Published in final edited form as:

Res Hum Dev. 2013 January 1; 10(1): 1–8. doi:10.1080/15427609.2013.760256.

Adult Personality Development: Dynamics and Processes

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Abstract

The focus of this special issue of *Research in Human Development* is on adult personality and how personality may contribute to and be involved in adult development. Specifically, the contributions in this issue focus on the links between personality structures (e.g., traits) and personality processes (e.g., goal pursuit, self-regulation) and emphasize the contributions that intensive repeated measurement approaches can make to the understanding of personality and development across the adult life span.

Since the early work by Bernice Neugarten (1977), personality has been considered a critical factor in adult development and optimal aging (Ryff, Kwan, & Singer, 2001). However, the debate on adult personality development was dominated for many years by the question of whether personality is mostly stable (McCrae & Costa, 2003) or whether it can change (Helson, 1993). The past two decades of theoretical and empirical work have mostly ended this debate and have opened avenues that focus on the structural aspects as well as the processes and dynamics of personality. This change has been facilitated by two major developments.

First, theoretical frameworks have been proposed that integrate structural trait and social-cognitive processing approaches to human personality (Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Mischel, 2004). For example, Mischel and his colleagues (Mischel, 2004; Mischel & Shoda, 2008) proposed a conceptualization of personality as a cognitive-affective processing system (CAPS) that predisposes individuals to react in typical ways to situations with certain soliciting characteristics. What represents the essence of human personality according to this approach is that “individuals are characterized by stable, distinctive, and highly meaningful patterns of variability in their actions, thoughts, and feelings across different types of situations” (Mischel, 2004, p. 8). These patterns represent a kind of “behavioral signature of personality” (Mischel, 2004, p. 8) that is consistent across similar situations and, hence, explains the relative consistency of human behavior. This theorizing has supported the notion that within-person variability across different situations is itself a relatively stable personality characteristic and empirical work has mostly supported this notion (Fleeson, 2001). Thus, from this perspective the person-situation debate in personality psychology has (mostly) been resolved (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009; Mischel, 2004).

Another theoretical framework that has been important in outlining a new research agenda on personality and adult development has been the six-foci model by Hooker and McAdams (2003). Building on McAdams’ (1995) earlier three-level model of personality, this model

provides a systematic framework in which personality structures at three different levels (i.e., traits, personal action constructs, life stories) are mapped onto three distinct personality processes (i.e., states, self-regulatory processes, and self-narration processes). By creating this link between structures and processes, this model elaborates on the richness of human personality and directs researchers toward questions that are of particular importance to developmental psychologists. For example, investigators who are primarily interested in adult development and aging have increasingly addressed the connection between specific personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, conscientiousness, extraversion) and specific behaviors, such as coping with daily stressors (Bolger & Schilling, 1991; Mroczek & Almeida, 2004), the engagement in health behaviors (Mroczek, Spiro, & Turiano, 2009), or the pursuit of personal goals (see Hooker, Choun, Mejía, Pham, & Metoyer, this issue). Furthermore, this model also provides a framework to redress the old question of personality stability versus personality change by allowing that continuity and discontinuity may exist at different levels and with regard to different processes, depending on the specific personal and contextual circumstances in which individuals live. Thus, this model is very much in line with action-theoretical approaches to human development that emphasize the role of individuals as producers of their own development (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002).

The second major reason to shift attention away from the stability versus change debate came from empirical research itself. Data from several multiwave longitudinal studies have provided ample evidence in support of significant and meaningful mean-level changes in personality traits across the adult life span (Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Mroczek & Spiro, 2003; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). In combination with the previously described theoretical developments, these findings have redirected researchers' attention to other issues of personality. Now that we know that certain personality traits show certain patterns of mean-level change across adulthood and that traits also predict relevant life outcomes (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007), researchers have increasingly redirected their attention to how personality is linked to relevant behaviors (Hampson, 2012) and to developmental change and developmental outcomes. The articles in this special issue all represent attempts to contribute to this emerging research agenda.

The articles in this special issue, however, are also noteworthy from another perspective. Traditionally, development in temperament styles and personality has been studied from a nomothetic perspective and has focused on mean-level differences among age groups or mean-level changes within groups. However, there also have been proponents of a more person-centered approach (e.g., Cattell, 1957; Fiske & Rice, 1955; Nesselroade, 1990; Wessman & Ricks, 1966) who have argued that the study of intraindividual variability in short-term processes (e.g., mood, emotion regulation, self-esteem, etc.) should be the core agenda for understanding personality development. Basically, proponents of this approach have argued that to understand personality development across the life span, researchers need to focus on aspects of continuity/stability and discontinuity/change and need to do so by studying the dynamics of intraindividual variability and linking them to long-term processes of change and stability. Hooker and colleagues (Hooker & McAdams, 2003; Hooker, Hoppmann, & Siegler, 2010), for example, have made the interdependent duality of structure and process the core of the rapprochement between idiographic and nomothetic approaches. An important next step for personality research then is to more fully explicate process approaches (Hampson, 2012) and to describe and explain how processes create the structures that are the foundation for the predictive associations with many important outcomes (e.g., marital and occupational success, health behaviors, longevity, or mortality) over the life course (e.g., Roberts et al., 2007).

Finally, we would be remiss if we overlooked another major reason for the current developments in research on adult personality. Specifically, the renewed interest in bringing

the “individual” back into individual differences research, and into a person-centered approach in personality and developmental psychology, has been greatly fueled by advances in the methodological and statistical tools that are available to researchers today. In particular, the adoption of new research designs and methods, such as measurement-burst designs (Nesselroade, 1991; Sliwinski, 2011), experience-sampling methods (Hoppmann & Riediger, 2009), and methods for the analysis of intensive repeated measurement data (Brose & Ram, 2012), have renewed the longstanding interest in the dynamic and contextualized aspects of personality, such as the role of personality in the context of coping with stress (Diehl & Hay, 2007, 2010). Although studies that can link data on short-term intraindividual variability to long-term developmental change are currently still scarce (for an example, see Eizenman, Nesselroade, Featherman, & Rowe, 1997), a critical next step will be to extend studies with multiple short-term measurement-bursts into long-term longitudinal studies. Although the contributions in this special issue “only” present data on the short-term intraindividual variability of personality processes, we believe that their findings point to the benefits of extending studies of this kind into long-term longitudinal studies.

The common thread of the five articles assembled in this special issue is that they report findings from intensive repeated measures studies. Although the samples and substantive questions vary, all contributions are focused on processes and their links to personality structures or relevant behavioral outcomes. The first article by Smith, Ryan, and Röcke (this issue) used data from the Intraperson Dynamics Study that followed young and old adults over 45 days with daily assessments to examine the effects of the trait conscientiousness and a state-level indicator of conscientiousness, perceived control, on daily well-being. They found that conscientiousness was positively related to average daily life satisfaction and positive affect, and greater day-to-day fluctuation in perceived control. In addition, conscientiousness also moderated the daily association between perceived control and negative affect; that is, the daily inverse coupling between perceived control and negative affect was significantly stronger for individuals low in conscientiousness. Older adults reported higher daily positive affect and lower daily negative affect compared to young adults; these age differences were not moderated by conscientiousness. Overall, this study illustrates how a trait and state component of conscientiousness are related to indicators of subjective well-being. This connection seems to be part of the explanation why individuals who score high on the trait of conscientiousness tend to show more positive developmental outcomes compared to individuals who score low on this trait.

The second article by Hooker et al. (this issue) reports findings from the Personal Understanding of Life and Social Experiences (PULSE) Project, a 100-day study with middle-age and older adults examining the associations between the traits neuroticism, conscientiousness, and extraversion and daily progress in achieving social and health goals. The pursuit of social and health goals was used as an operationalization of self-regulatory processes as proposed by the six-foci model of personality (Hooker & McAdams, 2003) and explicitly links structures (traits) to processes (daily stress-goal associations). Overall, the findings showed that the three traits were significantly related to daily goal progress such that those high in neuroticism made less progress in social goals and those high in conscientiousness and extraversion made more progress in health and social goals across the 100-day period. Adults’ goal progress was hindered by daily stress; specifically, on days when participants reported stressful events, they reported less goal progress overall. Surprising findings that could only be uncovered in a within-person design were (1) individuals high in neuroticism actually made more progress on health goals when stress was held constant and (2) those higher in conscientiousness were more sensitive to daily variation in stress. The findings also showed that progress in the two types of goals was associated, although individuals who reported progress on a health goal on any given day

were not necessarily those who also made progress on a social goal. Taken together the findings from this study provide evidence that traits and progress in achieving personal goals are associated and that this association is affected by the experience of daily stress.

Diehl and Hay (this issue) report findings from a 30-day diary study with adult cancer patients examining the effects of personality-related risk and resilience factors on these individuals' reactivity to daily stressors. The personality-related risk factor is self-concept incoherence, whereas the resilience factors are individuals' daily perceived control and their general level of psychological well-being at the beginning of the study. Overall, the findings from this study show that the personality-related risk and resilience factors interacted with daily stress in complex ways. For example, significant three-way interactions indicated that the associations between stress, control, and negative daily mood as the outcome variable differed by level of self-concept incoherence (i.e., individuals with an incoherent self-concept showed an increase in negative mood on low-control days but not on high-control days) and by level of psychological well-being. In general, the findings from this study provide evidence that personality-related variables work together in complex ways to affect how people cope with daily stress. A better understanding of these complexities is needed to understand (1) how daily stress gets under people's skin and (2) what resilience factors can "immunize" individuals against the detrimental effects of daily stress and the potential development of stress-related disorders.

Hoppmann and Gerstorf (this issue) used experience-sampling techniques (i.e., three assessments per day for nine days) to examine associations of self-focused and joint goals with daily affect and problem solving in a sample of 49 older couples. With its focus on couples, this article acknowledges the importance of marital processes, or more generally speaking the importance of dyadic processes, in potentially shaping development and developmental outcomes. Results showed that the number of self-focused goals moderated the association between daily goal progress and positive and negative affect, whereas the number of joint goals only moderated the association between goal progress and negative affect. Couples who had more joint goals had more collaborative discussions around their goals when problems arose and these were rated as effective in problem solving. Most of the variance was at the occasion level, indicating the importance of collecting repeated measurements to understand how older spouses navigate their daily lives based on their goals.

The last article in this special issue, by Ram, Coccia, Conroy, Lorek, Orland, Pincus, Sliwinski, and Gerstorf (this issue), is a creative demonstration that methods from another discipline, in this case geography, can be used to catalyze theoretical advancements in personality development. The increasing use of intensive measurement designs is pushing scientists to develop new and increasingly sophisticated analytical approaches. We now need to leverage what we are finding into breaking new theoretical ground. Ram et al. do this in a creative interdisciplinary approach that fuses ideas from life-span development with geographic methods for studying the topography of landscapes. Ram et al. build on the univariate density-distribution approach to personality (Fleeson, 2001) and the bivariate behavioral signature approach ("if-then" contingencies; Mischel & Shoda, 2008) and explore a more general interpretation of multivariate density distributions as behavioral landscapes that change and/or remain stable over macrotime. They do so by borrowing a method from geography that utilizes visualizations of intraindividual data to describe behavioral landscapes as geographic landforms. This article tested the use of the geographic methods by using two individuals who experienced a lot of change during the time period of their intensive measurement study and contrasted them with two individuals who experienced very little change. This article beautifully illustrates how utilization of intensive measurement designs, usually collected over microtime scales (Ram & Gerstorf, 2009), can

be combined with traditional longitudinal designs collected over macrotime scales, to bear the fruit promised by life-span developmentalists (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1977) to examine intraindividual change as the source of development.

In sum, the articles that follow show why intraindividual variability is garnering scientific respect as a construct in its own right and why it is no longer being relegated to statistical error. As one reviewer for this Special Issue stated, “We are entering a golden age of research on intraindividual processes.” We hope that this set of articles provides conceptual and methodological guidance for accelerating the trajectory of research on intraindividual variability and its contribution to the study of adult personality development.

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