



Development of personality traits in response to childbirth: A longitudinal dyadic perspective



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ABSTRACT

To investigate the influence of childbirth on personality, the authors conducted a three-wave longitudinal research program (pregnancy, 6 months, and 1 year postpartum) using a multilevel modeling framework on 204 parental couples with parental group (primiparous vs. multiparous parents) as a time-invariant predictor and the partner's development as a time-varying covariate and on childless couples as a control group. Results showed that the father's Extraversion decreases after childbirth. Except for Extraversion, parents' personality is highly stable. Moreover, when facing childbirth, mothers and fathers tend to follow the same developmental trajectory and hence to function in dyad. The discussion underlines the importance of the dyadic perspective to understand the childbirth experience.

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1. Introduction

People who are involved in the raising of children are transformed and follow a different developmental trajectory from childless adults (Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, & Holmes, 2003). What kind of transformation can parents be expected to undergo? Is childbirth a life event transformative enough to lead to changes in parent's personality traits?

1.1. Childbirth and parental development

Childbirth is considered one of the most significant life events because of its potential to drastically disrupt the individual's life (e.g., Feeney, 2001). "Childbirth" may actually refer to two distinct life events: the initial transition to parenthood and the birth of another child (i.e. subsequent childbirths). Both events imply a change of relational status and the development of new responsibilities, roles, and identities (Galinsky, 1981). The first-time parents change from a dyadic to a triadic perspective, but the multiparous parents develop relations with siblings (Yu & Gamble, 2008). Given these relational differences, developmental trajectory could differ between primiparous and multiparous parents. These two parental groups were therefore included in this study in order to differentiate their experience of parenthood. Moreover, the inclusion of childless couples was required to find out whether

changes in personality traits are unique to couples with children. In sum, the current study tested (a) whether and to what extent the personality is affected by childbirth, which would be a sign of its transformative nature and (b) whether personality development differs between primiparous and multiparous parents, and between these and childless adults.

1.2. Personality development

Personality traits are defined as the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that distinguish individuals from one another. Research (McCrae & Costa 1999) has reached near consensus on a five-trait structure of personality (i.e., the 'Big Five'): Neuroticism (withdrawal behavior, anxiety, and detection of threat), Extraversion (intensive pursuit of interpersonal relationships, activities, and joy), Agreeableness (empathic orientation), Openness to experience (intellectual curiosity, imagination, and new cultural experiences) and Conscientiousness (ability to organize, plan, and respect conventions).

Concerning personality development, two contradictory predictions have been proposed. The essentialist perspective argues that personality traits are biologically based "temperaments" that are not susceptible to the influence of environment. Changes are considered as primarily maturational and associated with changes in biological substrates of personality (McCrae & Costa, 2006). In contrast, the contextual perspective emphasizes the importance of life events and role transitions and suggests that personality can be prone to change (Lewis, 2001). Actually, existing longitudinal studies do not support either of these positions. First,

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there was confusion between the origin (genome and environment) and the development (continuity and change) of personality: Continuity of personality was usually associated with the genome and change with the environment. Actually, both genetic and environmental factors work together in creating and developing personality (Krueger & Johnson, 2008). Second, different forms of continuity and change may be independent of one another, making both continuity and change in personality traits unavoidable (Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008).

Different ways of conceptualizing and measuring personality continuity exist (Roberts et al., 2008): (a) structural continuity (i.e. similarity over time in patterns of co-variation among traits), (b) ipsative continuity (i.e., continuity in the configuration of personality variables within a person across time), (c) mean-level continuity (i.e. consistency in the amount of an attribute over time in a sample of individuals), (d) rank-order consistency (i.e., consistency of the rank ordering on trait dimensions in a sample of individuals), and (e) individual differences in change. The last type refers to the gains or losses in absolute levels of a personality trait that each individual experiences over time (Nesselroade, 1991). Particularly, this type of statistical continuity is used to test whether life events, such as childbirth, are associated with changes in personality traits (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008), which is in line with the objectives of the current study. Now, we will examine the mechanisms of personality continuity and change.

1.2.1. The mechanisms of personality continuity

The first mechanism concerns genes–personality–environment transactions (e.g., Krueger & Johnson, 2008). Genetic effects account for almost half of the variation in each of the Big Five domains (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001) and can determine drive effects on environmental experiences via niche-building processes. Indeed, individuals tend to create, seek out, or end up in environments that are correlated with their personality traits (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Once people enter trait-correlated environments, those environments may have causal effects of their own, contributing to the continuity of the personality traits. This illustrates the interactive influence of both genes and environment on personality. The second mechanism of continuity refers to identity clarity. With age, people tend to select roles that appear to fit with their dispositions, values, and abilities which provoke a sounder identity. This process of developing and maintaining an identity leads to higher levels of psychological well-being and adjustments, which in turn are related to personality continuity (Donnellan, Conger, & Burzette, 2007).

1.2.2. The mechanisms of personality change

The social investment principle (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005) allows for an explanation of why personality traits can change over time. It states that the investment in social institutions such as parenthood is embodied in social roles (e.g. parent) which lead to increasing expectations and demands turned towards the pertinent actors (e.g., the family and in particular the baby). These expectations may include responsibility to others, confidence, prosocial behaviors, and emotional stability. By responding to role contingencies and watching and listening to significant others, personality traits change (Roberts et al., 2008). For example, personality change may come about by adopting new behaviors through watching the partner (e.g. modeling), or by watching ourselves, do things differently (e.g., the parent can try to stay emotionally stable) in response to new role demands linked to childbirth. Another question remain: Which personality traits would be affected by childbirth? We could hypothesize that the development of such attitudes brings about an increase in Conscientiousness (i.e. responsibility to others) and Agreeableness (i.e.,

prosocial behavior), and a decrease in Extraversion (i.e., focusing on family) and Neuroticism (i.e., developing emotional stability).

1.2.3. The intervening mechanisms

Despite robust shifts in environments, people do not demonstrate dramatic shifts in terms of personality traits (Robins, Fraley, Roberts, & Trzesniewski, 2001). Why do personality traits not change more? Actually, the influence of continuity mechanisms outweighs the impact of change mechanisms (Roberts et al., 2008). Individuals tend more to assimilate the new environmental information by seeing it as validating than to accommodate themselves to the new environment. Some mechanisms intervene between changes in environments and personality with the result of small change of personality traits: (a) filibustering (i.e., actively avoiding new environments or avoiding making the social and emotional investment that would result in change), (b) identity structures (i.e., localization of the change only to a specific role identity – the parental role – and not one's entire personality), (c) dispositions (i.e., differential susceptibility to environmental contingencies such as susceptibility to partner's personality change), and (d) social-cognitive mechanisms (i.e., cognitive and emotional schemas to protect identity when it is threatened, acting to reconfigure the meaning of experience, not experience itself).

1.3. Gender perspective in personality developmental trajectory

After childbirth, do mother's and father's personality develop differently? After becoming parents, the mother's and the father's roles, attitudes, and goals differ. Couples often fall into more traditional gender roles (Koivunen, Rothaupt, & Wolfram, 2009). For example, men pursue more instrumental goals whereas women are more interested in nurturing the child (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Saisto, & Halmesmäki, 2000). These gender differences could be explained by the different social and biological expectations regarding gender roles. Women's greater biological role in childbearing (pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation), coupled with cultural expectations about motherhood place them in a different parenting role from men, who make a smaller biological contribution but still face marked cultural expectations about fatherhood, such as acting as the breadwinner (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Consequently, although the father's role is essential, greater change in mothers' personality was expected due to the biological and social expectations about their roles.

1.4. Childbirth: a parental dyadic life experience

Far from an individual life experience, childbirth affects the couple as a unit. One of the defining features of a couple is interdependence, i.e. the idea that one partner's behaviors and experiences could influence the outcomes of the other partner and vice versa (Atkins, 2005). The mother's and father's experiences are interdependent, so one individual cannot be fully understood outside the context of the couple (Cox & Paley, 1997). Thus, mothers and fathers would affect each other, and these effects change over time in response to events such as childbirth (Sameroff, 2009). Therefore, we expected that within a couple mother and father's developmental trajectories would tend to influence each other. To examine this effect, the partner's personality development was included as a covariate of intraindividual change in the parents' models.

1.5. Current study and hypotheses

Several objectives were considered in the current three-wave longitudinal study (pregnancy, 6 months, and 1 year postpartum)

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