



## Advancements in the field of personality development



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### ABSTRACT

A summary is provided what the fields of personality and developmental psychology had to offer each other the past decade, reflected in the eleven contributions enclosed in this special issue. Strengths and opportunities to further advance the field are identified, including the extension of general trait with maladaptive trait models, the use of alternative methods to assess personality, and the adoption of configural approaches to describe traits in individuals, beyond more traditional person-centered approaches.

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This special issue grouped a set of eleven papers at the intersection of developmental and personality psychology that were presented during a well-attended conference of the European Association for Research in Adolescence (EARA) on Spetses Greece in September 2012. Although the beauty of the island, its beaches and the nice weather served as tough distractors, this meeting of developmentalists had a lot to offer for hard-nosed personality researchers as is evidenced in this thematic issue. The large number of papers is testimony of the current prominence of this research domain, whereas the variety of themes and methodologies illustrates what the developmental and personality disciplines have to offer to each other. In this discussion, a somewhat unorthodox SWOT-analysis is conducted, shortly focusing on a number of Strengths of this emerging field that are also reflected in this special issue. A discussion of Weaknesses will be largely skipped, because these were/should have been handled in the review process, but instead some core points will be reiterated and turned into Opportunities for future research. Threats are relatively minor, though need consideration, to streamline research toward essential questions and facilitate strong inference research.

### Strengths

Reading through this special issue shows that there is good news from both the developmental and the personality field. Personality psychologists have spent considerable time and effort examining the structure of personality, finally agreeing that five major trait dimensions are necessary and sufficient to describe the core of personality differences. This Five-Factor Model (FFM) demonstrated to be useful from childhood to old age, was retrievable from self- and observer reports, turned out to be valid across cultures, and described the personalities of general population and specific clinical groups (De Clercq & De Fruyt, 2012). This evolution brought the long-awaited structure into a dispersed field and is also reflected in the number of studies in

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this special issue that adopted the FFM: in 8 out of 11 studies personality was operationalized with a measure based on the FFM. A set of easily administrable operationalizations describing personality across the life course became available, such as the Hierarchical Personality Inventory for Children (HiPIC; Mervielde & De Fruyt, 1999) and the NEO-PI-R/3 inventories (Costa & McCrae, 1992) for adolescents and adults. Finally, after years of intense debate questioning the stability of traits across time and their consistency across situations, trait psychologists developed more elaborate and nuanced views of trait stability and change and situational variability, including the notion of normative change patterns (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006) and trait-activation theory, a trait-situational perspective in which situational factors “trigger” latent trait tendencies (De Fruyt & De Clercq, 2014; Tett & Burnett, 2003).

Developmentalists from their part brought a rich set of developmental theories to the debate with considerable attention for environmental factors and where personality traits were mainly considered as moderators of various developmental outcomes. For example, the relationships between family climate and parenting dimensions or styles on the one hand and psychopathology outcomes on the other hand were studied, with children’s personality traits as moderators (e.g. Van Leeuwen, Mervielde, Braet, & Bosmans, 2004). Moreover, the notion of life stages prominent in developmental psychology aligned well with the study of normative personality change. From a more methodological perspective, developmentalists considerably advanced the personality field by introducing more appropriate methods of longitudinal data-analysis: growth modeling techniques enable to study nonlinear patterns of personality development, whereas mixture modeling allows for studying heterogeneity in patterns of change. Making use of growth mixture modeling, Luengo Kanacri et al. (2014) differentiated between three trajectories in prosocial behavior and detected associations with changes in personality traits. Castellani et al. (2014), identified three patterns of mother-adolescent hostile, aggressive conflict (low stable, medium increasing, and high decreasing). Lower levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability predicted maladaptive patterns of mother–adolescent conflict and higher depressive problems. These techniques helped charting individual change trajectories and raising questions on moderators and correlates of this change. Finally, and probably most important, the two fields further converged by an increased maturity to handle complex debates. Rather than discussing whether the glass is half full or half empty, a more balanced and integrative perspective is advocated nowadays acknowledging that both the person and the situation are important to understand significant outcomes, that there are stable in addition to more malleable aspects of development, and that people may follow very different developmental trajectories (Woods, Lievens, De Fruyt, & Wille, 2013).

## From weaknesses to opportunities

### *The FFM and beyond*

While the FFM evolved to a frequently researched model, its comprehensive nature may have certain drawbacks. Using hierarchical and multifaceted trait models decreases the necessity of carefully analyzing the required level of abstraction at which one wants to assess personality, also called the bandwidth-fidelity dilemma. Depending on the criteria to predict, assessments at the level of one (or more) higher-order domains or specific facets is warranted. For the purpose of investigating quality of life in children with a chronic disease, for example, a description at the level of the five personality domains is probably sufficient, whereas for understanding psychopathy in youth a more fine-grained assessment tapping into peculiar traits such as impulsiveness, callous-unemotional traits, and compliance is to be recommended (Decuyper, De Caluwé, De Clercq, & De Fruyt, *in press*). One can assess the entire FFM model and report and discuss the full correlation matrix. This is a common practice when investigating a topic for the first time. For example, Zupančič and Kavčič (2014) showed that all of the broad five personality domains were differentially associated with aspects of individuation (support seeking, connectedness, intrusiveness, self-reliance, and fear of disappointing the parent) and that these associations differed for the relationship with mothers and fathers. However, to avoid that (personality) research gets a sort of fishing expedition image, it is also necessary to specify hypotheses linking specific traits to particular criteria. Moreover, although many studies assess traits at different levels of the FFM hierarchy, usually only the associations at the domain level are reported in academic journals, to keep the work organized and readable, while there is certainly more to do with the data at the lower-order measurement level. Finally, the FFM, although important, just represents the largest common denominator of personality differences, and there are traits that are relatively difficult to portray in this model that may be more at stake to examine specific research questions (Paunonen & Jackson, 2000). Rather than using FFM measures as easy-to-administer omnibus inventories, a more thoughtful use of trait measures is to be recommended. For example, Teppers Luyckx, Klimstra, and Goossens (2014) focused on peer-related loneliness as a ‘surface personality trait’, which reflects a less stable and more situation-specific way to adapt to roles and environments. They found that adolescents who used Facebook to compensate for inadequate social skills were already more likely to be lonely, and at higher risk for becoming even lonelier in their relationships with peers.

The past years, general trait models such as the FFM were complemented with a number of maladaptive trait models describing the underlying structure of so-called aberrant, dysfunctional or disordered personality. For example, four- to five-dimensional models were proposed to assess pathological aspects of personality in children (e.g. Dimensional Personality Symptom Item pool: DIPSI; De Clercq, De Fruyt, Van Leeuwen, & Mervielde, 2006) or adults (e.g. Personality Inventory for DSM-5: PID-5; Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson, & Skodol, 2012). Although, such models are not necessarily qualitatively different from the FFM (De Fruyt, De Clercq, et al., 2013), with their constituting dimensions empirically linked to the FFM core set, they assess traits with a more clinical label and content. Tackett, Herzhoff, Reardon, De Clercq, and Sharp (2014) examined

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