



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Parental antipathy and neglect: Relations with Big Five personality traits, cross-context trait variability and authenticity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 May 2013

Received in revised form 24 August 2013

Accepted 5 September 2013

Available online 3 October 2013

Keywords:

Parenting

Parental antipathy

Parental neglect

Cross-context trait variability

Authenticity

Big Five traits

ABSTRACT

A sample of adults ($N = 553$) aged 18–56 completed self-report measures of recalled parental antipathy/neglect in childhood, Big Five personality traits (rated across three contexts: with parents, friends and work colleagues), and authenticity. Parents, friends and work colleagues of those self-report participants ($N = 895$) completed other-report Big Five trait measures. Parental neglect and antipathy related negatively to self-reported and other-reported Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience, and positively to Neuroticism, particularly when self-reported for the 'with parents' context and other-rated by parents. Results showed that antipathy (but not neglect) predicted lower self-report authenticity and higher cross-context trait variability. A theoretical interpretation of these findings, including the link between parental antipathy and adult authenticity, is offered.

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1. Introduction

Personality traits manifest as consistencies in how a person typically behaves across different contexts of life. However, some individuals report being more variable than others in how their personality traits manifest across social contexts – a phenomenon referred to as cross-context trait variability. Furthermore, people differ in the extent to which they experience their personality traits as authentic or inauthentic. All these three constructs; traits, cross-context variability and authenticity are postulated to have a developmental link to parenting, and in the current study we explore these links.

1.1. Parental care/maltreatment and Big Five personality traits

Studies have investigated the link between parenting and personality in childhood (Hagekull & Bohlin, 2003; Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2004), as well as the related construct of child temperament (Paterson & Sanson, 1999). However, studies linking parental care to FFM (Five Factor Model) adult personality traits are rare. Schofield et al. (2012) gained data on parenting via questionnaires completed by parents as well as from observations of family interactions during a discussion task and a problem-solving task.

Positive parenting was found to relate to higher Conscientiousness, lower Neuroticism and higher Agreeableness in the teenage years. A study of adult psychiatric outpatients in Norway found that Extraversion and Conscientiousness were negatively predicted by retrospectively rated neglect, while Neuroticism was positively predicted. Agreeableness was predicted by the presence of parental care (Fosse & Holen, 2007). These studies use varying methods of assessing parenting, one real-time and one retrospective, yet their findings do support one another, and they do provide a tentative basis for predicting that positive parenting relates to higher Extraversion and Agreeableness, and lower Neuroticism.

1.2. Parental attachment and cross-context trait variability

The extent to which personality is consistent across contexts, and conversely the extent to which situations influence behaviour, has been a perennial debate in personality psychology (e.g., Mischel, 1979). However, the extent to which situational consistency links to parenting has been relatively overlooked. One study on this topic (Robinson, Wright, & Kendall, 2011) studied parental attachment (using the Parental Attachment Questionnaire – PAQ) and the measure of contextualised traits used in the current study (the TIPI-3C) that assesses FFM traits when with parents, friends, and at work. The aim was to investigate whether parental attachment relates to cross-context trait variability and contextualised traits. Stronger parental attachment was related to being more extraverted, agreeable, emotionally stable, conscientious and open to

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experience when with parents as adults. However, there were no significant relations between parental attachment and trait ratings for the work or friends contexts. The extent to which people rated their traits differently across the three contexts was also found to negatively correlate with parental attachment, suggesting that those individuals with problematic parental attachments tended to see themselves as having a less socially consistent adult personality. Parental attachment in adulthood is strongly related to parental care ratings (Muller, Gragtmans, & Baker, 2008), thus the above findings help to infer predictions in the current study.

1.3. Parental care/maltreatment and authenticity

Measures of authenticity assess the extent to which a person perceives that they behave in ways that are aligned to enduring traits, attitudes and goals that are felt subjectively to be self-determined and intrinsically motivated (Harter, Marold, Whitesell, & Cobbs, 1996; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). While authenticity is predictive of mental health (Wood et al., 2008), in some instances inauthenticity can be an adaptive response, for example in social environments where concealment is necessary for survival (Robinson, 2012). In an experience-sampling study, authenticity was consistently associated with acting in extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, emotionally stable and open ways (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010), suggesting a link between Big Five traits and authentic functioning.

Authenticity is negatively related to cross-context variability in the expression of FFM traits (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997). This may be because individuals with high levels of cross-context variability describe habitually using a persona, or a false self, to conceal their authentic personality in order to avoid conflict or rejection or to fit into certain social settings (Querstret & Robinson, 2012). Inauthenticity and cross-context trait variability may therefore both reflect a tendency to adapt behaviour to the perceived demands and expectations of others (Snyder & Gangestad, 2000).

Kernis and Goldman (2006) conceptualized authenticity as comprising four components: (a) an awareness of one's self, attributes and capacities; (b) an unbiased and accurate self-view; (c) the tendency for honest self-expression to others; and (d) openness within relationships. Their model proposes a developmental link between adult authenticity and parenting in childhood. More specifically, they suggest that if parents repeatedly punish or show hostility towards a child's expression of their feelings and thoughts, the child learns to ignore or conceal those expressions in favour of others that are more likely to gain parental approval (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). This contributes later to an adult pattern of inauthentic self-presentation; behaving in ways that seek the approval of others while concealing certain aspects of personality. In contrast, parenting that supports and affirms a child's self-expression promotes authentic functioning later in life. Consistent with this view, positive parenting has been found to positively relate to authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Another study similarly found that adolescents who did not perceive unconditional support from parents were more likely to suppress their true selves and to alter their behaviour to gain parental approval (Harter et al., 1996).

1.4. The current study

To summarise, existing literature suggests that positive parenting relates to (a) traits that are related to authentic functioning (higher E, A, C, O and lower N); (b) an adult personality that is experienced as consistent across social contexts, and (c) adult authenticity. We therefore predicted that the experience of parental neglect and antipathy in childhood would relate to lower

Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness, and Extraversion, and to higher Neuroticism, but only when rated by parents or when self-reported in relation to the 'with parents' context. We also expected that ratings of parental neglect and antipathy would predict higher cross-context personality variability in both self-report and other-report data. Finally, we hypothesized that the experience of neglect and antipathy from parents would predict lower levels of authenticity at trait-level and in the 'with parents' context, but not in the 'with friends' or 'with work colleagues' contexts.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The self-report sample ($N = 553$) comprised undergraduates ($N = 240$) and community-residing adults ($N = 313$), of whom 409 were female and 144 were male. The mean age of this sample was 28 years, with a range of 18 to 56. Participants were required to be aged 18 or older, fluent or native English speakers, to be in regular contact with at least one parent and in part-time or full-time paid employment. No significant differences on any of the study variables were found between student and community samples other than perceived parental antipathy, which was significantly higher in the student sample.

Participants were provided with the address of the project website to complete the questionnaires online. Student participants were solicited through a collaborative web-based research pool recruitment system. A team of 12 volunteer student recruiters recruited community participants.

To gain the third-party data, participants emailed a link to a parent, a friend and a work colleague – these persons were provided with a password to match third-party data with self-report data. Third parties independently accessed the questionnaire through the link and were assured that the information they provided was confidential. The third party sample ($N = 895$) comprised 300 parents (207 mothers and 93 fathers), 330 friends, and 265 work colleagues. This resulted in 206 self-report participants having data from all three third parties, 106 having data from two, 65 having data from one, and 176 having no third party data (38% of students, and 37% of community-residing adults, had a full complement of third party data respectively).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. The CECA-Q – antipathy and neglect scales

These scales assess the recalled antipathy (i.e., hostility, coldness, and rejection) and neglect (i.e., disinterest in care and joint activities) in childhood relationships for father and mother (Bifulco, Bernazzani, Moran, & Jacobs, 2005). Sample items from the 8-item Antipathy scale include "She/He made me feel unwanted" and "She/He was very critical of me." Sample reverse-keyed items from the 8-item Neglect scale were "She/He was concerned about my whereabouts" and "She/He cared for me when I was ill." Maternal and paternal ratings of Neglect and Antipathy were combined into two variables: 'Parental Antipathy' and 'Parental Neglect.' Cronbach alpha coefficients in the present sample were .89 for Parental Antipathy and .87 for Parental Neglect, supporting the strong internal consistency of the combined parental scales.

2.2.2. TIPI-3C (self-report)

The Ten-Item Personality Inventory – 3 Contexts (TIPI-3C) is a measure of FFM traits that asks participants to rate their traits as they are typically expressed in three social contexts: with parents, with friends and with work colleagues (Robinson, 2009). The

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