



Brief Report

Course of antisocial behavior during emerging adulthood: Developmental differences in personality

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ABSTRACT

Despite similar normative changes in antisocial behavior (AB) and traits of disinhibition and negative emotionality during “emerging adulthood,” few studies have tested if there are developmental differences in personality over this period for distinct courses of AB. In a college cohort assessed at ages 18 and 25, we examined if mean-level changes on traits from the Tridimensional Personality Questionnaire varied by course of AB. Compared to persisters, those who desisted in AB from 18 to 25 exhibited a larger decrease on novelty seeking and larger increase on reward dependence. A significant mean-level decline was observed for harm avoidance, but was unrelated to AB course. Findings support theories of the co-development of personality and AB during emerging adulthood.

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1. Introduction

The developmental stage of “emerging adulthood” (roughly ages 18–25; Arnett, 2000) is marked by significant psychological changes. One of the most robust trends during this period is the normative pattern of desistance in antisocial behavior (AB). Notably, personality correlates of AB (i.e., disinhibition, negative emotionality; Miller & Lynam, 2001) also exhibit substantial mean-level declines from late adolescence to early adulthood (Blonigen, Carlson, Hicks, Krueger, & Iacono, 2008). Despite parallels in their normative trends during this timeframe, few studies have tested whether there are differences in personality development between those who follow a normative versus non-normative course of AB. Using a prospective design, this study investigated whether changes in personality, as measured by the Tridimensional Personality Questionnaire (TPQ), vary by course of AB during emerging adulthood.

1.1. Course of antisocial behavior and personality during emerging adulthood

AB declines sharply during the transition into adulthood. This phenomenon is a key component of the age-crime curve, and is robust across different ethnicities, nationalities, and historical peri-

ods (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). Various theories have been proposed to account for this developmental trend; however, most have neglected or dismissed the role of individual differences in personality (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). This perspective is likely based on traditional conceptions of traits as enduring patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior. However, contemporary models espouse a dynamic perspective of personality given evidence that several traits exhibit significant mean-level changes over time (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). These changes are most pronounced during emerging adulthood and reflect a normative pattern of psychological “maturity” in the form of reduced disinhibition and negative emotionality.

Recently, Blonigen (2010) articulated a theory of the *co-development* of personality and AB during emerging adulthood, and posited that declines in AB during this timeframe are underpinned by mean-level changes in disinhibition and negative emotionality. Although plausible given correspondence in their normative trends, this theory must also account for variability in the course of AB. Most notably, Moffitt (1993) distinguished between “adolescence-limited” antisocials who engage in AB in late adolescence but desist in early adulthood, and “life-course persistent” antisocials who engage in AB throughout this period. Other developmental subtypes of AB have been proposed, including a late-onset group marked by AB in early adulthood that is minimal or absent in adolescence; however, the distinction between desistance and persistence has garnered the most empirical support.

Per a co-developmental model of personality and AB, patterns of personality change during emerging adulthood would be predicted to vary across different courses of AB. Specifically, those

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who persist in AB may fail to decline in their level of disinhibition and negative emotionality (or decline to a lesser degree) than those who desist in AB. To our knowledge, few studies have directly tested this hypothesis; however, research on developmental subtypes of personality and antisociality provide indirect support. Regarding personality, among boys (Morizot & Le Blanc, 2005) and girls from the community (Johnson, Hicks, McGue, & Iacono, 2007), subtypes marked by “delayed” or “blocked” maturation (i.e., relative stability in levels of disinhibition and negative emotionality from adolescence to adulthood) are highest in AB in adolescence and adulthood. Regarding antisociality, in a sample of juvenile offenders, Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, and Mulvey (2009) reported that, relative to desisters, those who followed a persistent AB trajectory from ages 14 to 22 failed to increase on indices of psychosocial maturity. The present investigation builds on this latter study by using a non-adjudicated sample and prospectively testing whether there are similar developmental differences across AB subtypes on traits from a structural model of personality.

1.2. Present study

Using a mixed-gender cohort of college students that was enriched for family history of alcoholism and followed from ages 18 to 25, we tested whether there are different patterns of change in personality across distinct courses of AB during emerging adulthood. Of primary interest was whether those who follow a desistent course of AB exhibit larger declines on traits of disinhibition and negative emotionality than other AB courses (particularly persisters).

The constructs of disinhibition and negative emotionality were operationalized with the short form of the TPQ (Sher, Wood, Crews, & Vandiver, 1995), consisting of three independent dimensions of personality: *Novelty seeking* is primarily associated with disinhibition as indicated by positive correlations with Eysenck’s Psychoticism scale (Sher et al., 1995) and negative correlations with Tellegen’s Control scale (Waller, Lilienfeld, Tellegen, & Lykken, 1991); *Harm avoidance* is primarily linked to negative emotionality, given positive correlations with Eysenck’s Neuroticism scale and Tellegen’s Stress Reaction scale (Sher et al., 1995; Waller et al., 1991); *Reward dependence* is associated primarily with positive emotionality, given positive correlations with that factor from Tellegen’s model and Eysenck’s Extraversion scale (Waller et al., 1991), but also overlaps with disinhibition as indicated by negative correlations with Eysenck’s Psychoticism scale (Sher et al., 1995). Notably, this study is among the first to examine normative developmental trends for these TPQ dimensions during emerging adulthood. We expected significant mean-level decreases for novelty seeking and harm avoidance, and a significant increase for reward dependence, with each of these patterns of change more prominent for desisters than other AB courses.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Data were taken from a longitudinal study on family history of alcoholism (see Sher, Walitzer, Wood, & Brent, 1991). The baseline sample comprised 489 first-year college students (46% male, mean age = 18.2) from a Midwestern university. Approximately half of respondents (51%) were classified as “family history positive.” Respondents were assessed at seven time points (ages 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 29, 35) by interview and paper-and-pencil questionnaires. For this study, data were taken from ages 18 to 25, given that consistent measures of AB and personality were limited to these mea-

surement occasions. Over 93% of participants were retained over the first 7 years of the study. Compared to participants at age 25, attriters ($n = 32$) did not differ significantly in their rate of AB or mean scores on the three TPQ dimensions at age 18.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Antisocial behavior

A dichotomous past-year measure of AB was created from the antisocial personality disorder module from the Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS) – Version III-A (Robins, Helzer, Croughan, Williams, & Spitzer, 1985) and Version III-R (Robins, Helzer, Cottler, & Goldring, 1989) were administered at ages 18 and 25, respectively. On both occasions, participants were asked 23 items related to AB (e.g., “Have you ever used a weapon like a stick, knife, or gun, in a fight since you were 18?”). Only participants who endorsed three or more items were asked how recently the behaviors occurred (age of recency was not asked separately for each behavior). At each time point, participants who reported that these behaviors occurred within the past 12 months were coded “1.” All other participants (with non-missing data) were coded “0”.

2.2.2. Personality

The 44-item Short-TPQ (Sher et al., 1995) was used to measure the dimensions of novelty seeking (e.g., “I do things based on how I feel without thinking about how they were done in the past”), harm avoidance (e.g., “I often stop what I am doing because I worry about what might go wrong”), and reward dependence (e.g., “I discuss my experiences and feelings openly with friends”). Internal consistency (α) was .74 or greater for all measures at both time points.

2.3. Analytic framework

Using the AB variables, four groups were formed *a priori*. The “No AB” group ($n = 402$) consisted of individuals coded “0” on the AB measure at ages 18 and 25. The “desistent” group ($n = 11$) consisted of individuals coded “1” on the AB measure at age 18 and “0” on this measure at age 25. The “late-onset” group ($n = 35$) comprised individuals coded “0” at age 18 and “1” at age 25 on the AB measure. The “persistent” group ($n = 9$) consisted of individuals coded “1” on the AB measure at both time points.

For the primary analyses, repeated measures analyses were conducted using SAS PROC MIXED to examine mean-level change in the TPQ personality measures, and mean-level changes in personality by AB group status (Wave \times AB group). In line with Moffitt’s taxonomy, we were particularly interested in comparisons between the desistent and persistent AB groups. Cross-sectional differences at each Wave between the desisters and the No AB group were also conducted (the small size of the desistent, persistent, and late-onset AB groups limited the power to detect cross-sectional differences between these groups). Sex was modeled as a fixed covariate in all analyses.

3. Results

3.1. Intercorrelations between TPQ personality, antisocial behavior, and sex

Zero-order correlations among the TPQ dimensions, past-year AB, and sex are shown in Table 1. At ages 18 and 25, novelty seeking was positively associated with AB, whereas reward dependence was negatively associated with AB. Harm avoidance was unrelated to AB at both time points. Compared to males, females had lower

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