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Do you see my growth? Two longitudinal studies on personality development from childhood to young adulthood from multiple perspectives ☆

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ABSTRACT

Personality developmental studies typically rely on single reporter data, while multi-informant studies are rare. In two longitudinal studies, the present investigation examined inter-judge differences in the development of the Big Five personality traits from childhood to young adulthood. Study 1 investigated personality development as judged by the self and parents from age 12 to 17 to 29 (N = 186). Study 2 investigated personality development annually from age 12 to 18 as judged by the self, and both parents and siblings (N = 574). Results showed personality maturation from childhood to young adulthood with disruptions during adolescence. Only parent-reports indicated maturation in adolescents' negative affectivity (decreases in N), while self-reports indicated maturation in self-regulatory traits (increases in A and C).

1. Introduction

Personality traits refer to the relatively enduring inter-individual differences in the tendency to feel, think, and behave (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008).[1] On the one hand, a certain degree of stability is what makes personality traits conceptually distinct from states (Denissen, van Aken, & Roberts, 2011). On the other hand, despite this relative stability, previous research has shown that personality is susceptible to change across the entire life span, especially during young age (e.g., Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

Studies on the development of personality traits have bloomed in the last years (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011; for an overview, see Denissen, 2014). However, the majority of these studies have focused on adulthood, whereas personality development from childhood to young adulthood remains relatively understudied. This is surprising, given that childhood personality predicts a variety of crucial future outcomes, such as parenting (Van den Akker, Deković, Asscher, & Prinzie, 2014), internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Denissen, Asendorpf, & van Aken, 2008), and educational and occupational success (Asendorpf, Denissen, & van Aken, 2008). In addition, personality development during childhood and adolescence contains key differences from personality development during adulthood, thus requiring unique scientific attention (Soto & Tackett, 2015).

Most previous studies have relied exclusively on either parent-, teacher-, or self-reports, leaving it unclear whether similar developmental patterns are found when examining personality from multiple perspectives. Cross-sectional studies have shown that judges differ considerably in the information they rely on for personality judgments (Connelly & Ones, 2010; Vazire, 2010). Importantly, there is no single perspective from which a person is known best, rather, both the self and others possess unique information (Vazire & Mehl, 2008). Therefore, multiple informants are needed to capture different perspectives of the developing individuals. The current paper used two longitudinal studies to examine in what way the mean-level change and rank-order stability of the

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[1] Although this definition could technically also include mental abilities, ability, and temperamental traits - which were historically covered in relatively separate literature - in the current paper we focus on the development of personality traits.

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Big Five personality traits from childhood to early adulthood differ depending on the judge,[2] and the level of self-other agreement.

Previous studies have shown many more substantial changes in personality from childhood to young adulthood compared to the later ages, reflected in both rank-order stability and mean-level change. Rank-order stability reflects whether groups of people maintain their relative placement to each other on personality traits over time. A classic meta-analysis based on 152 longitudinal studies showed that rank-order stabilities were moderate during early childhood and adolescence, and large from college years to old age (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). A more recent meta-analysis (Ferguson, 2010) confirmed the significantly lower rank-order stability from childhood to young adulthood, and further recommended the consideration of measurement error when investigating rank-order stability.

Another type of change - mean-level change - reflects the average amount of change in the population as a whole, independent of individual differences. A meta-analysis of 92 longitudinal studies (Roberts et al., 2006) showed that people, on average, increased in social dominance (a facet of extraversion) and conscientiousness and decreased in neuroticism, especially during young adulthood (age 20–40). Moreover, people increased on social vitality (another facet of extraversion) and openness in adolescence, but then decreased in both of these domains during old age. Agreeableness showed no mean-level change until old age (after age 50), when it increased.

Recent theoretical frameworks have aimed to describe developmental patterns in these results. The "maturity principle" refers to the finding that individuals tend to become more conscientious, more agreeable, and less neurotic with age (Bleidorn et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2008). However, the maturity principle was based on findings focusing on adults, and more recent studies have shown that personality development during adolescence is more in accordance with the disruption hypothesis (Denissen, van Aken, Penke, & Wood, 2013; Soto & Tackett, 2015). The disruption hypothesis suggests that the biological, social, and psychological transitions from childhood to adolescence are accompanied by temporary dips in some aspects of personality maturity, thus showing a temporary deviation from the maturity principle during adolescence (Denissen et al., 2013; Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Van den Akker et al., 2014).

Although these recent studies have provided valuable insights into developmental patterns of personality during young age, they have typically relied on single-reporter data, while multi-informant studies are rare. However, cross-sectional studies have shown that judges differ considerably in their judgment of personality traits. The Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model (the SOKA Model; Vazire, 2010) advocates that judges vary considerably in their information and motivation for personality judgments. Therefore, personality judgment might be, at least to some degree, a social construction. Transferring this to a developmental framework, children's personality maturation and the possible disruption of this maturation during adolescence might be observed differently by different judges.

The constructivist perspective and the realistic perspective, regardless of their different assumptions of the degree to which "the true" personality exists, both provide support for this notion. Studies from a more constructivist perspective maintain that alternative personality judgments are both valid, since each reflects accurately what this judge perceives (e.g., John & Robins, 1993). Studies from a more realistic perspective maintain that valid cues need to be available and used, in order to make *accurate* personality judgment. However, the availability and usage of valid cues are almost always not perfectly sufficient, and then personality judgments are influenced by various heuristics (e.g., Funder, 1995), such as convenient social comparisons (Wood, Brown, Maltby, & Watkinson, 2012) or current relationship quality (Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000).

Studying personality development from multiple perspectives is important, because recent studies have shown that there is no single perspective from which a person is known best. Rather, both the self and others possess unique information (e.g., Vazire & Mehl, 2008). In addition, the perceived views of each other's personalities influence the interpersonal interaction and as such thus deserve more scientific attention. However, the notion that judges might differ in the degree to which or the personality trait in which they observe personality maturation and possible disruptions thereof, has rarely been tested longitudinally.

A highly interesting exception by Watson and Humrichouse (2006) tracked newlywed young adults for two years, and found that while self-ratings were in accordance with the maturity principle – increases in conscientiousness and agreeableness and decreases in neuroticism over time – spouses reported opposite developmental trajectories of the very same person's personality, specifically decreases in conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and openness.

How can these results be translated to differences between judges when looking at personality development in childhood and adolescence? When focusing on the most important relationship partners during childhood – the parents – previous studies have shown that parents possess some of the characteristics of "good judges" in that they are motivated to provide thoughtful responses about their child and are highly familiar with their child (Funder, 1995; Tackett, Herzhoff, Kushner, & Rule, 2015). However, just like other judges, a parent's judgment of their child's personality and emotions can also be biased (Durbin & Wilson, 2012; Tackett, 2011). Consequently, mothers' and fathers' *longitudinal* judgments of their children's personality might differ from each other, and also differ from the judgments of children themselves and of other family members.

Indeed, a recent study by Van den Akker et al. (2014) investigated personality development by self- and mother-report and found that benevolence and conscientiousness increased from middle to late childhood, temporarily declined from late childhood to mid-adolescence, and increased again thereafter. Imagination decreased from middle childhood to mid-adolescence and also increased again thereafter. Mothers reported a temporary decline in emotional stability, which was not confirmed by children's self-ratings.

A number of questions still remain unknown in this field of research. First, within the family context, personality judgments by fathers and siblings are also important to understand the development of an adolescent's personality. Fathers and mothers show only moderately high agreement regarding their child's personality traits (Tackett, 2011). Moreover, sibling relationships are among the most constant and prominent social companionships in adolescence (Jenkins & Dunn, 2009). Adolescent siblings are of similar age and encounter the same developmental tasks and emotional fluctuations, therefore both mean-level change and rank-order stabilities of siblings' personality judgments might be more similar to adolescents' self-views than to parents' views.

Second, the study by Van den Akker et al. (2014) compared personality development judged by children and mothers from age 9 to 17. It would be interesting to see whether parent-ratings confirm the maturity principle in the longer term, after the "storm and stress" period of adolescence (Arnett, 2000; Casey et al., 2010).

[2] There are multiple ways of referring to who judges the personality, such as the judge, rater, perceiver, and reporter. In the current paper we will consistently use the term "judge".