinants of social influence, leadership effectiveness, and relational dynamics within both personal and political contexts. Applying the Big Five model to cinematic characters provides a structured framework for understanding complex psychological and behavioral patterns, bridging the fields of personality psychology, leadership studies, and film analysis.

This study also contributes to the broader literature by demonstrating the value of systematic personality analysis in biographical cinema, revealing how differences in personality traits shape narrative development, conflict resolution, and social impact. Future research can expand this approach to other biographical films, explore cross-cultural variations in character traits, or integrate additional psychological frameworks, such as moral reasoning or emotional intelligence, to enrich the understanding of leadership and personality in historical and cinematic contexts.

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