
Self-Discovery – “Becoming Oneself” In A Period of Profound Life Change

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ABSTRACT

All over the world, emerging adulthood is a crucial time of profound changes in both personality characteristics and life. This study investigates three significant life transitions between the ages of 18 and 25, namely tertiary education and career, romantic relationship and residential independence and their influence on personality development according to the big five. All three domains were related to some extent, to changes in single or multiple personality traits. Overall, most findings were in line with maturation characteristics - increased Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness and Conscientiousness and decreased Neuroticism. The results suggest that life transitions and personality maturation relate coherently. However, there was little evidence for any causal relationship.

Keywords: *Big Five, Life Transitions, Maturation, Personality Development, Young Adulthood*

1. Introduction

“Where does it all lead? What will become of us? These were our young questions, and young answers were revealed. It leads to each other. We become ourselves.” - Patti Smith (Just Kids, 2010)

Already a brief glance at culture and literature reveals that people have been approaching the question of personal development in young adulthood for centuries and have even devoted an entire genre of coming-of-age to the topic. In her novel *Just Kids*, the poet and musician Patti Smith documents her own story transitioning into adulthood addressing various life events such as her first romantic relationship, moving into a new city, and establishing her profession. Her self-discovery process inspires young adults who are confronted with questions about their own identity and their position in society and life in general. The transitioning period between adolescence and adulthood goes with an emerging necessity to take over full responsibility. Those environmental changes can influence personality development (Bleidorn et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2008).

The phenomenon which Smith describes as "becoming oneself" is referred to as maturation: the process of learning to cope and react in an emotionally appropriate way and the emergence of individual characteristics (Specht et al., 2014). Maturation is measured with the Big Five Personality Traits' increased stability and peaks during young adulthood (Specht et al., 2014). Higher Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Extraversion and lower levels in Neuroticism are mainly expected within society. People with these personality traits are more likely to engage in social investment and therefore classified as mature. (Caspi et al., 2005; Roberts et al., 2008; Specht et al., 2014).

The profound changes happening in young adulthood can be an opportunity to take a new direction on the one hand. However, on the other hand, changes may disrupt life balance and increase psychological distress. Typically, personality developments happen in adaptation to new social

roles with changes in the environment, which are associated with life events (Allemand et al., 2015; Löckenhoff et al., 2017; Lüdtke et al., 2011; Specht et al., 2017). Based on that, the social investment theory (SIT) proposes that personality changes occur in similar ways across cultures because the similar life transitions appear at approximately the same age (Roberts et al., 2005). According to SIT, committing to new social roles fosters personality maturation, as these roles coincide with expectations to act more maturely. Behaving, in a socially-expected manner, can be rewarding and might contribute to adapting the personalities accordingly. (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010; Roberts et al., 2006)

Due to the present struggle and vulnerability towards psychological distress that adolescence have, a deepened understanding of personality development during emerging adulthood might be a particular interest in psychology's clinical field. Furthermore, as every human being goes through this stage of life without prior experience, more extensive knowledge about life transitions' influence on personality is a notable concern of general society. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of maturation and leads to the research question: How do life transitions during young adulthood (18-25) influence personality development, according to the Big Five Personality Traits?

Tertiary Education and Career

Many factors contribute to development in personality traits during the transition out of secondary school into the university or work setting (Lüdtke et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2014). Entering work-life or university demands reliability, self-organization and hard work, traits that predict higher Conscientiousness in later years (Denissen et al., 2019; Hudson & Roberts, 2016; Leikas & Salmela-Aro, 2014; Specht et al., 2011). Compared to university students, young adults entering the job market have to take more responsibilities and deal with financial dependence earlier (Lüdtke et al., 2011). This may contribute to an increase in Conscientiousness at a remarkably faster rate (Lüdtke et al., 2011). Furthermore, employment at a young age is associated with lower Neuroticism (Bleidorn et al., 2012; Leikas & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Thus, an early start into the career may lead to stronger resilience and confidence in one's abilities, decreasing neuroticism-related personality traits.

Moreover, a new social context inevitably affects changes in social networks. Finishing high-school appears to lead to a decreased emotional closeness, seeing only about 27% nonkin friendships that accompanied individuals through high-school persisted across the transition (Wellman et al., 1997). However, the number of nonkin friends seems to steadily increase, peaking during young adulthood (Hill & Dunbar, 2003; Milardo et al., 1983; Neyer & Lang, 2004; Wrzus et al., 2013). Besides, serving as a constant in the challenging transition, fellow students and colleagues simultaneously share similar interests, promoting emotional closeness (Wagner et al., 2014). The increase of nonkin relationships correlates positively with a rise in the big five personality traits Extraversion and Openness (Wagner et al., 2014). Since extraverted individuals strive to look out for social interactions and tend to be less shy (Wagner et al., 2014), it leads to a larger social circle. In turn, a widespread network appears to impact extraversion (Leikas & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Factors increasing Openness can be the content related broadened horizon. Furthermore, the gained network tends to motivate students to seek experiences (Leikas & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Regarding

the change of social context, the traits Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Agreeableness remain constant (Wagner et al., 2014).

Romantic Relationships

Over 75% of the 25-year-old participants stated they had already been in their first romantic relationship. (Asselmann & Specht, 2020) The average age for engaging in a relationship for the first time, was around 18 years (Van Dijk et al., 2020). Being in the first serious partnership is associated with personality differences and changes in young adulthood (Bleidorn et al., 2016; Lehnart et al., 2010; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007; Pusch et al., 2019; Schwaba et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2015).

The first serious relationship correlates with a substantial increase in emotional stability and thus a decrease in Neuroticism (Lehnart et al., 2010; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007; Wagner et al., 2015). One possible explanation for this might be that romantic relationships are characterized by high closeness and mutual interdependence, two factors that contribute to a more balanced personality (Neyer et al., 2011). A Replication of those studies has shown that neuroticism's effects were limited to people between 23 and 25 (Wagner et al., 2015), and failed to confirm a general decreased level of neuroticism at other age stages. When it comes to Openness, studies have shown a steady decline related to being in a relationship (Pusch et al., 2019; Wood & Roberts, 2006). The increasing commitment and reduced exploration opportunities could be one reason for the decrease in Openness. In addition, an analysis of stable romantic relationships reported an increase in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness (Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Neyer & Lehnart, 2007; Wagner et al., 2014). As persistence and responsibility are essential components of a long-term relationship, this might eventually lead to a higher Conscientiousness level. Agreeableness is found in relationship components like the willingness to meet the other's needs, promoting an understanding and validation of the other. Following from this, a rise in Agreeableness may be explainable. Other studies also found an increase in extraversion (Wagner et al., 2015). Nevertheless, there is research in which no connection between entering a partnership and personal development could be found (Vaidya et al., 2002).

Residential Independence

Leaving the parental home marks another life event between 18 and 25 associated with personality development (Arnett, 1997; Hogan & Astone, 1986). On average, individuals are 20 when moving out, women usually earlier than men, and by age 22, over 50% confirmed no longer living in their childhood homes (Wagner et al., 2014). Typically, moving out is associated with significant educational or occupational changes and increased personal freedom of choice (Mulder, 2009).

Regarding romantic relationships, studies have shown that moving in with the partner influences the Agreeableness and Openness of the individual (Jonkmann et al., 2014; Pusch et al., 2019). When moving into a shared apartment, partners must learn to share a household, negotiate basic rules, compromise and adapt to each other's needs. Therefore, it can be particularly desirable to adapt to the partner, which ultimately increases Agreeableness. Regarding the decreasing Openness, growing responsibility and commitment may be determining factors.

In contrast, people who move in with flatmates increase Openness and Agreeableness and decrease Conscientiousness (Jonkmann et al., 2014). Having roommates means getting to know each other

and living together simultaneously, regardless of whether being befriended before or not. This situation requires much flexibility, which inevitably results in increased Openness and Agreeableness.

Another factor concerning residential independence that may add to personality development is the relationship to the individual's parents. Generally, studies show that despite a decrease in contact frequency (Parker et al., 2012) and increased independence from their parents (Arnett, 1997), family relationships remain essential parts of the social network along with this transition. Still, particularly in their first years after moving out, young adults often remain financially dependent on their parents, stabilizing the contact. The reduced confrontation of everyday interaction combined with the intentionally spend time together may contribute to an increased Agreeableness.

Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the influence life transitions have on personality development. All of the investigated life domains - tertiary education and career, being in a romantic relationship and residential independence-were related to changes in single or multiple personality traits supporting that life transitions influence personality development. Though not all studies could obtain the same results, the findings align with the expected maturation according to the SIT. A significant increased Conscientiousness and Openness could be observed regarding the life transition from secondary school to work or university. The connected social context contributed to a decrease in Neuroticism and increased Extraversion. Those findings correlate with the maturation processes. Similarly, personality changes were witnessed in romantic relationships, especially Agreeableness and Emotional stability enhanced. Yet, in contrast, to mature traits, a decline in Openness was encountered, and no change in Extraversion was noticed. Concerning leaving the parental house, the personality matured in all traits with increased Extraversion, Agreeableness, Openness and Conscientiousness and decreased Neuroticism.

Those findings implicit the impact the life transitioning period between 18 and 25 may have. The correlation between life transitions and maturation might indicate the relevance of support to help young adults transitioning as smoothly as possible. Although a correlation between maturation and life events was determined, no confident statement regarding the influence transitions may or may not have on personality development can be made. Therefore, the research question could not be answered fully and does not cover life transitions' confident influence on personality. Still, the aim to deepen the understanding of the effect life transitions have on personality, was partially achieved. Further limitations to this analysis are additional factors that are not considered, like development during adolescence, the influence of personality traits, such as transition choices, cross-cultural differences and genetic predispositions. Future experimental research might examine the influence life transitions can have and considering the not included factors might lead to relevant results. Furthermore, more life transitions may be regarded for future research, as the transition to parenthood or events like marriage or losses of loved ones. Even modern life paths like going abroad, or being self-employed from a young age might be contemporary transitions that should be taken into account.

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