



Personality types during transition to young adulthood: How are they related to life situation and well-being?



S. Leikas^{a,*}, K. Salmela-Aro^{b,c}

^a Institute of Behavioural Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

^b Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

^c University of Jyväskylä, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The present longitudinal study examined personality types, their change, and their relations with life outcomes and well-being in a sample of young Finns ($N = 493$) that was followed from age 15 to 23. The Big Five traits were measured at ages 20 and 23, and four personality types – Resilients, Overcontrollers, Anti-Resilients, and “Averages” – emerged at both time points. Those with higher initial well-being were more likely to be later classified as Resilients, whereas those with low and decreasing well-being were more likely to be classified as Anti-Resilients. At age 23, Anti-Resilients were less likely to have reached normative educational goals than others, and more likely to be unemployed than others, but Overcontrollers were less likely to be in a romantic relationship than others. The results question the universality of the three-type structure, but support the predictive validity of personality types.

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Research on personality types has recently received increasing attention in the literature (Akse, Hale, Engels, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2007; Donnellan & Robins, 2010; De Fruyt, Mervielde, & van Leeuwen, 2002; Meeus, van de Schoot, Klimstra, & Branje, 2011). In contrast to trait-focused variable-centered personality research, personality type research focuses on personality profiles. This approach seeks to identify prevalent profile types, and the antecedents, consequences, and correlates of these types (e.g. Donnellan & Robins, 2010; Meeus et al., 2011).

There is vast evidence for the usefulness of the trait approach to personality. However, the type approach may offer certain advantages over the trait approach. Perhaps most importantly, the type approach takes simultaneously into account many personality dispositions (or even all relevant personality dispositions, as implied by the phrase “overarching configuration”). Thus, this approach may help understand how different traits operate in concert or in complex interactions. In the trait approach, the relations of different traits with outcome variables are usually considered separately or by means of two-way interactions between traits. Within the type approach, it is possible to examine how complex configurations of traits are related to events (e.g. Meeus et al., 2011). Other potential advantages of the type approach include providing a view to the within-person organization of personality, providing an alternative way of conceptualizing personality, and being able to effectively communicate with the general public regarding personality research (see Donnellan & Robins, 2010).

To our knowledge, no study has examined personality type stability and change during the years immediately following age 20. However, from a developmental perspective, this age period is of crucial importance as several profound changes (e.g.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sointu.leikas@helsinki.fi (S. Leikas).

moving away from the childhood home, entering the workforce for the first time, becoming financially independent) typically take place during these years (Arnett, 1997; Hogan & Astone, 1986). In a longitudinal sample of young Finns, the present research examines personality types and their change during these years, as well as the life events and the well-being of young adults with different personality types. Our research complements previous research by examining personality type change in young adulthood after age 20. Our goals include a) identifying personality types in a Finnish sample of young adults; b) examining change and stability in personality types from ages 20 to 23, and c) investigating how well-being and life events relate to different personality types.

Personality types

The majority of research on personality types is loosely based on Block's (1971) theory of ego-resiliency and ego-control. Ego-resiliency refers to the tendency to adapt to and flexibly respond to situational demands, and ego-control refers to the tendency to inhibit and control own impulses and motivations. Three personality types, labeled as *resilients*, *overcontrollers*, and *undercontrollers*, can be theoretically constructed as combinations of these two dimensions. Resilients are characterized by high level of ego-resiliency, moderate level of ego control, high ability to adjust their ego control to the demands of the environment, and by good adjustment. Overcontrollers are characterized by low ego-resiliency and high ego-control; they tend to be shy, inhibited, and internalize their problems. Finally, Undercontrollers are characterized by low ego resiliency and low ego control, and they tend to be impulsive and externalize their problems (Block & Block, 1980).

The Big Five model of personality trait structure emerged in the 1980s, after which personality type researchers also began to apply this model. The three previously derived types were found to have distinguishable and replicable Big Five profiles (e.g. Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996). As a consequence, the current personality type literature, although adopting the labels of Resilients, Overcontrollers, and Undercontrollers, has derived these types directly on the basis of the Big Five trait dimensions (e.g. Asendorpf, Borkenau, Ostendorf & Van Aken, 2001; De Fruyt et al., 2002; Meeus et al., 2011). In terms of the Big Five traits, Resilients tend to have low Neuroticism and average or high levels of Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Overcontrollers tend to have high Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, and low Extraversion, while Undercontrollers tend to have low Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and high Extraversion (e.g. Donnellan & Robins, 2010).

In their five-wave longitudinal study on personality types, Meeus et al. (2011) followed adolescents from age 12 to 20. These authors identified the three above mentioned personality types at each wave and concluded that as a function of age, more participants moved toward the Resilient type than toward the other two types. This finding is consistent with the maturation principle (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008), according to which personality in general develops into a more mature direction as a function of age, especially during adolescence and young adulthood.

Personality types, life events, and behaviors

Previous research on personality types has connected the commonly identified three personality types to relevant external criteria. For instance, Robins et al. (1996) reported that Undercontrolled boys performed poorly in school and were more likely to engage in delinquency and to behave badly in school than were Resilients or Overcontrollers. Overcontrollers, on the other hand, were more likely to have internalized psychopathological symptoms than were the other two types. Similarly, Meeus et al. (2011) found that Overcontrollers had higher levels of anxiety symptoms than the other two types. Asendorpf et al. (2001) linked Overcontrollers to several shyness- and inhibition-related tendencies, and Undercontrollers to certain aggressive and antisocial tendencies. Overall, Resilient individuals seem to be generally well-adjusted in many respects (e.g. to have high self-esteem, high life satisfaction, low levels of psychological distress, and few mental health problems), whereas both Over- and Undercontrolled individuals seem to be less well adjusted. However, the problems characteristic of Over- and Undercontrollers differ: Overcontrolled individuals tend to view themselves negatively and experience negative feelings, whereas the problems of Undercontrolled individuals tend to derive from impulsive and counter-normative behavior.

To our knowledge, no previous study has linked personality types to life events during the transition to adulthood. Young adulthood is one of the most critical age periods (Schulenberg, Sameroff, & Cicchetti, 2004) as it typically encompasses several important life transitions such as moving away from the childhood home, beginning and perhaps finishing tertiary education, and entering the workforce. Indeed, trait research has shown that personality is more apt to change during young adulthood than during any other age period (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). Individual differences in life transitions are an important topic, because age-appropriate transitions predict higher well-being and a more positive life course (e.g. Schulenberg et al., 2004).

In the present study, changes associated with education, work, and family, as well as self-esteem, life satisfaction, and depressive symptoms (for simplicity, the three latter variables are hereafter referred to as well-being) are examined in relation to personality types. In longitudinal studies, the predictive power of personality traits or types on later life events or well-being is typically examined. By contrast, in the present research, we had information on participants' well-being from age 15 onwards, whereas the personality types were measured at ages 20 and 23. Thus, we examine early well-being as a predictor of later personality type.

How might the three personality types differ regarding life events? Previous research has shown that Overcontrolled individuals tend to internalize their problems; e.g., to view themselves negatively and to be shy and inhibited (Asendorpf

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