Introduction

At the intersection of personality and adult development

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Abstract

People change and remain the same over time. This assertion is simple but not simplistic. Two decades of dogged research on the change-stability debate have finally led proponents on both sides to cede: “It’s both.” Meta-analyses of personality research (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) reveal that different statistical indices provide different answers to the change-stability question: rank-order correlation coefficients support stability, group and individual mean level indices support change. Yet how much change occurs, and when? For which traits and states? What is the relevance of change versus stability for various outcomes? Although trait structure and rank-order position may change little to not at all over time, are the manifestations of traits and their associations with daily activities and life events as stable? Who is more likely to change, and how does change at the fundamental level of personality affect other life domains, such as health, emotion, relationships, leisure, and happiness? This special issue of papers provides empirical evidence couched in theoretical perspectives that addresses most of the questions posed above. Of those not yet answered, promising paradigms for getting those answers are proffered for the new and continuing generations of behavioral scientists who study personality as a life-long process. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science (USA).
The greatest mistake in modern psychology is to treat the self-in-its-world as a self separated from its surroundings.

Reed, 1994, p. 278

... and its place in time. This special issue enjoins the reader to consider personality – the self – in the temporal context of adult development and aging. Five papers comprise the special issue. The authors of the papers presented their work and ideas originally at a workshop sponsored by the National Institute on Aging held in Bethesda, MD, in February, 1999. That workshop brought together 17 experts working in aging, personality, or both. The goal of the workshop was to identify areas of mutual interest and potential collaborations between primarily adult developmental and primarily personality psychologists. Our immediate goals were for mainstream personality researchers to consider the developmental underpinnings of personality, and for life span and adult developmental psychologists to consider current trends in personality theory, research, and methodology. These immediate goals were met. Now, the next goal of disseminating the exciting exchange of information that occurred at that meeting is met with the publication of this special issue, which we hope will meet our most distal goal of motivating additional research at the intersection of these fields.

Helson, Kwan, and John lead the set with a convincing case for personality change in adulthood, grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives. They remind us of the value of broad-band personality inventories, reviewing several studies that reveal adulthood personality differences and change at group and individual levels. Classic personality theories and appropriate analytical and statistical methods (e.g., hierarchical linear modeling) are emphasized. Helson et al. provide evidence for curvilinear personality differences in adulthood that, for some traits, is further modified by differential patterns or profiles of change for men and women.

McCrae provides some historical context to the current shape of personality research, and moves us far beyond “the dark days of the 1970s” when situationism reigned. In its place, McCrae points to the roles of culture and genes in shaping personality structure and consistency. Briefly reviewing data on change and stability of personality traits, McCrae asks us to consider “what changes and why?” His own answer to the why part of that question invokes maturation and genetic underpinnings for change. He emphasizes the robust stability of personality structure over time and cultures, and enjoins us to consider a meaningful outcome criterion associated with personality traits – happiness.

Hooker moves the discussion beyond the mere trait level to the processes and states that operate in tandem with traits. Her “six-foci” model, adapted from McAdams’ (1995) triarchic model of personality, enriches the trait approach by emphasizing the social-cognitive processes that lend personality its dynamic character. Hooker’s parallel processes are persuasive. In the first process, she reminds us of Nesselroade’s (1987) compelling arguments for
personality states, that locate persons at fluctuating levels of personality dimensions from day to day, week to week and so on, such that at any given moment, these states hold the person poised for action, ready to engage self in the current context. The second, self-regulatory set of processes evokes important life span developmental concerns of goal-setting, self-efficacy expectations, motivation, reappraisal and reattribution processes, and personal control. The final parallel process is a refreshing attempt to cast persons as narrators of their lives, going beyond McAdams’ autobiographical or life narrative level to the active portrayal of one’s life through storytelling, reminiscence, reflection, and intimate interpersonal self-disclosure.

The predictive utility of personality traits and processes related to mental and physical health outcomes is reviewed by Widiger and Seidlitz, and Smith and Spiro, in their respective papers. Widiger and Seidlitz present intriguing data on the nature of personality disorder, and decry the lack of information on the developmental trajectories of personality disorders into midlife and late adulthood. They argue persuasively for the need for such data, and offer insights into how the manifestation of personality disorders is determined partially by the underlying personality trait structure. Their discussion of how pathoplastic processes operate to co-modify the influences of aging, personality, and personality disorders on each other provides rich ideas for prospective study into the developmental pathways of personality and other clinically significant disorders. Smith and Spiro review the empirical evidence that links hostility, neuroticism, and optimism to illness behaviors and disease states and outcomes. Like Widiger and Seidlitz, they point to the lack of developmental data on health-personality relationships and offer an appealing transactional model to employ in prospective studies of personality, health, and aging. But as Widiger and Seidlitz caution us, “Just as there is no infallible instrument for the assessment of personality traits, there is no conclusive research design.” (p. 23).

These collected papers represent some of the best current thinking on personality and adult development and aging. Each provides careful, critical, and even-handed analyses of their respective areas of expertise, lending weight to their conclusions and claims. They report recent data, and offer us a variety of rich models and theoretical frameworks. McCrae states that scientific personality is finally at hand, a theme echoed throughout the papers with their emphases on theory-driven, methodologically sound research questions employing sensitive measures and strong designs. Beyond content per se, these papers each provide extensive reference sections that combine to yield a rich bibliographic resource ranging from classic treatises (e.g., Sullivan, 1953) to current discoveries (e.g., Twenge, 2000) in personality psychology, developmental theory, and mental and physical health. For the novitiate to personality development and aging, this collective list will provide at least a year of reading material ere the first datum in a fledgling research project might be collected.
References


