



Personality trait change and life satisfaction in adults: The roles of age and hedonic balance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether changes in personality traits influenced life satisfaction (LS). This involved investigating whether these associations were moderated by age and mediated by hedonic balance (i.e., positive and negative affect). Participants included 11,104 Australian adults aged 18–79 years, with data available from two time points (baseline and 4-year follow up). Latent difference score modeling indicated that increased neuroticism was associated with lower LS, whereas increased extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness were associated with higher LS. These relationships were moderated by age, and were less evident in older adults. Hedonic balance partially mediated the relationships between change in neuroticism and extraversion with LS. These findings provide important insights into longitudinal associations between personality change and LS.

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1. Introduction

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to how individuals evaluate their lives, and encompasses life satisfaction (LS), happiness, job satisfaction, and emotional reactions to events (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Realo & Dobewall, 2011). It has implications for numerous outcomes including marriage quality, job performance, social functioning, health, and quality of life (Realo & Dobewall, 2011). LS is an important cognitive component of SWB that incorporates an individual's subjective judgment and/or evaluation of their life drawing on any information they deem relevant (Diener et al., 2003). It predicts happiness and quality of life (Diener et al., 2003), and has been widely examined in a range of different disciplines.

Several studies have reported relationships between personality traits and LS (Boyce, Wood, & Powdthavee, 2013; Mroczek & Spiro, 2005; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2013). For instance, extraversion (E), conscientiousness (C), and agreeableness (A) are positively associated with LS, with neuroticism (N) inversely associated with LS (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005); openness to experience (O) is not a consistent correlate of LS (Heller, Watson, & Illies, 2004). Factors such as hedonic balance (i.e., positive and negative affect) have been proposed to underlie the association between

personality traits and LS (Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Ahadi, 2002).

The objective of this paper is to investigate whether changes in personality traits over time are associated with LS. We extend on existing literature by examining whether these longitudinal relationships are moderated by age and mediated by hedonic balance. In aggregate, this paper aims to provide an improved understanding of the longitudinal relationship between personality change and LS.

1.1. Personality change and LS

Longitudinal studies have examined the relationship between personality and LS, with personality traits assessed at a single time-point (i.e., at baseline). Although there is evidence of stability in personality traits, a potential limitation of these studies is that there is potential for continued personality development across the life span (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000; Specht, Egloff, & Schmukle, 2011; Turiano et al., 2012). Longitudinal studies have shown that levels of C and A increase with age, whereas N gradually decreases (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008); O increases in young adulthood, stabilises during middle adulthood, and declines thereafter (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Specht et al., 2011). Certain facets of E such as social dominance may also change with age (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Specht et al., 2011).

Personality change likely reflects a combination of genetic (e.g., intrinsic maturation) and environmental factors, such as changing physical and social environments, and significant life events

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(McCrae & Costa, 2008; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Specht et al., 2011). In addition, it has been linked with a range of outcomes (Magee, Heaven, & Miller, 2013; Mroczek & Spiro, 2007; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Turiano et al., 2012). For instance, individuals with increased N over time have poorer mental and physical health, whereas increased E is linked with improved health (Magee et al., 2013; Mroczek & Spiro, 2007; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Turiano et al., 2012). Boyce et al. (2013) found that personality change predicted LS in a sample of 8625 Australian adults aged 15–93 years old drawn from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. In particular, increases in E, A, C and O over time were associated with higher LS, whereas increases in N were linked with lower LS.

An important consideration when looking at these associations is that the nature and rate of changes in personality and LS vary by age. For instance, personality change is most pronounced during young adulthood and becomes less marked with increasing age. Thus, the effects of personality change on LS could be greater in younger than older adults. LS is high during young adulthood, declines in middle adulthood, and increases during older adulthood (Realo & Dobewall, 2011). Changes in personality traits may partially underlie the decline in LS observed during young adulthood. However, as personality change becomes less pronounced with increasing age, other factors (e.g., retirement) may influence LS in older age with personality change being less influential. Therefore, it is important to investigate whether age moderates the associations between personality change and LS.

1.2. Hedonic balance as a mediator

A range of mechanisms may link personality change with LS. Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, et al. (2002) proposed a mediator model to explain the relationship between baseline measures of personality and LS. This model involved conceptualising the relationship between personality and LS as a system mediated by hedonic balance (the ratio of positive to negative affect experienced by an individual). The mediator model proposes that higher E could facilitate expansion of one's social networks and interactions, leading to a positive hedonic balance where positive affect outweighs negative affect. In turn, the positive hedonic balance could promote more favourable ratings of LS (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005). In contrast, higher N is linked with greater emotional reactivity to life events, which could increase the likelihood of experiencing more negative emotions such as depression and anxiety (Mroczek & Spiro, 2005). High N could therefore promote a negative hedonic balance, and lead to lower ratings of LS.

This model has received some support, with the relationships of baseline measures of N and E with LS found to be mediated by hedonic balance (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, et al., 2002). Hedonic balance could also account for the associations between personality change and LS. This is because individuals who become more neurotic over time may experience a negative hedonic balance which could contribute to poorer LS. In contrast, individuals who become more extraverted over time could derive more pleasure out of doing things they enjoy (a positive hedonic balance) and hence have higher LS. These pathways have yet to be examined in relation to personality change.

1.3. Aims of this study

The objective of this paper was to investigate the relationship between personality change and LS in adults using data from the HILDA survey. Boyce et al. (2013) previously examined HILDA data and using fixed effects regression found that changes in personality traits were associated with LS. Although these findings provided important insights, fixed effects regression removes between-subject

variation from the model to focus on within-subject variation. One problem with this approach is that it removes factors considered to be stable over time but that may contribute to between-subjects differences. As outlined above, age is one between-subjects factor that could moderate the association between personality change and LS, but this cannot be captured in a fixed-effects model. Therefore in the present article, we utilised latent change score modeling which not only estimates both between-subject and within-subject differences in change, but minimises measurement error over time by expressing personality change as a latent variable (Selig & Preacher, 2009). In addition, it allows us to extend on existing research by examining whether age moderates these associations and whether hedonic balance is a mediator linking changes in N and E with LS.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and design

The HILDA Survey is a longitudinal study that collects data through interviews and self-completion surveys on household and family variables from a broadly representative sample of Australians (Wooden, Freidin, & Watson, 2002). Data were first collected in 2001 (Wave 1), with 13,969 participants providing data; follow up data are collected every 12 months (Wooden et al., 2002). Approval to use the HILDA data was obtained from our university's Human Research Ethics Committee. We focused specifically on data from Waves 5 and 9, as these are the two time points where information on both personality and LS are available. We refer to Waves 5 and 9 as Times 1 and 2, respectively in the remainder of this paper.

The sample included 11,104 adults aged 20–79 years ($M = 45.27$, $SD = 15.59$) at Time 1, which included a relatively equal proportion of males (47.3%) and females (52.7%). Data were available from 9323 participants at Time 2, indicating an attrition rate of 16.0%. Missing data were dealt with using Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation, which is preferred over other methods (e.g., imputation and pairwise deletion) because of greater efficiency and reduced bias (Bandalos, 2002).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Personality

Personality was assessed at Times 1 and 2 using a 36-item version of Goldberg's Big Five Markers Scale (Saucier, 1994). Each item consists of a single adjective (e.g., "talkative") requiring participants to indicate how well each item described them on a 7-point Likert scale from "does not describe me at all" to "describes me very well". N consisted of eight items, with adjectives such as jealous, envious, and selfish (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$). C comprised seven adjectives reflecting organization and orderliness ($\alpha = 0.79$). E was reflected by seven adjectives representing talkativeness and liveliness ($\alpha = 0.75$), with A assessed according to four items reflecting warmth and kindness ($\alpha = 0.78$). Finally, O was reflected by six items encompassing creativity, complexity, and imagination ($\alpha = 0.74$).

2.2.2. Life satisfaction

LS was assessed using a single item: 'All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?' which was assessed on an 11-point scale from 'dissatisfied' to 'satisfied'. This widely used item has been shown to produce reliable and valid indications of LS (Diener et al., 2003; Fujita & Diener, 2005; Realo & Dobewall, 2011; Veenhoven, 1996), with scores corresponding closely with LS scales that include multiple items (Realo & Dobewall, 2011; Veenhoven, 1996).

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