



Personality trait development and social investment in work

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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study of employed individuals was used to test the relationship between social investment at work—the act of cognitively and emotionally committing to one's job—and longitudinal and cross-sectional personality trait development. Participants provided ratings of personality traits and social investment at work at two time-points, separated by approximately 3 years. Data were analyzed using latent change models. Cross-sectional results showed that extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability were related to social investment at work. Additionally, a positive association was found between longitudinal change in social investment in work and change in personality traits—especially conscientiousness. Finally, the correlated changes in social investment and personality traits were invariant across age groups, suggesting that personality traits remain malleable across the lifespan.

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1. Introduction

Personality traits develop according to normative patterns across the lifespan. For example, individuals tend to increase in conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability well into adulthood (Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Srivastava, Oliver, Gosling, & Potter, 2003). In a recent study, these same patterns were found in an internet sample of over one million English speaking participants ranging in age from 10 to 65 from across the globe (Soto, Oliver, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). It appears that this pattern, described as maturity (Roberts & Wood, 2006) is widely evidenced across most industrialized countries.

Why do personality traits continue to grow and develop in adulthood? One initial perspective argued that the near universal nature of these patterns of personality development would mean that genetic factors and only genetic factors could explain personality trait change in adulthood (McCrae et al., 2000). Though personality change is heritable (Bleidorn, Kandler, Riemann, Angleitner, & Spinath, 2009; Hopwood et al., 2011), like most other psychological phenomena, it is only partially heritable, with over half the variance in personality trait change attributable to environmental factors. Moreover, multiple studies have shown that subpopulations of individuals change in the opposite direction of the norm. For example, individuals who continue to smoke marijuana into adulthood also fail to increase on conscientiousness (Littlefield, Sher, & Wood,

2010; Roberts & Bogg, 2004). Thus, the argument that personality trait change is driven entirely by genetics is untenable.

As an alternative to examining genetic factors that might explain personality trait change, some researchers have searched for and theorized about environmental factors that may be responsible for personality trait development. For example, the neo-socioanalytic model of personality trait development suggests that commitment to and investment in adult roles—like shared genetics—is nearly universal, and may be one reason for personality trait change in adulthood (Roberts & Wood, 2006; Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). This transition from the freedom of adolescence to the responsibilities of adulthood has been described as the process of social investment (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). To date, most evidence for the effect of social investment has been inferred from past research that was not designed to explicitly test the idea (cf., Lehnart, Neyer, & Eccles, 2010). The primary purpose of this study is to test whether changes in work-related social investment predict changes in personality traits. Changes in social investment in romantic relationships have empirically demonstrated associations with personality change (Lehnart et al., 2010). However, very few studies have directly explored the effects of social investment on personality trait development in other areas of life. Given the extremely high proportion of time many individuals allot to their careers each day, the workplace is a logical next life domain within which to explore social investment processes.

1.1. Social investment and its association with personality change

Social investment reflects the commitment most people make to adult social roles as they transition from their provisional status

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as an adolescent and young adult into a full-fledged adult, both in their own eyes and the eyes of their society (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). The process of social investment is presumed to be universal, and therefore normative (Helson, Kwan, John, & Jones, 2002). That is, most individuals in most societies commit themselves to the adult roles found in the social structures of family, work, and community. Moreover, despite the heterogeneity in the roles found in these social institutions, most are assumed to contain similarities in terms of the mechanisms that would contribute to personality change. Specifically, social roles contain expectations that are widely held by most age groups in society (Wood & Roberts, 2006). Therefore, people anticipate changes in behavior that will be necessitated as they enter new roles, such as taking their first career-related job or becoming a parent for the first time (Roberts & Wood, 2006). Moreover, others will promote and reward these changes because they share the expectations with the role participant. Finally, new roles come with explicit experiences, rewards, and punishments that lead to changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which translate into personality change over time.

While many of the aforementioned mechanisms could potentially explain why social investment might lead to personality trait change, it is first necessary to demonstrate that social investment processes actually occur—that is, changes in social investment correlate with changes in personality traits. To the best of our knowledge, Lehnart and colleagues (2010) provided one of the first explicit tests of such social investment processes. They found that young adults who became increasingly socially invested in romantic relationships over time experienced simultaneous increases in emotional stability and self-esteem. Complementarily, they also found support for de-investment processes. A de-investment process occurs when individuals who fail to invest in socially normal ways also fail to experience normative personality changes (Roberts, Walton, Bogg, & Caspi, 2006). For example, Lehnart and colleagues found that individuals who remained single for extended periods of time—thereby failing to invest in romantic relationships—did not display normative increases in self-esteem or emotional stability over time.

1.2. Social investment in work

These very same social investment (and conversely, de-investment) processes that occur in romantic relationships are also expected to occur in other life domains. Specifically, Lodi-Smith and Roberts (2007) found, via meta-analysis, that personality traits were correlated with social investment in four key life domains: (i) close relationships, (ii) work, (iii) community involvement, and (iv) religion. To date, the social investment process has only been explicitly tested in the context of close relationships. The primary purpose of this study is to examine social investment in a second domain—the workplace—as a potential process by which personality traits change.

What does social investment at work look like? Social investment involves committing deeply to adult roles. As such, social investment in work involves assuming an identity as an employee and forming deeply committed, meaningful bonds with various aspects of one's workplace. As such, individuals who are socially invested in their careers should be more likely to follow workplace norms, be good citizens, and embrace their career-oriented identity. Many existing measures used in the literature tap into these constructs. For example, Kanungo's (1982) job involvement scale directly assesses the career-centricity of individuals' lives. Other measures, such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983) assess prosocial behavior at work, which represents a deep commitment to one's career role. Conversely, counterproductive behaviors at work (Bennett & Robinson, 2000) characterize individuals who are de-invested and not committed

to their careers. Strictly speaking in terms of existing measures, someone who is deeply social invested in work would be characterized by high job involvement and organizational citizenship behaviors, and low levels of counterproductive behaviors. Specifically, we expect that these scales are indicators of social investment at work. As such, their common variance should be a good indicator of individuals' levels of social investment at work.

We would expect that as individuals become increasingly invested in and committed to their careers that they should experience changes in their personality traits that accommodate the demands of their workplace. Of all of the Big Five personality traits, conscientiousness is empirically and theoretically most linked to a variety of outcomes in the workplace (Bowling, 2010; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). As such we would expect that increasing social investment at work would lead to increases in conscientiousness over time. For example, when an individual deeply commits to a work role that requires conscientious behaviors, the self and others provide a structure of rewards and expectations that reinforce conscientious behaviors. This may lead to real, lasting increases in conscientiousness over time. Although the link between social investment and changes in the remaining Big Five traits is less clear, based on cross-sectional research we might expect similar findings for agreeableness and emotional stability (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007).

Past cross-sectional and longitudinal research on work variables that are analogous to social investment provide evidence that work social investment could be linked to changes in agreeableness, emotional stability, and especially conscientiousness. For example, emotional stability and conscientiousness are strong predictors of career success (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002; Judge et al., 1999). Moreover, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability have replicable relationships with many important work outcomes, including occupational attainment and job involvement (Judge et al., 1999; Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003). Second, longitudinal studies have linked workplace experiences to actual changes in personality traits over time. For example, Roberts (1997) found that working women become more norm-adhering over time compared with their non-working peers. Other studies have shown that occupational attainment and work satisfaction are related to long-term changes in traits from the domains of conscientiousness and emotional stability (Roberts et al., 2003). Finally, Roberts and colleagues (2006a, 2006b) found that repeated patterns of antisocial or counterproductive behaviors at work predict subsequent decreases in conscientiousness and emotional stability over time. This effect is notable in its similarity to the de-investment processes observed by Lehnart et al. (2010).

1.3. Social investment across the lifespan

For theoretical and practical reasons the direct empirical tests of the social investment process have focused on young adulthood. The fact that most individuals make the transition to adult roles in young adulthood combined with the fact that it is during this time that we find the most normative changes in personality traits has made this an obvious age period on which to focus. Furthermore, most longitudinal studies track single cohorts over several years, which has prevented an examination of the relation between social investment experiences in other periods of the life course. As a consequence of the focus on young adulthood, very few studies have examined whether changes in social investment continue to occur throughout the lifespan, or whether they attenuate quickly after young adulthood.

The current study permits an examination of the relation between social investment at work and personality change across several age periods in adulthood. What should we expect to find in terms of differential patterns across age? Predictions differ

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