



Personality development at school: Assessing a reciprocal influence model of teachers' evaluations and students' personality

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ABSTRACT

We examined, over 4 years, the interrelationships between changes in teachers' ratings of student behavior and changes in students' self-reports of their personality. Participants were Australian high school students in Grades 8–11 (Ns were 891, 763, 778, and 571, respectively). Teachers evaluated students' behavioral problems and overall adjustment, whereas students reported on their levels of Eysenckian psychoticism (P), a personality trait relevant in the school setting. We found some evidence of bidirectional influences between P and evaluations of adjustment and behavioral problems. These results are discussed with reference to transactional models of personality change.

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1. Introduction

The adolescent years are filled not only with enormous promise and new opportunities, but also with many challenges. As young people leave their childhood years and make the transition to high school, they confront a radically different, but exciting world. They forge their identity across several domains including the academic and interpersonal and their levels of success in each domain help determine the trajectory of their development. The personality development of adolescents coincides with major transitions (e.g. biological changes) and occurs within a number of social contexts (Elliott et al., 2006; Montemayor, Adams, & Gullotta, 1990). The reciprocal interplay between these contexts and the individual will help shape and mould the teenager's personality. As Lerner and Galambos (1998, p. 415) succinctly put it, teenagers are shaped by diverse forces and "...no single influence acts either alone or as the 'prime mover' of change".

This study seeks to assess the impact the social context has on adolescent personality development. More specifically, it will examine the bidirectional influences between students' personality and teachers' evaluations of students' behavior. To what extent do teachers' evaluations help shape the development of their students' personalities? And to what extent do students' personalities influence teachers' evaluations? In particular, we were interested in the development of a personality construct that has been consistently linked to anti-social behavior, namely, Eysenck's psychoticism (P) dimension (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1976). We examined the

extent to which change and stability in this personality trait is driven by teenagers' relationships with salient others, namely, school teachers. Thus, we sought to examine the extent of reciprocal links between teachers' evaluations of their students and the personality development of these students. Our research extends previous work by using self- as well as observer reports of behavioral tendencies and by using multiple observations of behavior. An advantage of using teacher ratings of behavior is that they are not confounded with genetic variation, as is the case with parental ratings (Plomin & Bergeman, 1991).

1.1. Personality change

Although the study of personality development has a long history going back to Freud (Mroczek & Little, 2006), it is only much more recently that research has begun to examine personality stability and change in a concerted way (see, for example, Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Donnellan, Conger, & Burzette, 2007; Fraley & Roberts, 2005; McCrae et al., 2002; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003).

Most of the research has focused on explicating the extent to which various aspects of personality (such as conscientiousness or agreeableness, for example) change over the life course. For instance, it has been established that personality stability in adulthood is substantially greater than during the adolescent years (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and that some components of personality such as trait hope and global self-esteem decline during the adolescent years (Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2008) before rising again during adulthood (Trzesniewski et al., 2003). It has also been shown that, as adolescents move into adulthood, the personality change that does occur is in the direction of greater

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maturity: women tend to show increases in constraint and social closeness, whilst men show increases in agency and achievement, and decreases in aggression and alienation (Lönqvist, Mäkinen, Paunonen, Henriksson, & Verkasalo, 2008; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001).

Research into aspects of the social world that may underpin personality development has been relatively rare. One reason might be due to the belief that personality is immune to environmental influences (McCrae et al., 2000). However, a number of studies have highlighted that person–environment interchanges do play an important role in shaping personality (Anderson, Lytton, & Romney, 1986; Bell, 1968; Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Fraley & Roberts, 2005; Ge et al., 1996; Lang, Reschke, & Neyer, 2006; Lerner & Galambos, 1998). According to these authors, there is continual change and transition between individual and context which has a significant effect on personality development.

An important social context in which the development of adolescent personality occurs is the school setting. Attendance at school is a normative life task for the teenager and is compulsory until the mid-teen years, at least in most Western societies. According to Caspi and Roberts (2001), a number of environmental forces have the ability to exact personality change, including teacher expectations. Teachers' expectations and demands on their students are powerful socialization agents and teachers' expectations – as manifest through their observations and feedback regarding a student's behavior – have the ability to create a strong environmental push that will shape the trajectory of a student's personality development. Indeed, Skinner and Belmont (1993) found that teachers' perceptions of the emotional and behavioral engagement of their students in class predicted teachers' interactions with their students across the length of the academic year. Through these interactions teachers help shape the behaviors of their students.

1.2. The importance of psychoticism in the school setting

We focused on P because it is an important correlate of school adjustment. Eysenck's P dimension is one of three personality dimensions in his taxonomy, the others being neuroticism and extraversion (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985). There has been considerable debate and controversy as to the nature of the P dimension (e.g. Bishop, 1977; Block, 1977; Costa & McCrae, 1995; Eysenck, 1977, 1992, 1995; Howarth, 1986; Van Kampen, 1993), although there appears to be general agreement that P is an indicator of low constraint or self-control (Tellegen & Waller, 2008; Zuckerman, 2003, 2005; Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta, & Kraft, 1993).

Zuckerman (2003; Zuckerman, Kuhlman, & Camac, 1988) views P as being aligned to tendencies that can best be described as reflecting "...sensation-seeking, impulsivity, nonconformity, and an ... (un)willingness to live by society's rules and mores..." (p. 104). Costa and McCrae (1995, p. 316) described P as a fusion of agreeableness and conscientiousness and as indicating "...a lack of conventional socialization". Rawlings and Dawe (2008) concluded that the P dimension is reflective of impulsive and anti-social behaviors. In addition to predicting deteriorating emotional well-being in adolescents (Ciarrochi & Heaven, 2007), P is predictive of anti-social and delinquent behaviors (Furnham & Thompson, 1991), later criminal convictions (Lane, 1987) and drug-taking behavior (Kirkcaldy, Siefen, Surall, & Bischoff, 2004).

High P students therefore have the potential to be disruptive at school by disturbing the learning environment of more agreeable and conscientious students. Such disruptive behavior has a negative effect not only on the perpetrator's grades (Johnson, McCue, & Iacona, 2005), but also on class-room dynamics and social net-

works (Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2008), and teachers' levels of distress (Lopez et al., 2008). It is therefore important to articulate to what extent the interactions between students and teachers affect the development of students' levels of P.

1.2.1. Bidirectional influences on personality

It is now generally accepted that personality development is the product of bidirectional influences and that person–environment transactions drive the trajectory of one's life course (Anderson et al., 1986; Bell, 1968; Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Fraley & Roberts, 2005; Ge et al., 1996; Lang et al., 2006; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Lytton, 2000; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). A large proportion of this literature has tended to focus on parent–child relationships (e.g. Hipwell et al., 2007; Lytton, 2000; Pardini, 2008) whilst tending to ignore the influence of other socialising agents such as teachers. Our study is the first to examine bidirectional influences between teachers and students.

Bidirectional influences can occur in a number of ways (see Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Fraley & Roberts, 2005). One way is through reactive person–environment transactions, that is, individuals reassess who they are on the basis of their unique experience with their environment. As self-views are often resistant to change and because one attends to information selectively, these person–environment transactions may lead to minimal personality change. Bidirectional influences can also occur through evocative person–environment transactions. According to this view, the behavior of an individual evokes a response from others which, in turn, leads to further responses from the individual. This gives rise to reciprocal interchanges or, as Caspi and Roberts (2001, p. 58) put it, a system of "mutually interlocking evocative transactions". Thus, it is quite likely that a student's behavior may evoke an evaluation from teachers ("your behavior is unacceptable"; "you are being anti-social") which will lead to the teacher or school authorities exacting a verbal rebuke or other form of punishment (or reinforcers in the case of acceptable behavior). This, in turn, will elicit a further behavioral response from the student. These transactions with the social environment are therefore thought to lead to personality and behavioral change (Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Fraley & Roberts, 2005; Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Support for this transactional model is mixed. Recent support was obtained by Ciarrochi and Heaven (2008) who found that self-reported positive attributional style and perceptions of social support were mutually influencing across multiple observations. Pessimistic attributional style in Grade 7 predicted decreases in reported social support in Grade 8 which predicted an increase in pessimistic attributional style in Grade 9 after controlling for baseline attributional style. Asendorpf and Van Aken (2003) found evidence for bidirectional support with respect to traits such as self-esteem, but not with respect to the Big Five personality dimensions. A weakness of both studies, however, is that they relied on self-reported measures only. Additionally, Asendorpf and Van Aken (2003) made use of only two waves of data thereby limiting their ability to detect changes over time. In the present study we relied on four observations of self- and observer reports across a 4-year period.

1.3. The present study

The main aim of this study was to examine the extent to which the development of P in teenagers reflects bidirectional influences between teachers and adolescents. We present data from a 4-year longitudinal study in which data were collected annually. Following Caspi and Roberts (2001), we tested a mutually evocative model in which adolescents' self-reported P and teachers' ratings of students would show reciprocal influences.

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