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Personality changes during adolescence: the role of gender and pubertal development

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Abstract

This study assessed how personality dimensions evolve during adolescence and how they are affected by gender and pubertal development. To this end, we used the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire and Tanner's stages to measure personality and pubertal development, respectively, of 578 schoolchildren of 10 and 11 years old over a period of five years. The results indicated that personality was not stable in the age range analyzed and that these changes were independent of pubertal stages. Moreover, gender had significant effects on psychoticism and antisocial behaviour, and an interactive effect with age on neuroticism, which may be related to the increase in certain pathologies.

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1. Introduction

Behavioral differences between the sexes begin at a very early age (Canals, Fernández-Ballart, & Esparó, 2003). As Nugent and Brazelton pointed out (2000), the infant has well-established behavioral endowments at birth. These individual differences have a genetic basis but also contain environmental influences, including both pre- and postnatal experiences. Early temperamental traits contribute to the future development of personality. Children's maturation makes it possible for new behaviors to develop and be expressed, which may result in an evolution of the personality structure over development (Shiner, Tellegen, & Masten, 2001). However, many questions arise about the evolution of personality: is personality steady across the life span?; at which developmental stage do changes begin?; do personality changes affect boys and girls in the same way and at the same age?

There is a considerable amount of research that attempts to determine both when and why some of the traits of personality evolve. Several longitudinal studies examine the stability of personality in certain periods of life and explore the biological and social factors which can influence changes in personality (Kitamura & Fujihara, 2003; Maiden, Peterson, Caya, & Hayslip, 2003; Roy, 2002). However, few of these studies are based on Eysenck's model (three-factor system) or evaluate the age of childhood or adolescence. Most of the research has been conducted with the five-factor model, which adds Agreeableness and Openness to experience to the other three dimensions (Extraversion or Positive Emotionality, Neuroticism or Negative Emotionality, and Conscientiousness or Constraint). Lamb, Chuang, Wessels, Broberg, and Hwang (2002) followed 102 children between 2.3 and 15.2 years of age and found that over time children became less extraverted, more agreeable and more conscientious according to the California Child Q-Set. Neuroticism and openness to experience increased at the beginning of adolescence, although openness then decreased. Likewise, McCrae et al. (2002) found, using the Revised NEO Personality Inventory, that openness to experience increased in both boys and girls during adolescence, but neuroticism appeared to increase in girls and extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness were stable. Bratko (2002) administered the EPQ to 262 young adults at two measurement points and showed that neuroticism significantly decreased, while extraversion scores decreased slightly and there were no changes in psychoticism. Other research in adulthood found that neuroticism declined in women but did not change in men (Srivastasa, Jonh, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). All these data indicate that although personality traits can undergo changes in several periods of life, the adolescent years can be a vulnerable period of change. Psychopathology also increases in this period and important epidemiological changes emerge between genders. From this pathological perspective, puberty has been considered to be a critical period for the onset of many disorders (Graber, Lewinsohn, Seeley, & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Laitinen-Krispijn, Van der Ende, Hazebroek-Kampschreur, & Verhulst, 1999). The relevance of puberty may be explained by hormonal changes or by the impact that hormonal maturation can have on adolescents' relationships with their parents and peers and on their own self-perception. However, although there is evidence to suggest that personality is a predictor of psychological problems, no studies have investigated how puberty affects the development of personality in adolescence. We have only found the work of Markey, Markey, and Tinsley (2003) that investigated whether girls' pubertal development moderated any of the relations between their personality traits and their participation in risky behaviors.

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