



Hostile, aggressive family conflict trajectories during the transition to adulthood: Associations with adolescent Big Five and emerging adulthood adjustment problems



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this longitudinal study was to investigate the relation of adolescents' Big Five factor (BFF) personality to the development of different patterns of mother–adolescent hostile, aggressive conflict (MHAC) from late adolescence to young adulthood. Furthermore, we examined the prediction of Antisocial Problems (AP) and Depressive Problems (DP) in emerging adulthood from BFF and MHAC trajectories. 385 adolescents participated in this study (age 15–16 at Time 1 and 21–22 at Time 4). Using latent growth curve analysis, Low stable (69.1%), Medium Increasing, (23.3%), and High decreasing (7.6%) trajectories were distinguished. Low adolescents' emotional stability was directly related to AP and indirectly related to DP, throughout the mediation of both Medium Increasing and High Decreasing trajectories. Agreeableness was directly negatively related to DP and indirectly throughout the mediation of High Decreasing trajectory. Low Conscientiousness was indirectly related to DP, throughout the mediation of Medium Increasing trajectory. 385 adolescents participated in this study (age 15–16 at Time 1 and 21–22 at Time 4). Using latent growth curve analysis, Low stable (69.1%), Medium Increasing, (23.3%), and High decreasing (7.6%) trajectories were distinguished. Low adolescents' emotional stability was directly related to AP and indirectly related to DP, throughout the mediation of both Medium Increasing and High Decreasing trajectories. Agreeableness was directly negatively related to DP and indirectly throughout the mediation of High Decreasing trajectory. Low Conscientiousness was indirectly related to DP, throughout the mediation of Medium Increasing trajectory.

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It is well recognized that the transition to adulthood brings an augmentation of uncertainty in different domains of individuals' lives (Elder, 1998). Overall, this is a time of developmental milestones (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004) and, as suggested by Krueger (1999), it is “an optimal window” for studying the links between personality and negative life outcomes, such as in psychopathology, as well as processes that may contribute to significant variation in the developmental course of problematic life pathways.

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The study of how personality traits influence parent–youth relationships during the life transition to adulthood, and how these may affect young adult psychological adjustment, has become particularly important in both European and North American countries (Douglass, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2013), where the number of young adults living with their parents is rising. For example, in the United States, in 2012, 21.6 million (36%) of the young adults aged between 18 and 31 years old lived with their parents, up from 18.5 million of their same-aged counterparts in 2007 (Pew Research Center, 2013).

It is evident that processes of realignment in regard to expectations and roles in parent–youth relationships need to be further negotiated and that failure to adapt to these developmental changes may compromise the quality of family relations, with the emergence of conflicts and disagreements, and negative youth outcomes (Aquilino, 2006).

In this study, we considered personality traits as vulnerability factors conducive to psychopathology (antisocial and depressive problems, Tackett, 2006), but also as predisposing factors to problematic interpersonal relations, which in turn lead to an increase in the development of antisocial and depressive problems (Prinz et al., 2004). In particular, we have investigated how adolescents' Big Five factors (BFF) and different patterns of mother hostile aggressive conflict (MHAC) from adolescence (age 15–16) to young adulthood (age 19–20) were associated with the development of Antisocial Problems (AP) and Depressive Problems (DP) during the life transition to the early adult years (age 21–22).

Associations between personality traits and antisocial and depressive problems

Among the personal characteristics conducive to (mal)adjustment outcomes, personality traits have received particular attention in the last decades. Overall, traits are not considered as fixed behavioural responses, but as reflecting ways of adapting to the environment that are partially consistent for each individual (Pervin, 1989). The Five Factors model (e.g. John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & John, 1992) is one of the most comprehensive personality taxonomies which encompasses five general dimensions of personality: *extraversion* refers to the level of activity, positive affect, energy, and sociability; *agreeableness* concerns the level of empathy, warmth, and trustiness in interpersonal relations; *conscientiousness* concerns persistence and organization of goal-directed behaviours; *neuroticism* (or low emotional stability) concerns chronic levels of poor emotional adjustment and control; and *openness* (or intellect) concerns openness to new experiences, values, and behaviours. The model has been widely recognized as a taxonomy describing the main individual personality differences also in children and adolescents (Caspi & Shiner, 2006; De Fruyt et al., 2006; Shiner, 1998).

The relations between personality traits and psychopathological problems have been studied in many different ways. Accordingly, four different models have been identified (e.g. Tackett, 2006) to explain such relations: the *vulnerability/predisposition* model, the *complication* or *scar* model, the *pathoplastic/exacerbation* model, and the *spectrum* model. In the *vulnerability/predisposition* model the presence of a certain subset of maladaptive personality traits increases the probability of developing and maintaining a disorder. For example, low Conscientiousness is significantly related to antisocial behaviours throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (e.g. Lynam et al., 2000; Raskin White, Bates, & Buyske, 2001).

In the *complication/scar* model, the experience of psychopathology may affect personality traits over time, such as an existing depressive disorder is assumed to “complicate” or “scar” personality characteristics, for example, neuroticism/negative emotionality (Schmidt, Lerew, & Joiner, 2000).

In the *pathoplastic/exacerbation* model personality traits may influence or exacerbate the course of psychopathological problems and their severity after the onset. For example, high level of inhibition, a facet of Neuroticism, results in less severe manifestation of behavioural problems in children diagnosed for conduct disorders (e.g. Bienvenu et al., 2004).

Finally, the *spectrum* model posits personality traits and psychopathological symptoms on a continuum and hypothesizes the existence of common processes underlying both traits and disorder. For instance, in a longitudinal twin study common genetic influences have been found to account for the association of Emotionality, Shyness, and Internalizing problems in early childhood.

As suggested by Tackett (2006), there is no broad consensus about the model that better explains the relation between personality and psychopathology in adults and children. However, it is likely that different models may account for specific aspects of the personality and psychopathology links and consequently answer different questions. Our study is theoretically guided by the *vulnerability/predisposition* model and investigates how adolescents with different levels of personality traits (i.e., vulnerability) may influence reactions from others and shape their family relations overtime, conceivably in order to highlight the processes by which these traits contribute to young adult antisocial and depressive problems. In other words, we conceived personality traits not only as generic risk factors for later psychopathology, but also as factors contributing to adolescents' repeated negative interpersonal experiences, as well as to their individual sensitivity and reactivity to conflictual interpersonal experience.

As regards the relations between BFF and adjustment, agreeableness and conscientiousness have been consistently documented as broad personality traits associated with antisocial behaviours (e.g. Miller, Lynam, & Jones, 2008). Individuals who are less inclined to trust others and be gentle and empathic towards others, and who are less self-disciplined and tenacious are more frequently involved in antisocial behaviours. In addition, the recent metanalytic study of Jones, Miller, and Lynam (2011) reported a significant effect size for the relations of low agreeableness, low conscientiousness, and high neuroticism to antisocial behaviour. It is probable that, beyond the tendency to experience a broad range of negative emotions, the lack of impulse control may account for this association (Jones et al., 2011). The relations between openness and extraversion and antisocial behaviours have been documented less consistently. Indeed, such traits have been weakly and negatively associated with aggressive behaviour (e.g., Klimstra, Akse, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2010), but not significantly

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