Theories of Personality

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Abstract

The study of personality development has seen significant advances in the last two decades. For many years, youth and adult individual differences were studied from separate theoretical standpoints. However, more recent research has indicated that teenagers display personality traits in many of the same ways as adults. These personality traits are moderately stable throughout the life course, but there are important developmental shifts in their expression, structure, and maturation, especially in adolescence. This has resulted in an effort to study youth personality “in its own right” (Tackett, Kushner, De Fruyt, & Mervielde, 2013). Early personality associations with important lifelong outcomes including academic achievement, mental health, and interpersonal relationships further underscore the importance of studying traits in youth. Here we discuss current consensus and controversy on adolescent personality and highlight foundational research on the topic.

Keywords: adolescence, personality, temperament, life outcomes

Main Text:

Traits

Historically, individual differences before the age of 18 have been examined from the perspective of temperament, or what was initially considered the foundation of the more complex phenomenon of personality. This developmentally based approach to the study of traits portrays characteristic differences in children as reflective of underlying biological functioning and reactivity. The most prominent contemporary temperament model includes three broad, “higher-order” traits: surgency/extraversion, effortful control/constraint, and negative affect/negative emotionality (Rothbart & Bates, 2006). This model describes individual differences in children up to the early

adolescent period. According to temperament theory, these earlier foundational traits/tendencies give rise to adult personality. More recent research on personality development, however, suggests that temperament in adolescence is virtually isomorphic to personality (e.g., Tackett et al., 2012, 2013).

Though the study of personality trait development is still in early stages, there is substantial evidence for the validity of the Five Factor Model (FFM), or “Big Five” personality trait structure from the age of 3 years and beyond. This research shows that evidence for a five-factor structure of personality only grows stronger in the teenage years, as children transition to adulthood (Tackett et al., 2012). The FFM dominates adult trait theory in contemporary psychology. Though several trait models preceded it, the Big Five personality taxonomy includes five major dimensions that account for much of the variation in the observable differences in people’s patterns of behavior. These traits are extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness to experience. This framework for describing personality traits is currently seen as a unifying framework for decades of research on individual differences (John & Srivastava, 1999). These five traits were originally derived from lexical analysis of descriptors of adults in western, developed countries, but they have since been found in cultures across the globe. Here we discuss the development of the Big Five personality traits, with special considerations for the period of adolescence.

Conscientiousness/Effortful Control. Conscientiousness describes an individual’s tendencies toward organization, dependability, attentional control, and achievement striving. Relative to other traits, there are few remarkable differences between the behaviors thought to indicate conscientiousness before and after the age of 18. The temperament trait effortful control has been long associated with this personality dimension due to the conceptual similarity between the two; indeed, empirically, this represents the most isomorphic temperament-personality pairing in childhood (Tackett et al., 2013) and potentially adolescence, as well (De Pauw, 2017).

Openness to Experience. In adults, openness to experience reflects a propensity to be adventurous, aesthetically sensitive, interested in intellectual pursuits, and imaginative. In contrast to conscientiousness, youth openness to experience (OE) is one of the most controversial and least understood traits in personality development research. While references to children's intellect, curiosity, and creativity are frequently present in parents' free-descriptions, measurement of this trait in childhood and adolescence has lacked consistency. If measures include openness in developmental personality taxonomies at all, behaviors included typically overemphasize intellect in their measurement of OE – a facet which only makes up a portion of the adult trait (Tackett et al., 2012). Further, some researchers have proposed that OE may not emerge as a separable personality trait until the teenage years. However, recent research on the construct validity of developmental OE has indicated not only that it can be recovered reliably in childhood and early adolescence, but that it takes on a three-facet structure. These facets include intellect, imagination, and sensitivity (Herzhoff & Tackett, 2012). Though facets of temperament are included in this measurement model, there is no higher-order temperament trait that corresponds to OE in temperament inventories. Since research on the development of this trait is limited, much remains to be learned about openness to experience in adolescence.

Agreeableness. In adults, agreeableness describes individual differences in warmth, trust, altruism, generosity, and low aggression (Avshalom Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Similarly, parents commonly use these descriptors in reference to their teens, and though child agreeableness as a factor looks somewhat different from its adult counterpart, this trait undergoes significant development in adolescence. Child agreeableness (sometimes termed benevolence or affiliation) measures typically over-emphasize antagonistic and strong-willed behaviors (which reflect *low* agreeableness), and these appear to be particularly stable and cross-culturally valid indicators of the trait (Tackett et al., 2012). Prosocial tendencies such as warmth and positive social contact have

stronger correlations with facets of extraversion and may not play as strong a role in measurement of child agreeableness as they do in adults. However, by early adolescence, teenage agreeableness begins to look more similar to that of adults, including prosocial indicators alongside antisocial ones (Tackett et al., 2012). Though this trait undergoes maturation during the adolescent period, agreeableness in youth tends to covary more highly with neuroticism or negative affect than it does in adults. This finding is reflected in research on the structure of temperament, as temperament inventories lack a higher-order factor akin the agreeableness of personality measures. Taken together, this suggests that though the characteristic social features of agreeableness become more adult-like in adolescence, emotional maturation is still not yet complete. More work is needed to better understand at what time in development agreeableness emerges as a fully distinct adult trait.

Neuroticism/Negative Affectivity. In adults, neuroticism describes trait differences in how often a person experiences negative affect such as guilt, shame, self-consciousness, anger, depression, and worry. However, parental reports of teen neuroticism are inconsistent in the extent to which they capture all of these descriptors. The developmental timing of complex psychological processes (such as rumination), limited teenage disclosure to parents, and the *internal* nature of many negative emotions make measurement of this trait in youth difficult. Thus, the content coverage of early adolescent neuroticism in particular may be limited by a reliance on parent informants for youth personality ratings. However, fear and irritability are negative emotional experiences that are readily observable from outside perspectives, and as such, are frequently emphasized in developmental personality measures of neuroticism. The corresponding temperament trait, negative affectivity, is also characterized primarily by fear and irritability. Further research is needed to clarify the structure and content of youth neuroticism and negative affectivity.

Extraversion/Surgency. In adults, trait extraversion reflects the extent to which a person is happy, outgoing, enthusiastic, and enjoys the company of other people. People who are labeled

“extraverted” also tend to be described as physically active, lively, and energetic. The descriptors that capture extraversion are much the same between adults and adolescents. The corresponding temperament construct, surgency, is defined by many of these same features, as well. However, another component of extraversion in adults – social dominance or adaptive assertiveness – is almost always missing from developmental measures of extraversion. Further, some research has suggested that activity level, while considered a facet of extraversion in adults, may constitute a sixth personality factor in children and early adolescents (collectively these traits are referred to as the “Little Six”; De Pauw, 2017). Activity level is also sometimes seen as a blend of both physical activity and striving for other kinds of high-intensity stimulation, such as rough games or suspenseful TV shows (De Pauw, 2017). Activity level has been researched less as a separate personality trait, as the preliminary evidence to suggest that it is distinct from extraversion has been recovered relatively recently. Therefore, little is known about what life outcomes this trait may predict, and when in development it may merge with the sociability/positive affect dimension of extraversion (if it is a meaningfully distinct trait prior to young adulthood). This presents an area of opportunity for future investigation in personality/temperament research.

Hierarchical Structure

Personality traits in adults, teenagers, and children conform to a hierarchical structure, which incorporates both broad traits (such as the Big Five) and more narrowly defined, specific behavioral traits (also called facets) subsumed under these broader traits. The Big Five, Little Six, and three-factor temperament trait taxonomies represent just a few ways of conceptualizing broad, higher-order personality traits in childhood. Just as specific individual characteristics (e.g. “likes to attend lively parties” and “makes friends easily”) tend to correlate under higher-order latent factors of personality (e.g. extraversion), so do factors of personality correlate to form superordinate factors. The study of the hierarchical structure of personality is especially germane to our understanding of

how traits develop in adolescents. The relationships between personality traits are themselves an essential element in the study of individual differences; for example, it is not enough to know that a youth is high on extraversion – the impulsive (low on conscientiousness) extraverted teenager is likely to relate to his/her peers very differently from the highly controlled extraverted teenager. While many of these inter-trait relationships are stable across the lifespan, correlations between traits may vary depending on the developmental epoch under consideration. The identification of a unified, hierarchical structure of traits allows researchers to integrate findings across studies using different personality taxonomies.

In the hierarchy of personality traits, the broadest distinction between individual differences accounts for two meta-traits, called α and β . This structure first emerged in adult trait research, however this finding has been replicated in children and adolescents, as well (Markon, Krueger, & Watson, 2005; Tackett et al., 2012). α is a broad trait that is defined by patterns of behavior recognizable in a FFM framework as low conscientiousness, high neuroticism, and low agreeableness. α has often been conceptualized as maladjustment, or alternatively, as avoidance orientation. β , however, is a trait that captures elements of positive emotionality, or FFM extraversion and (to a lesser extent) openness to experience. This trait, sometimes also referred to as “Plasticity” may also be interpreted as an index of positive adjustment or approach orientation. Much like positive and negative affect from the state (rather than trait) literature, α and β seem to be relatively uncorrelated in adults (Markon et al., 2005). Though α and β are broadly replicated in children and adolescents, there are developmental considerations for their conceptualization.

In youth especially, the traits captured by α indeed seem to be less differentiated than in adults. Factor analytic studies of parental free-descriptions find that not only is agreeableness more strongly correlated with neuroticism in youth, but that it is also more strongly associated with

conscientiousness in younger children. By the early teenage years, correlations between conscientiousness and agreeableness/neuroticism attenuate to adult levels, the latter two traits remain relatively inextricable until late adolescence. Indeed, these studies sometimes find that pure neuroticism is the least cross-culturally valid factor of the Big Five in youth, while a blend of agreeableness and neuroticism (A/N) is often recovered (Tackett et al., 2012).

Further levels of analysis decompose traits into three factors, abstracting them at an intermediate level. Though temperament is not the only three-trait individual difference model, it is certainly the most influential in the realm of youth dispositions. This three-factor model is conceptually paralleled in research on the hierarchical structure of personality in adults. At the three-trait level of analysis, α can be decomposed into facets of negative emotionality and disinhibition, while β is relatively unchanged (Markon et al., 2005). These traits bear surface similarities to negative affectivity, (low) effortful control, and surgency, respectively. However, despite their commonality, these intermediate traits have important differences in content between youth and adults.

While disinhibition in adulthood indexes both conscientiousness and agreeableness as separate from neuroticism (or negative emotionality), this finding does not hold in youth. Both temperament research and factor analytic studies of personality development find that internally- and externally- directed negative emotions tend to go hand-in-hand among children and teens across a variety of cultures, as shown by N and A's higher correlation. While the causes of this difference between youth and adult personality structure are not fully understood, they may be either methodological (e.g. due to difficulty in capturing inwardly expressed neuroticism) or psychobiological (e.g. from the lack of self-regulatory abilities tied to prefrontal immaturity in youth; DeYoung, Hirsh, Shane, & Papademetris, 2010).

In adults, at the four-factor level, negative emotionality is characterized only by patterns of negative emotional experiences, while disinhibition splits into agreeableness (or rather, its reverse -

antagonistic disinhibition) and conscientiousness (or unconscientious disinhibition). Positive emotionality is not differentiated until the five-factor level, at which point extraversion and openness become distinct. The four-factor structure of teenage personality is largely consistent with that found in adults, aside from the relatively larger correlation between A and N in teens.

Though the Big Five trait taxonomy is largely valid and consistent in late adolescence and beyond, research on child personality finds that there are important developmental considerations in the study of personality structure. Big Five traits are, overall, more correlated in young children and become more differentiated until late adolescence. Even this characterization is too simplistic, however, as extraversion is an exception. The push for a sixth factor of child personality, activity level, results from the greater differentiation between facets of extraversion in children and early adolescents. Taken together, these results show how the hierarchical structure of personality is an important component in building our understanding of the development of personality in adolescence.

Stability and Change

Personality traits are, by definition, individual differences that are consistent and enduring within each individual. However, people clearly change throughout the course of their lives. When do people become stable and consistent in their patterns of behavior? How do their personalities change, and when do these shifts occur? Research on personality development shows evidence of both stability and change across adolescence.

Stability. To investigate the intra-individual consistency of traits across development, researchers generally examine each trait's rank-order stability. Rank-order stability reflects a person's ranking on a given trait relative to their peers, and how this ranking may endure over developmental epochs. This is generally measured by test-retest correlations for individuals measured longitudinally. Across domains, research shows that personality rank-order stability is moderate in magnitude, and

that it increases with age until midlife. This stability does not differ greatly between traits in the FFM (Avshalom Caspi et al., 2005). Trait change, however, has a more complex story.

Change. Mean-level changes are analyzed to determine how traits may change between developmental epochs. The differences may be examined cross-sectionally, by comparing average trait scores of different age cohorts, or longitudinally, by tracking a single cohort's changes in average trait scores over time. This gives some insight into how traits may change as a result of cognitive, social, and biological development. Some research has suggested that personality traits conform to the “maturity principle”, or the trend of socially advantageous traits to increase over development, while negative aspects of personality decline (Avshalom Caspi et al., 2005). For example, this theory advances that conscientiousness and agreeableness (traits which confer social and economic advantages) steadily increase with age, while neuroticism (associated with many negative life outcomes) declines. However, research on children and adolescents has shown a much more complicated picture. Unlike rank-order stability, mean-level changes differ widely by trait, and for some traits, even further by gender. Here, we discuss each trait in the FFM framework and current findings on mean-level changes in the adolescent period.

Overall, conscientiousness and agreeableness increase from childhood to late adulthood. However, they do not do so in a linear fashion, as the maturity principle would suggest. While overall C and A increase over the lifetime, these traits sharply decrease in adolescence. This decline is temporary, however, as C and A increase sharply from adolescence to young adulthood to return to pre-teenage levels, then steadily show gains until midlife (near age 60). This pattern is similar for girls and boys, though women tend to be higher in mean-level conscientiousness and agreeableness across the lifespan. Agreeableness trends to not differ by facet, while conscientiousness trends do. The decreases in C in adolescence seem to be more dramatic for the self-discipline facet, while

orderliness declines with less intensity. Overall, conscientiousness and agreeableness seem not to conform to the maturity principle, but rather to a “disruption hypothesis” (Soto & Tackett, 2015).

Openness to experience has a more complicated developmental trajectory than conscientiousness and agreeableness. Across the lifespan, openness moderately increases, but this trend is curvilinear. While adolescents do tend to be lower on openness than children, this difference is not so dramatic as with conscientiousness and agreeableness. Here, gender differences in overall openness are also more complex. In middle childhood, boys and girls tend to score relatively equivalently on openness, but in early adulthood (around age 20), they tend to diverge. Through the majority of adulthood, men tend to be higher on openness than women. When this trait is examined at the facet level, however, girls score higher on openness to aesthetics, while boys are more ideologically open. Further, openness to ideas declines most dramatically in late adolescent girls, though openness to aesthetics increases in a relatively linear fashion for both boys and girls (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). These trends portray the development of openness as a complicated process, perhaps owing to the complicated nature of the trait itself.

Neuroticism is the trait most marked by gender differences in development, so much so that it is not well characterized by any overall trend in development. Until middle childhood, boys and girls are roughly equal in their tendencies to experience negative emotions. However, around puberty, there is a drastic divergence in male and female neuroticism trends. While boys remain relatively stable on this dimension throughout their life with modest decreases overall, girls show a curvilinear trend. In adolescence, girls become much more neurotic and remain so until midlife. Thereafter, women’s neuroticism decreases until later adulthood, and the gender gap in this trait therefore becomes much less pronounced. When examined at the facet level, both anxious and depressive neuroticism increase sharply for women in the teenage years, and anxiety remains high until adulthood. Female depression, however, shows another peak in early adulthood (around the

mid-20's) before declining again until later life. Male anxiety and depression do not show this teenage peak, though depressive neuroticism in men does increase in early adulthood before once again declining. In fact, men and women's depression facet scores appear to converge sometime around midlife, though their mean anxiety levels remain disparate into old age (Soto et al., 2011; Soto & Tackett, 2015). From this evidence, neuroticism seems clearly not to conform to the maturity principle.

By comparison, extraversion is a trait with a fairly simple developmental trajectory. Overall, there is a large decline in extraversion from middle childhood to adolescence, and it remains quite stable from that point onward. Though there are no gender differences in this trait in early life, women tend to be modestly more extraverted than men throughout the period from adolescence to old age. Young men show a sharp decline in extraversion in adolescence, while women's extraversion decreases less dramatically during this time. Extraversion's age effects show some specificity in facets in this developmental epoch, as well. While assertiveness declines until the teenage years before it levels off, there is a much steeper decline in the facet activity during this early period (Soto & Tackett, 2015). Taken together, findings on mean-level changes in personality traits do not ubiquitously support the maturity principle, or any other single descriptor of personality development. Mean-level changes likely reflect a complex developmental process subject to many sources of influence (e.g. hormonal, cognitive, and social). Personality change is therefore best understood through a developmentally-informed lens.

Outcomes

Personality traits in adolescence can serve important descriptive functions to tell us what an individual is like. More than this, however, personality traits shape how a teenager interacts with their world and how their world interacts with them. There are several important domains of life

outcomes associated with personality traits in youth – here we will discuss academic outcomes, interpersonal relationship functioning, and psychopathology.

Academic Outcomes. The relationships between personality traits in youth and various academic outcomes have been the subject of extensive study, with mixed results. Research has examined the association of personality traits with grades, standardized test scores, classroom behaviors, motivation, and other academically relevant variables. Interestingly, the associations between personality traits and academic outcomes are not consistent across all academic variables (e.g., grades vs. test scores).

Conscientiousness is the trait most robustly positively associated with grades (Poropat, 2014). This association was originally found in a large meta-analysis of primary school children, but it has since been found in individual studies ranging from elementary school to college students. Research has also found a positive association between conscientiousness in youth and academically relevant behaviors such as homework completion, school attendance, and motivation. Additionally, conscientiousness is negatively associated with procrastination, providing a coherent picture of conscientiousness as a positive influence on academic success (Lubbers, Van Der Werf, Kuyper, & Hendriks, 2010).

Openness is the trait with the second strongest evidence for relationships with academically relevant behaviors. It has also been positively associated with grades in a meta-analysis (Poropat, 2014), along with several individual studies ranging across ages. However, there are also several studies which fail to find an association between grades and openness in older (high school and college aged) students (Spengler, Lüdtke, Martin, & Brunner, 2013). Openness is the only trait to have a positive association with standardized test scores. In addition to grades and test scores, openness has been positively associated with academically relevant behaviors including motivation,

school attendance, and class participation. It has not been investigated in association with homework completion, as this trait is often omitted in studies of personality in youth.

Findings are less clear for the remaining three traits. Extraversion has been positively associated with grades (Poropat, 2014), but other research has found null or negative associations. Extraversion has been positively associated with classroom participation (Avner Caspi, Chajut, Saporta, & Beyth-Marom, 2006), but studies have failed to find associations between extraversion and any other academic outcomes (homework completion, motivation, standardized test scores). Like conscientiousness, extraversion is negatively related to procrastination (Lubbers et al., 2010). Agreeableness has been positively associated with grades, motivation, and attendance, although there are also studies that fail to find each of these relationships. In contrast, agreeableness has been negatively associated with standardized test scores (Spengler et al., 2013) and with procrastination (Lubbers et al., 2010). Neuroticism is, overall, negatively correlated with academic outcomes including grades, achievement tests, motivation, homework completion, and classroom participation, as well as being positively associated with procrastination. This again provides a coherent narrative of trait-outcome relationships, but with neuroticism as a negative influence on academic success.

Interpersonal Functioning. In addition to academic variables, personality traits shape a teenager's social world, too. Particularly in adolescence, when social relationships become increasingly salient, the association between personality and interpersonal functioning is an important area of study. Personality traits not only dictate how individuals interact with those around them, they also influence how others may perceive and interact with them. These bidirectional influences are important for several domains of interpersonal functioning including intimate relationships, friendships, and relational aggression (Smack, Kushner, & Tackett, 2015; Tackett, Kushner, Herzhoff, Smack, & Reardon, 2014). Potentially because the development of social competence encompasses such a wide range of skills, every higher-order trait is an important

predictor of social competence (Shiner & Caspi, 2003). High agreeableness and extraversion are positive predictors of friendship quality, while high neuroticism and low conscientiousness predict more social difficulties. Similarly, the combination of high neuroticism, low agreeableness and low conscientiousness predicts relational aggression (Tackett et al., 2014). These same patterns are relevant for intimate relationships in adolescents, such that an individual's high level of negative emotionality was found to predict poorer relationship quality across several partners (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2002). Thus, the dynamic relationship between personality, environment, and social behaviors profoundly impacts teenagers' developmental context.

Psychopathology. Along with normative developmental processes such as friendships, academics, and parenting, personality is also central to the development of psychopathology in youth. Research has established typical trait profiles for both externalizing (e.g., conduct problems, aggression, and rule-breaking) and internalizing (e.g., anxiety and depression) disorders. Youth high in externalizing problems are characterized by patterns of high neuroticism and low self-regulatory traits (agreeableness and conscientiousness). Youth high in internalizing problems, in contrast, are characterized by patterns of low extraversion and high neuroticism (Tackett et al., 2013).

It is important to recognize that the influence of personality on psychopathology reflects a dynamic process where each may exert reciprocal influence on the other. In fact, there have been five different models of association put forth for how personality and psychopathology may influence one another in youth, adapted from adult theories (Shiner & Caspi, 2003). First, the spectrum model posits that psychopathology is an extreme manifestation of a given personality trait. Second, the vulnerability model states that personality traits or clusters of traits may predispose an individual to be more likely to develop certain forms of psychopathology over time. Third, the resilience model states that personality may have the opposite influence, and it might act as a protective factor against the development of psychopathology in the face of life stressors. Fourth,

the pathoplasty model suggests that personality may influence the course and manifestation of psychopathology, even if it does not directly contribute to it. Finally, the scar model suggests that the experience of psychopathology may leave lasting impressions on youth in ways that alter their personality functioning. The variety in mechanistic explanations put forth demonstrates that the relationships between personality and psychopathology has the potential to be bidirectional and quite complex across time, though work to illustrate these various models has not been done uniformly. Further research is needed to test these theories specifically in the period of adolescence, as well as to understand the mechanisms of these relationships.

Conclusion

Personality research investigates what makes people different from one another, how those distinctions arise, and what the consequences of those differences are. In order to understand individual differences in personality, the structure, stability, and change of traits must be considered from a developmentally-informed lens. Personality traits have many similarities between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, but hormonal, cognitive, and social developmental processes result in many differences, as well. These developmental shifts are particularly relevant for personality in the adolescent period, as puberty marks a period of dramatic biological and psychological maturation. A thorough understanding of these developmental specificities is critical, given personality's association with many of the life outcomes we consider most important for teens, such as academic success, mental health, and social functioning. In conclusion, while recent decades have yielded a large amount of informative research on adolescent personality, much is still left to be known. We look forward to future research exploring the measurement, organization, and consequences of youth personality traits.

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