Personality and Individual Differences 54 (2013) 118–122

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Relative and longitudinal evidence for the importance of the General Factor of Psychosocial Development in predicting well-being

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 April 2012
Received in revised form 14 August 2012
Accepted 16 August 2012
Available online 13 September 2012

Keywords:
General Factor of Psychosocial Development
General Factor of Personality
Midlife

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the General Factor of Psychosocial Development (GFPD) and well-being was examined. Support for three hypotheses was found. First, the GFPD accounted for more variance in well-being than the shared unique variance of the individual psychosocial stages. In fact, a number of the stages were negatively associated with well-being when controlling for the GFPD. Second, the GFPD accounted for a significant amount of variance in well-being when controlling for the General Factor of Personality. Third, the GFPD partially mediated the relationship between well-being at two points in time.

1. Introduction

There is an increasing understanding of the interrelatedness among measures of personality (e.g., Figueredo et al., 2005; Figueredo, Vásquez, Brumbach, & Schneider, 2004). This trend is most clearly seen in research on the relationship between the Big Five personality traits of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The Big Five traits correlate, suggesting that higher order factors, sitting above the Big Five in a hierarchical structure, exist (Hofstee, 2003; Musek, 2007; Rushton & Irwing, 2011). In fact there may be a single factor at the apex of the hierarchy referred to as the Big One or the General Factor of Personality (GFP).

While there is a great deal of debate about the existence and the meaning of the GFP, for the purposes of the current investigation it is important to review the investigative strategy of the GFP taken by van der Linden, Scholte, Cillessen, te Nijenhuis, and Segers (2010) and van der Linden, te Nijenhuis, and Bakker (2010). They tested the predictive validity of the GFP and when doing so examined the variance in important psychological and behavioral variables explained by the shared variance of the Big Five (i.e., the GFP), and the combined unique variance of the five individual traits. van der Linden, te Nijenhuis, et al. (2010) found that the GFP accounted for more variance in employee performance appraisal by supervisors than the combined unique variance of the Big Five. Utilizing a sample composed of early adolescents van der Linden, Scholte, et al. (2010), found that the GFP accounted for more variance in likeability than the combined unique variance of the Big Five, but that the combined unique variance of the Big Five accounted for more variance than the GFP when predicting popularity.

Variables in other domains of inquiry have also been reassessed to see if they too contain significant overlap. Judge, Erez, Bono, and Thoresen (2002) found that self-esteem, neuroticism, locus of control, and generalized self-efficacy shared a great deal of variance with intercorrelations between the variables of around $r = .60$. In the majority of tests they ran they found that the common factor formed by these four variables accounted for more variance in the Big Five traits than the unique variance of the individual measures. Consistently, they also found that the common factor formed by the four variables explained more variance in job satisfaction, stress, happiness, and life satisfaction than the unique variance of the individual measures.

Similarly, it has been found that various measures of Erikson's (1968) construct of ego-identity form a higher-order factor called identity consolidation (Schwartz, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2010). Schwartz et al. (2010) found that a single higher-order factor predicted a number of risky health behaviors such as driving while intoxicated. Replicating Schwartz et al. (2010) Dunkel, Mathes, and Harbke (2011) also found that a variety of identity measures formed an identity consolidation factor and, in turn, identity consolidation formed an even higher-order factor with measures of life history strategy and well-being.

Continuing this line of research Dunkel, Kim, and Papini (2012) proposed that Erikson's (1968) stages of psychosocial development of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2012.08.022

generativity, and integrity form a higher order general factor they labeled the General Factor of Psychosocial Development or GFPD. They found support for their hypothesis of the existence of the GFPD and found that the GFPD formed an even higher factor with the GFP and measures of life history strategy.

This leads to the purpose of the current investigation. While Dunkel, Kim, and Papini found evidence for the GFPD, the importance of the construct has not yet been examined.

The purpose of the current investigation was to examine the predictive validity of the GFPD. The GFPD is composed of the psychosocial stages and the stages themselves have repeatedly been found to be predictive of numerous psychological phenomena, including well-being (e.g., Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008; Waterman, 2007). Thus, if the stages are associated with well-being, and the stages make up the GFPD, then, of course, the GFPD should be predictive of outcomes including well-being.

Following Judge et al. (2002), van der Linden, te Nijenhuis, et al. (2010), and van der Linden, Scholte, et al. (2010), what is important is looking at the predictive significance of the GFPD relative to the individual stages. Thus the first hypothesis of the current investigation is, that while both the GFPD and the individual psychosocial stages will be positively correlated to indices of well-being, the relationship between the individual psychosocial stages and well-being will be attenuated when controlling for the GFPD.

However, it could also be that the GFPD is redundant with other higher-order factors. Dunkel et al. (2012) found that the GFPD and the GFP were strongly correlated. Thus while support for the first hypothesis could be found, the reason the GFPD is predictive of well-being may be simply because of the variance it shares with the GFP. Thus the second hypothesis is that the GFPD will be predictive of well-being after controlling for the GFP.

While hypotheses one and two address the importance of the GFPD in predicting well-being relative to the individual psychosocial stages and another higher-order factor, the third hypothesis further tests the importance of the GFPD in accounting for individual differences in well-being. Utilizing the longitudinal nature of the available data set the role of the GFPD in the stability of well-being across time was examined. It was hypothesized that the GFPD will partially mediate between well-being at two points in time.

2. Method

2.1. Data

Data from the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS; Brim et al., 1996) was utilized to test the hypotheses. The MIDUS data was intended to be representative of midlife adults in the United States. The sample is composed primarily of a national probability sample of adults with additional over sampling of siblings and individuals from metropolitan areas. An additional sample of twin pairs is also included.

The data used in the current investigation represents participants with responses complete enough to compute the GFPD. It included 4487 (2291 or 51.1% female) participants between the ages of 20–75 ($M = 46.50$, $SD = 12.49$). For the analyses, this number represents the maximum number, with missing data reducing the degrees of freedom for any particular analysis. The level of education of participants was measured on a Likert-type scale with poles beginning at 1 = no school or some grade school up to 12 = Ph.D., M.D., etc. ($M = 6.91$, $SD = 2.47$). Additional data was collected from the same sample in 2004–2006 allowing for longitudinal analyses ($N = 2938$). Time two data collection was approximately 9 years after Time 1 data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Psychosocial stages and the GFPD

The choice of scales to measure the psychosocial stages was made after extensive review of the items from various scales designed to measure the psychosocial stages with consideration given to both the breadth of the constructs and potential coherence of the scales. The Measure of Psychosocial Development (MPD, Hawley, 1988) appears to be the most oft used measure of all eight psychosocial stages and the negatively valenced subscales were used in previous research on the GFPD (Dunkel et al., 2012). Therefore, for the sake of comparison items from the negatively valenced MPD subscales are included with the description of the scales selected from the MIDUS data file to measure each specific stage.

More than one scale in the data file was used for each stage. First the scales scores were transformed into *z*-scores. Next, the scores corresponding to each psychosocial stage was summed. This sum was then used to represent the particular psychosocial stages.

2.2.1.1. Trust. The psychosocial stage of trust was measured by combining three scales. The scales were Meaningfulness of Society (sample item/reversed: I cannot make sense of what's going on in the world), Acceptance of Others (sample item: I believe that people are kind), and Social Actualization (sample item: The world is becoming a better place for everyone). A sample MPD item is "It is a cold cruel world".

2.2.1.2. Autonomy. The psychosocial stage of autonomy was measured by combining two scales. The scales were Autonomy (sample item: I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think) and Perceived Constraints (sample item/reversed: Other people determine most of what I can and cannot do). A sample MPD item is "I am easily swayed".

2.2.1.3. Initiative. The psychosocial stage of initiative was measured by combining three scales. The scales were Primary Control/Persistence (sample item: When I encounter problems I do not give up until I solve them), Flexible/Positive Reappraisal (sample item: When I am faced with a bad situation it helps to find a different way of looking at things), and Personal Mastery (sample item: I can do just about anything I set my mind to). A sample MPD item is "I tend to avoid or delay action".

2.2.1.4. Industry. The psychosocial stage of industry was measured by combining two scales. The scales were Environmental Mastery (sample item: I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life) and Work Obligations (sample item: How much obligation would you feel to work hard even if you did not like or respect your employer or supervisor?). A sample MPD item is "I can't do anything well".

2.2.1.5. Identity. The psychosocial stage of identity was measured by combining three scales. The scales were Self-Acceptance (sample item: When I look at the story of my life I am pleased with the way things have turned out so far), Social Integration (sample item: I feel close to other people in my community), and Self-Directedness/Planning (sample item: I know what I want out of life). A sample MPD item is "I have not found my place in life".

2.2.1.6. Intimacy. The psychosocial stage of intimacy was measured by combining two scales. The scales were Positive Relations with Others (sample item/reversed: I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others) and Spouse/Partner Affectual Solidarity (sample item: How much can you relax and be your-