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Personality, psychopathology, and aging

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Abstract

The interplay of personality and psychopathology has been of substantial interest since the beginning of medicine and continues to be a clinically significant yet highly challenging focus of investigation. There is considerable empirical support for the important contributions that personality traits provide to the development of and resilience to psychopathology within mixed-age populations. However, the relationship of personality to mental health and psychopathology within the aging population is only just beginning to be studied. The purpose of this paper is to stimulate and to hopefully further the development of informative research on the interaction of personality and psychopathology within the aging community. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA). All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The interaction of personality and psychopathology has been of substantial interest since the beginning of medicine (Maher & Maher, 1994) and continues to be a clinically significant yet highly challenging domain of study (Watson & Clark, 1994; Widiger, Verheul, & van den Brink, 1999). However, the relationship of personality to mental health and psychopathology within the aging community is only just beginning to be studied (Abrams & Horowitz, 1996; Agronin, 1998, 2000; Rosowsky, Abrams, & Zweig, 1999; Sadavoy & Fogel, 1992; Segal, Hersen, Van Hasselt, Silberman, & Roth,

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1996). The purpose of this paper is to stimulate and hopefully to further the development of a broader life span perspective. We begin with a brief overview of maladaptive personality functioning, followed by illustrative aging research and a discussion of conceptual and methodological issues.

2. Maladaptive personality functioning

Personality is defined traditionally as “the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine [a person’s] characteristic behavior and thought” (Allport, 1961, p. 28). Everybody has a personality, or a characteristic manner of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating to others, that is evident in everyday behavior and has been evident across a wide variety of situations and throughout each person’s life. Some persons are typically introverted and withdrawn, others are more extraverted and outgoing. Some persons are invariably conscientious and efficient, whereas other persons would be consistently undependable and negligent. Some persons are characteristically anxious and apprehensive, whereas others are more relaxed and unconcerned. Personality traits have been the focus of a voluminous body of research for many years. The heritability, cross-situational consistency, temporal stability, and relevance of personality traits to occupational functioning, well-being, marital stability, and even physical health have been well established (Hogan, Johnson, & Briggs, 1997; Pervin & John, 1999).

It is “when personality traits are inflexible and maladaptive and cause significant functional impairment or subjective distress [that] they constitute Personality Disorders” (APA, 2000, p. 686). As expressed well by the Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council (1996) “surprisingly large numbers of people mature into normal, successful adults despite stressful, disadvantaged, or even abusive childhoods. Yet other people are so emotionally vulnerable that seemingly minor losses and rebuffs can be devastating - sometimes even precipitating severe mental disorder” (p. 22). The Basic Behavioral Science Task Force indicated how much of this vulnerability and resilience to the development of psychopathology in response to stress, loss, and trauma will be due to a person’s premorbid personality functioning. Countless studies have in fact been conducted on the different ways in which personality traits can contribute to the development of psychopathology during the early and middle years of adulthood (Widiger et al., 1999) and attention is now finally being directed at the adaptive and maladaptive effects of personality traits on the process and experience of aging (Seidnitz, 2001).

One approach to the study of maladaptive personality traits is the study of the disorders of personality included within the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

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