



Inter-individual stabilization of justice sensitivity in childhood and adolescence [☆]



Rebecca Bondü ^{a,b,*}, Marianne Hannuschke ^c, Birgit Elsner ^a, Mario Gollwitzer ^c

^a University of Potsdam, Department of Psychology, Karl-Liebknecht-Str. 24-25, 14476 Potsdam, Germany

^b University of Konstanz, Department of Psychology, Universitätsstraße 10, 78464 Konstanz, Germany

^c Philipps University Marburg, Department of Psychology, Gutenbergstraße 18, 35032 Marburg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 September 2015

Revised 20 June 2016

Accepted 27 June 2016

Available online 29 June 2016

Keywords:

Justice sensitivity

Stabilization

Latent-state-trait modeling

Childhood

Adolescence

ABSTRACT

Individuals systematically differ in their justice sensitivity, but so far little is known about the trait's development. The present study investigated the inter-individual stabilization of victim, observer, and perpetrator justice sensitivity in 1,122 German children and adolescents between 9 and 18 years of age over the course of 1–2 years. Latent-state-trait analyses with two occasions of measurement showed increasing stability rates of all justice-sensitivity perspectives between childhood and early adolescence and decreasing stabilities of observer and perpetrator sensitivity between younger and older adolescents. Correlations between justice-sensitivity perspectives tended to decrease with age. Thus, presumably due to increases in social-emotional and social-cognitive abilities, childhood and adolescence seem important periods for the stabilization and differentiation of the justice-sensitivity perspectives.

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1. Introduction

Psychological research on human personality builds upon the notion that personality traits are relatively stable over time and across situations. Empirical evidence corroborates this notion. However, observed trait scores often fluctuate across measurement occasions and the extent to which they do varies between individuals (Asendorpf, 1992). Furthermore, the extent to which a trait is stable varies across the life span: In a seminal meta-analysis including more than 150 original longitudinal studies, Roberts and DelVecchio (2000) showed that the “inter-individual stability” (i.e., the rank-order consistency of interpersonal difference measures within a given sample between two points in time) of personality traits increases with age. They found considerable increases in stability rates during early childhood (3–5 years), in young adulthood (18–29 years), and between the first and second half of middle age (40–59 years). More recent studies showed that—at least for some personality traits—stability coefficients

already peak at around age 30 (Terracciano, Costa, & McCrae, 2006) or around age 50 (Ardelt, 2000; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011).

Much of the pertinent research on personality change and stabilization has been conducted on broad personality dimensions such as the *Big Five*. This is helpful to investigate rather general patterns of personality stabilization. However, it makes sense to assume that stabilization processes are largely trait-specific: Some traits may stabilize earlier than others; some may stabilize in a linear, others in an inverse U-curved fashion, etc. (Specht et al., 2011). Furthermore, age-related factors and processes, such as social influences by peers, may have differential effects on different trait measures (e.g., Asendorpf & van Aken, 2003). Social influences should impact so called social-cognitive traits in terms of the Cognitive-Affective System Theory of Personality (Mischel & Shoda, 1995), such as justice sensitivity, in particular. In addition, from the perspective of developmental psychology, social influences should be particularly relevant during childhood and adolescence, when family relations are close and when peers and the broader school environment become increasingly important.

The present paper focuses on the stabilization of one particular personality trait that is related to, but narrower than broad personality dimensions such as the Big Five (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010): justice sensitivity, the tendency to perceive and react to injustice (Schmitt, 1996). As we will argue below, there are reasons to assume an increasing stabilization of

[☆] This research was funded by the German Research Foundation, Germany (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft; GRK 1668/1).

* Corresponding author at: University of Konstanz, Department of Psychology, Universitätsstraße 10, 78464 Konstanz, Germany.

E-mail addresses: rebecca.bondue@uni-potsdam.de, rebecca.bondue@uni-konstanz.de (R. Bondü), marianne.hannuschke@staff.uni-marburg.de (M. Hannuschke), birgit.elsner@uni-potsdam.de (B. Elsner), mario.gollwitzer@staff.uni-marburg.de (M. Gollwitzer).

justice sensitivity between childhood and early adolescence, but a decreasing stability in late adolescence. In addition, we examine whether different perspectives of the justice-sensitivity construct become more differentiated over the course of development.

1.1. Justice sensitivity (JS)

Justice sensitivity has been defined as the extent to which people readily perceive and react to injustice. It varies between individuals, forming a narrow, but discrete personality trait that cannot be explained by combinations of the Big Five alone (Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2010). Recent research has shown that individual differences in justice sensitivity can be reliably observed from the age of 9 years onwards (Bondü & Elsner, 2015). Notably, individuals can be sensitive to injustice from different perspectives: from a victim's perspective ("victim sensitivity"), from an observer's perspective ("observer sensitivity"), from a beneficiary's, or from a perpetrator's perspective ("perpetrator sensitivity"). These perspectives predict different psychological outcomes (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2005): "Self-oriented" victim sensitivity is related to a number of behavioral problems during childhood and adolescence, such as aggression (Bondü & Krahe, 2015), conduct problems (Bondü & Elsner, 2015), or symptoms related to attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders (Bondü & Esser, 2015; Schäfer & Kraneburg, 2015). Also in adult samples, victim sensitivity predicted uncooperative and antisocial behaviors (Bondü & Richter, 2016a, 2016b; Gollwitzer, Rothmund, Pfeiffer, & Ensenbach, 2009; Gollwitzer et al., 2005) as well as functions of aggression even when other trait measures, such as the hostile attribution bias, trait anger, or other sensitivity factors, were controlled for (Bondü & Richter, 2016a, 2016b).

In contrast, "other-oriented" observer and perpetrator sensitivity predicted cooperative and prosocial behaviors in different age groups (Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004; Gollwitzer et al., 2005). High perpetrator sensitivity in particular may even be a protective factor for behavioral problems such as conduct problems or aggressive behavior in children and adolescents (Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Bondü & Krahe, 2015).

Despite these differences, all justice-sensitivity perspectives are meaningfully and positively correlated with each other, reflecting a common underlying concern for justice (Schmitt et al., 2005). In representative and/or large adult samples, latent correlations ranged between 0.66 and 0.79 for observer and perpetrator sensitivity, between 0.45 and 0.55 for victim and observer sensitivity, and between 0.28 and 0.37 for victim and perpetrator sensitivity (Baumert et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2005, 2010).

The extent to which people are justice-sensitive changes across the life span: Previous studies indicate highest mean values of victim sensitivity in late adolescence (Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Schmitt et al., 2010). Observer and perpetrator sensitivity did not show any significant trends during childhood and adolescence (Bondü & Elsner, 2015), but perpetrator sensitivity is apparently higher in adults than in adolescents (Schmitt et al., 2010). Thus, there is evidence for age-related mean-level changes (i.e., changes in absolute stability) in justice sensitivity. In contrast, potential differences in the correlational stability between different age groups have not yet been examined. In adults, stability rates ranged between 0.43 and 0.60 for the different justice-sensitivity perspectives (Baumert et al., 2014; Schmitt et al., 2010). As we will outline below, there is reason to believe that late childhood and adolescence are critical periods for the stabilization of justice sensitivity.

1.2. Processes of personality stabilization

Personality may stabilize in a number of ways. The present study focusses on the inter-individual stabilization of justice sensitivity, hence, decreases in rank-order changes in inter-individual differences within a given population over the course of development. The increasing inter-individual stabilization of personality during adolescence and young adulthood has been theoretically explained by influences of biological (e.g., Bleidorn, Kandler, Riemann, Angleitner, & Spinath, 2009) and environmental factors (e.g., Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001) as well as of social-cognitive processes (e.g., Roberts, Wood, & Caspi, 2008; see Specht et al., 2014, for a review). Regarding environmental factors, major life events such as normative transitions in life (e.g., the first child, beginning retirement) or individual experiences (e.g., the death of one's partner, a new job) might shape the extent to which personality stabilizes. So far, stabilization effects of life events have only been investigated with regard to broad personality dimensions (Specht et al., 2011). These effects were surprisingly small if present at all. Instead, critical life events tended to affect mean-level scores. This, however, does not necessarily imply that life events have no impact on stabilization processes at all. It is still possible that specific trait-related life events have an impact on the stabilization of the respective traits. For instance, experiences of injustice might impact the stabilization of justice sensitivity (see below).

Regarding social-cognitive processes, Caspi and Roberts (1999, 2001) argued that individuals themselves contribute to the stabilization of their personality by (a) selectively preferring particular environments, (b) manipulating environments, (c) interpreting events, and (d) provoking reactions such that they are consistent with (and, thus, reinforce) their personalities. These processes have been referred to as *person-environment transactions* (Caspi, 1998; Roberts et al., 2008). For instance, adolescents prefer peers that are similar to themselves over peers that differ from them; and this preference, in turn, stabilizes behavioral dispositions due to social reinforcement (Harris, 1995; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

Recently, Gollwitzer, Süßenbach, and Hannuschke (2015) have applied the notion of person-environment transactions to the assumed stabilization of justice sensitivity (i.e., victim sensitivity). They argued that victim-sensitive individuals may be particularly likely to (a) prefer peers who are similarly victim-sensitive as themselves, (b) convince others about the danger of being treated unfairly by others, (c) interpret ambiguous events such that they are consistent with their sensitivity towards victimization, and (d) behave in a way that eventually confirms their victimization anxiousness. These theoretical arguments are currently awaiting empirical corroboration.

1.3. The stabilization of justice sensitivity in childhood and adolescence

1.3.1. Victim sensitivity

Adolescence is a developmental period in which individuals experience many situations that include social justice or injustice, such as social inclusion or exclusion in one's peer group, fair vs. unfair treatment in school, conflicts with parents, etc. (Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Gollwitzer et al., 2015). These experiences are likely to constitute "critical life events" especially during adolescence, because social contacts outside the family gain in importance in this age range (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). These justice-related experiences may then promote a stabilization of individual differences in justice sensitivity.

Bondü and Elsner (2015) suggested four further factors or processes that may make adolescence a critical phase for the development of victim sensitivity:

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