



## Full Length Article

# Predictors of volitional personality change in younger and older adults: Response surface analyses signify the complementary perspectives of the self and knowledgeable others <sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 30 January 2017

Revised 12 July 2017

Accepted 6 August 2017

Available online 10 August 2017

## Keywords:

Volitional personality development

Change goals

Other-report

Characteristic adaptation

Big Five

Response surface analysis

## ABSTRACT

Goals to change personality traits have been linked to self-rated Big Five traits. Extending previous research, we investigated the associations between change goals and diverse personality characteristics (e.g., self-esteem), other-rated Big Five traits, and self-other agreement in an age-heterogeneous sample ( $N = 378$ ). Results replicated previous associations of change goals with age and self-rated traits. Additionally, change goals were stronger when others rated a person's traits as low and when self-other agreement about traits was greater for extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Associations of additional personality characteristics with change goals diminished when we controlled for the Big Five traits. We conclude that goals to change personality traits primarily reflect the perspective of the self and, for some traits, of knowledgeable others.

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## 1. Introduction

People's personality traits exhibit continuity and change across the entire lifespan (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008). In part, people actively shape this development by setting goals to maintain or change certain characteristics. Such self-regulated or volitional personality development is currently discussed as one mechanism that contributes to the lifelong development of personality (Denissen, van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013; Hudson & Fraley, 2015, 2016b; Wrzus & Roberts, 2016). However, little is known about why people set goals to change themselves<sup>1</sup> (Hudson & Roberts, 2014). Previous research has shown that goals to change depend on the current self-reported trait level (Hudson & Fraley, 2015, 2016a). For example, with lower self-perceived extraversion, the goal to increase in extraversion is more pronounced. Researchers have yet to determine whether setting goals to change is a purely

subjective phenomenon (e.g., I think I am shy and thus I want to be more extraverted) or whether others' perspectives play a role as well (e.g., Others tell me I am shy, and therefore I want to be more extraverted, especially when I agree that I am shy).

To fill this gap, we investigated the role of self- and other-reported Big Five traits in change goals in an age-heterogeneous sample. Specifically, in younger and older adults, we examined whether self- and other-perceptions that agree are associated with stronger change goals than trait perceptions that disagree. In addition, we examined more domain-specific predictors beyond the Big Five traits (e.g., self-esteem and entity orientation) as well as whether the effects of the predictors varied with age. This enabled us to provide a comprehensive picture of why and when people want to change or maintain certain traits.

### 1.1. Current knowledge on goals to change or maintain personality traits

In general, goals are future states that a person wants or feels obliged to achieve (Ryan, Sheldon, Kasser, & Deci, 1996). Given the broad agreement that personality traits can be organized in terms of the Big Five dimensions—emotional stability (the inverse of neuroticism), conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion,

<sup>☆</sup> This research was supported by the German Research Foundation (Grant WR 160/1-1 to Cornelia Wrzus).

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<sup>1</sup> In this manuscript, the terms *change goals* and *goals to change* are used interchangeably and refer to goals to change or maintain one's personality traits.

and openness to experience (Goldberg, 1993; John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008)—Hudson and Roberts (2014) showed that goals to change personality traits can be organized within the same dimensions. Even when people freely described goals to change personality, the Five Factor structure emerged except for openness (Baranski, Morse, & Dunlop, 2016).

In recent studies, the vast majority of people expressed goals to change aspects of their personality and generally wanted to become more emotionally stable, extraverted, open, agreeable, and conscientious (Baranski et al., 2016; Hudson & Fraley, 2015, 2016b; Hudson & Roberts, 2014; Robinson, Nofle, Guo, Asadi, & Zhang, 2015). Hudson and Roberts (2014) emphasized the importance of experiencing discrepancies between actual and desired future traits as an antecedent of change goals (see also Higgins, 1987). Similarly, a recent framework for self-regulated personality change (Hennecke, Bleidorn, Denissen, & Wood, 2014) proposed that changing trait-related behavior needs to be considered necessary or desirable (i.e., motivated) and feasible to enact behavioral changes, which, after becoming habitual, might change latent traits. Thus, initial studies investigated current trait levels as reasons for why trait changes are considered necessary or desirable (Hudson & Fraley, 2015; Hudson & Roberts, 2014; Robinson et al., 2015). People might want to increase traits that are less pronounced because higher values on the aforementioned Big Five personality traits are partly socially desirable (Dunlop, Telford, & Morrison, 2012). Accordingly, lower self-reported Big Five trait levels were consistently associated with stronger goals to change the trait (Hudson & Fraley, 2015, 2016b; Hudson & Roberts, 2014; Robinson et al., 2015).

Personality development has been found to be most prominent in young adulthood (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Therefore, goals to change personality might also be most prevalent in young adulthood. Supporting this assumption, for 6800 adults between the ages of 18 and 70, goals to change traits were generally less pronounced in older participants (Hudson & Fraley, 2016b). The age differences were especially prominent for conscientiousness, emotional stability, and extraversion. Nonetheless, change goals were prevalent, albeit weaker, in later life, with, for example, 85% of participants at age 70 expressing goals to change their conscientiousness (Hudson & Fraley, 2016b). Yet previous studies relied on self-reported traits and change goals, inviting the questions of whether associations between traits and change goals arise from common report bias and whether such associations would also exist if traits were measured differently, for example, with observer reports. Hence, considering such an outside perspective would help to address this open question and to provide information on whether change goals are related only to self-perceived levels of personality traits or more generally to trait levels, irrespective of how the traits are assessed.

### 1.2. Self- and other-perspectives on traits and goals to change

People can provide valid and unique information about their personality because they have access to a great quantity (e.g., due to their access to a long time span and many diverse situations) and quality (e.g., due to their access to intrapsychic processes) of trait-relevant data (McDonald, 2008; Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). However, people's perception of their own personality may also include biases and blind spots due to processes such as consistency seeking and self-enhancement (Back & Vazire, 2012; John & Robins, 1994; Kwan, John, Kenny, Bond, & Robins, 2004; Paulhus & Vazire, 2007). Other people (e.g., friends or family) may provide complementary and unique information (Vazire & Carlson, 2011). Although such other-ratings may also suffer from biases (e.g., enhancement bias, fundamental attribution error)

and may be based on less information (McDonald, 2008), they have been shown to be accurate, valid, and incrementally useful in predicting personality outcomes (Vazire, 2006; Vazire & Mehl, 2008).

Regarding change goals, others' perceptions may provide another view on a person's "real" trait level (Back & Vazire, 2012). Because there is no direct, unbiased measure of the "real" trait level, it is important to consider multiple sources (e.g., self- and other-ratings) that might provide corresponding or complementary information about a person's personality traits. In addition, close, knowledgeable others may also influence goals to change if they provide feedback on a person's current and prospectively desired personality (Taylor, 2006). In social interactions, such close others perceive a person's personality through the person's behavior and might communicate both the perceived and the desired personality (Back et al., 2011; Funder, 1995; Vazire, 2010). The person might react to how knowledgeable others perceive her, so that the feedback might alter goals to change one's personality (Back et al., 2011). Aside from directly providing explicit feedback, others may interact with a person according to their perceptions of the person's personality and thus provide more indirect feedback. In turn, the person could use such (behavioral) interactions with others to form a meta-perception that may then form the basis for evaluating the need for personality change (Back & Vazire, 2012; Back et al., 2011). For example, if others perceive a person as shy or reserved, they may make fewer efforts to start a conversation. The experience of such situations and indirect social feedback may then foster the person's self-perception of being shy so that the person might thus desire personality change.

A person and his or her knowledgeable others might agree or disagree in their perceptions of that person's personality traits. This may lead to *self- and other-ratings that agree more* (e.g., my friends and I agree on my level of extraversion) or less, with *disagreements* taking two forms: *higher self- than other-ratings* (e.g., I think I am more extraverted than my friends think I am) or *lower self- than other-ratings* (e.g., I think I am less extraverted than my friends think I am; Atwater, Ostroff, Yammarino, & Fleenor, 1998; Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). Most literature on the consequences of self-other agreement comes from leadership research (for an overview, see Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010). For example, leaders who over- or underestimate their effectiveness relative to how others rate their effectiveness misjudge their own strengths and deficits (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997). At the same time, leaders who overestimate themselves fail to set developmental goals to overcome their deficits (Atwater & Yammarino, 1997; Bass & Yammarino, 1991). Individuals who underestimate themselves may be interested in self-development but may lack the aspirations and self-efficacy to set high goals (London & Smither, 1995). Thus, a rather accurate self-rating (i.e., self- and other-ratings that agree) of oneself seems important for realistic goal setting and goal accomplishment (London & Smither, 1995; Taylor, 2006).

Translating these findings into the research on goals to change personality, one could expect that agreement between a person and others regarding the person's traits would be associated with stronger goals to change traits compared with when the person and others disagree because views (i.e., ratings) that agree might better reflect the "real" trait level. In contrast, people with higher self- than other-ratings might neglect their weaknesses, give more weight to their own perception of strengths, and thus set lower change goals. For example, others may provide direct feedback or behave in a manner that corresponds with their impression that a person is not very extraverted, but the person might still hold the belief she more extraverted than others think she is. Thus, the person may find it unnecessary to try to become more extraverted. Also, people with lower self- than other-ratings may be open about their assumed weaknesses but at the same time lack

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