



# Psychosocial development and the big five personality traits among Chinese university students<sup>☆</sup>

Li-fang Zhang<sup>\*</sup>

The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how psychosocial development and personality traits are related. In particular, the study investigates the predictive power of the successful resolution of the Eriksonian psychosocial crises for the Big Five personality traits beyond age and gender. Four hundred university students in mainland China responded to the Measures of Psychosocial Development and to the NEO Five-Factor Inventory. Results indicate that the successful resolution of particular Eriksonian crises reversely predicted neuroticism, but positively predicted extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The amounts of these contributions went substantially beyond what was predicted by age and gender. Implications of the findings are discussed in relation to research and university education.

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## 1. Introduction

University years are a period of time during which students' psychosocial development happens rapidly and when their personality traits continue to be formed (Astin, 1993; Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Given that psychosocial development is commonly deemed as part of personality development (Erikson, 1950; Johnson, 1993), this study tests the contribution of psychosocial development as defined by Erikson (1950) to the big five personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992) among Chinese university students.

### 1.1. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development

According to Erikson (1950), an individual develops through a sequence of eight stages that define the life cycle: 1) trust versus mistrust; 2) autonomy versus shame and doubt; 3) initiative versus guilt; 4) industry versus inferiority; 5) identity versus role confusion; 6) intimacy versus isolation; 7) generativity versus stagnation; 8) ego integrity versus despair. Individuals have different concerns at various points in the life cycle. While the adolescent is likely to be preoccupied with the concern of "Who am I?", the young mother has the question "What type of parent shall I try to be?" An individual develops through learning certain attitudes, formation of particular

facets of the self, and through learning specific skills that must be mastered if one is to successfully manage that particular life phase. Each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages. The challenges of stages not successfully completed may reappear as problems at a later life stage. The particular timing and methods in which the concerns are addressed are influenced not only by the society in which individuals reside, but also by the individuals' characteristics such as age and gender. Furthermore, as noted earlier, Erikson (1950) contended that psychosocial development is critical to the formation of personality.

### 1.2. Measures of the Eriksonian stages

Between the 1960s and 1970s, several instruments were developed to measure the Eriksonian stages (Ochse & Plug, 1986). Among these, the Inventory of Psychosocial Development (IPD) designed by Constantinople (1969) was the most widely used. Studies using the IPD generally found that older people tended to score higher on the psychosocial developmental stages than did their younger counterparts and that females usually scored significantly higher than did their male counterparts (Whitbourne, Jelsma, & Waterman, 1982).

The IPD remained to be a popular research tool until the mid 1990s. Two factors were responsible for the decline of the IPD's popularity. The first concerns the inventory's limitations: its lack of suitability for cross-cultural research and its confinement to only assessing the first six Eriksonian stages.

The second factor responsible for the decline of the IPD's popularity is the birth of Hawley's (1988) Measures of Psychosocial Development (MPD) that assesses the degree and direction of conflict resolution at each of the eight Eriksonian stages. The MPD was proved to be a reliable and valid inventory in a number of cultures, including India (Mercer,

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<sup>\*</sup> Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong. Tel./fax: +852 2859 2522.

E-mail address: [lfzhang@hku.hk](mailto:lfzhang@hku.hk).

1996), Taiwan (Chou & Chen, 2005), and Norway (Mercer, 1996). This research supported Erikson's contention that people's psychosocial development could vary along several dimensions, including culture (e.g., Mercer, 1996), age (Norman, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Ashcraft, 2002), and gender (Gribble, 2000).

### 1.3. Further on studies using the IPD and the MPD

Studies using the IPD and the MPD addressed different psychological variables relevant to the Eriksonian stages. Whereas studies using Constantinople's IPD essentially investigated the impact of psychosocial development on personality disorders, studies using Hawley's MPD primarily examined the relationships of psychosocial development to more adaptive human attributes (e.g., higher levels of self-efficacy). Despite the different research foci of the two lines of investigations, all existing studies yielded one overarching finding: successful resolution of the Eriksonian crises is positively related to more adaptive human attributes, including constructive types of humor (Hampes, 1993) and higher levels of self-efficacy (Senior, 2002), but negatively to personality disorders (e.g., Johnson, 1993). However, existing research does not suggest how people's psychosocial development contributes to general personality traits such as the big five personality traits (i.e., Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness; Costa & McCrae, 1992).

### 1.4. The present study

#### 1.4.1. Objectives

The study's preliminary objective was to further explore the appropriateness of the MPD (Hawley, 1988) for assessing Chinese university students' psychosocial development given that the MPD has only been used in one study of Chinese students (Zhang, 2010). The primary objective was to determine the contribution of psychosocial development to the big five personality traits beyond what was predicted by age and gender.

#### 1.4.2. Research hypotheses

It was predicted that the Eriksonian stages would make unique contributions to the big five personality traits after the effects of age and gender are controlled for. Certainly, age and gender have been proved to be important contributory factors to personality traits. However, because Erikson (1950) considered psychosocial development to be part of personality, unique contributions of psychosocial development personality traits were anticipated. Specifically, it was predicted that psychological development would contribute negatively to neuroticism, a personality trait denoting psychological maladjustment; but positively to the remaining four personality traits (extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness), all signifying psychological adjustment. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, no further fine-grained hypothesis was made.

## 2. Method

This study is survey-based and correlational in nature. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 400 (135 male and 265 female) students of 16 intact classes from a large comprehensive university in Shanghai, mainland China. With both the mean and the median being 21 years, the students' ages ranged from 17 to 32. Of all participants, 143 were first-year students, 120 were second-year students, and 137 were third-year students. Finally, 211 students were studying in education, and 189 were in management.

### 2.2. Measures

All participants responded to two self-report measures: the Measures of Psychosocial Development (MPD, Hawley, 1988) and the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

#### 2.2.1. Measures of Psychosocial Development

The MPD consists of 112 self-descriptive statements contributing to eight subscales of positive and eight subscales of negative attitudes associated with the eight Eriksonian stages. Each of the 16 subscales contains seven items. Participants rated themselves on a 5-point response scale, with 1 indicating that the statement does not at all describe them, and 5 denoting that the statement describes them extremely well. The minimum sum of each subscale is 7 and the maximum is 35. Appendix A shows one sample statement from each of the 16 subscales.

The levels of resolution between conflicting attitudes at each stage are indicated by a Total Resolution score obtained by subtracting a Total Negative Resolution score from a Total Positive Resolution score. The MPD manual reports the test-retest reliability coefficients for the individual scales to be approximately .80. Internal consistency coefficients ranged from .65 to .84. Convergent validity of the MPD was demonstrated through its correlation with the Self-description Inventory (Hawley, 1988). This study adopted the Chinese version of the inventory validated in a previous study (Zhang, 2010) of Chinese university students.

#### 2.2.2. The NEO Five-Factor Inventory

Composed of 60 statements (12 for each of the five dimensions), the NEO Five-Factor Inventory is a brief measure of the five personality dimensions. For each statement, the participants rated themselves on a 5-point scale, with verbal anchors of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The statements are scored in both directions. The total score for each personality dimension is the summed score from the 12 statements of each scale. Appendix B shows sample statements.

The NEO-FFI Manual reported sound alpha coefficients (ranging from high .70s to low .80s) and test-retest reliability data (ranging from high .60s to low .80s) as well as good convergent and discriminant validity data (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The present study used a Chinese version of the inventory that was translated and back-translated between Chinese and English in the year 2000. The Cronbach alpha coefficients are .82, .75, .63, .72, and .81, respectively for the neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness scales for this study. These alpha coefficients are comparable in magnitude with those obtained in previous studies of Chinese university students (Zhang, 2008).

### 2.3. Data analysis

Reliability estimates for the MPD scales were obtained using Cronbach's (1951) alphas. Preliminary statistical analyses (using *t*-test, zero-order correlation, and MANOVA) were conducted to test possible differences in psychosocial development and in personality traits based on age, gender, and academic disciplines.

In testing the hypothesized predictive relationships of psychosocial development to personality traits, hierarchical multiple-regression procedures were performed, with age and gender being forced into the regression models first because they were significantly correlated with particular scales of the two inventories. Subsequently, all eight Total Eriksonian resolution scales were put into the models simultaneously, which allowed the detection of the competitiveness among the eight scales in contributing to personality traits. Before multiple-regressions were conducted, zero-order correlations were calculated between the MPD Total Resolution and the NEO-FFI scales to examine the basic relationships between psychosocial development and personality traits.

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