



Age differences in conscientiousness facets in the second half of life: Divergent associations with changes in physical health[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 January 2016

Received in revised form 24 February 2016

Accepted 26 February 2016

Available online 12 March 2016

Keywords:

Conscientiousness

Facets

Personality development

Age differences

Health and Retirement Study

ABSTRACT

The development of personality across the lifespan has captivated researchers for several years. However, lower order facets may show different developmental trends and divergent associations with outcomes compared to their higher order traits. In a sample of 12,762 older adults, age differences in conscientiousness and its facets were examined. Further, the degree to which conscientiousness and its facets differentially predicted physical health over a four-year period was also examined. Broader conscientiousness, orderliness, and industriousness were lowest in late life. Traditionalism and virtue were highest in late life. Responsibility was highest around age 70. Self-control did not show any significant age-related differences. Conscientiousness, orderliness, industriousness, and responsibility were most consistently related to physical health over time. The findings are discussed in the context of the mechanisms that give rise to personality development and divergent associations in outcomes among seemingly related facets.

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1. Introduction

Conscientiousness is a personality trait that describes individuals who are goal-directed, organized, able to control their impulses, and follow socially accepted norms and values (John & Srivastava, 1999). Much of the research on conscientiousness details its purported benefits with respect to physical health, occupational success, and marital stability across the lifespan (Bogg & Roberts, 2004; Hogan & Holland, 2003; Roberts & Bogg, 2004; Roberts, Walton, & Bogg, 2005). Although conscientiousness is a stable personality trait, it also changes over time and across the lifespan, such that people become more conscientious as they age (Bleidorn et al., 2009; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008; Roberts et al., 2006). There is also a growing amount of evidence that conscientiousness peaks in middle age before declining in late life (Donnellan & Lucas, 2008; Wortman et al., 2012). Finally, there is evidence that conscientiousness is seen as increasingly more desirable across adulthood, which may also explain why conscientiousness tends to increase with age (Soubelet & Salthouse, 2011).

Recently, Jackson et al. (2009) delineated how particular facets (i.e., sub-components) of conscientiousness might change differently across the lifespan. The facets they focused on were impulse/self-control (cautious v. careless), orderliness (organized v. sloppy), industriousness (tenacious v. lazy), conventionality/traditionalism (traditional v. non-conforming), and reliability/responsibility (dependable v. unreliable)

(Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). Some facets showed age-related differences similar to broader conscientiousness (e.g., industriousness); other facets increased linearly with age (e.g., impulsiveness/lack of self-control, reliability/responsibility); others increased only in late life (e.g., conventionality/traditionalism); yet others showed no age-related change (e.g., orderliness). This study was an important first step toward providing a more nuanced description for how facets of conscientiousness develop across the lifespan. However, there are a few limitations in previous studies of conscientiousness facets across the lifespan that are worth considering.

First, although the samples used in Jackson's report were moderately large ($Ns = 274$ and 613), the number of older adults in their samples were relatively small ($Ns = 74$ and 155 for individuals over the age of 60). The small number of older adults does not enable researchers to test meaningful age-related differences and curvilinear trends throughout the second half of life. Examining how personality develops in the second half of life is important because recent theoretical work suggests this life stage might involve considerably more personality change than researchers originally thought (Specht et al., 2014).

Second, much of past research has been dedicated to identifying and quantifying conscientiousness facets, rather than on whether they are differentially associated with important outcomes, particularly among older adults. Nevertheless, the growing number of studies suggests that the facets of conscientiousness uniquely predict emotional states, health behavior, and educational and occupational success (Christopher et al., 2008; Ellickson-Larew et al., 2013; Fein & Klein, 2011; Hagger-Johnson & Whiteman, 2007; O'Connor et al., 2009; Periard & Burns, 2014; Roberts, Chernyshenko, et al., 2005; Woo et al., 2015). However, most of these studies find inconsistent associations

[☆] The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The Health and Retirement Study is sponsored by the National Institute on Aging (NIA U01AG09740) and is conducted by the University of Michigan.

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between conscientiousness facets and each of these outcomes, and others find no predictive validity of these facets above the contributions of broader conscientiousness (Salgado et al., 2013). Further, no study has examined the unique contribution of conscientiousness facets in predicting longitudinal changes in health among older adults. Older adulthood is a particularly important time to examine the impact of personality on health as the onset of many health-related problems occurs in older adulthood.

Thus, the goal of the current study was twofold. First, age differences in conscientiousness and its facets were examined in large cross-sectional sample of older adults. Second, the utility of each of these facets in predicting physical health over a four-year period was examined.

1.1. Age differences in conscientiousness and its facets

Why do conscientiousness and its facets change across the lifespan? Early research and theory stated that personality is something that is tied to inherent biological states and does not change after one reaches adulthood (McCrae et al., 1999; Roberts, Walton, et al., 2005). However, the prevailing perspective in the literature now is that personality continues to develop and change across the life course, including into older adulthood (Specht et al., 2011; Srivastava et al., 2003). Many reasons have been put forth to explain why conscientiousness tends to increase across the lifespan (Soto et al., 2010). For example, there is evidence that people's personality changes when they enact a new (conscientious) behavior over a long period of time. People who stop smoking also tend to report increases in responsibility across the cessation (Roberts & Bogg, 2004). The idea is that individuals reflect on how a new behavior impacts their life and they revise their opinions about themselves and change their behavior accordingly. Another mechanism leading to personality development involves people changing in response to contingencies put on them by their social environments (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). When individuals start a new role (e.g., a new job, a committed relationship, becoming a parent), they are expected to act in ways that are socially acceptable and promote success in that role. For example, starting a new job entails many social responsibilities. It involves showing up to work on time, completing work thoroughly and on time, having positive relationships with one's coworkers, and many more expectations. In turn, people are rewarded for their investment and commitment to the social institutions in their environment. Inappropriate behavior is punished when people do not conform to these expectations.

Thus, personality change results, in part, from the social control imposed on people by the various social roles they inhabit across the lifespan. There is evidence that conscientiousness increases after individuals get married, take part in religious communities, and invest more in their work (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2007). Age differences in conscientiousness facets demonstrate this *social investment principle* well (Jackson et al., 2009; Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). Middle aged adults are more industrious, have more self-control, and are more responsible than younger adults. The higher values of these facets in midlife may reflect the culmination of efforts to fit into these social roles. Indeed, midlife is a time during which adults have had a considerable amount of time in their relationships and occupations, so facets related to social investment may peak around this time (Lachman et al., 2015). Other facets, such as traditionalism, may not be socially rewarding earlier in the lifespan, which is a time that rewards people and thinking that go against the grain of society. Late life increases in traditionalism could reflect the fact the individuals become more entrenched in their ideals and views about life (Jackson et al., 2009).

Thus, there are reasons to expect conscientiousness and its facets change differently across the lifespan, which would be revealed in cross-sectional age differences. However, studies on age differences in personality among older adults are relatively rare (Berg & Johansson, 2013). This oversight is surprising considering the many life transitions

and events that occur after middle adulthood (Specht et al., 2014). Individuals may retire from full-time work, become grandparents and often care for young children, or experience bereavement (Specht et al., 2011). Each of these has the potential to change the way people act in their social environments, which is a major mechanism underlying personality change. In fact, older adults report a high desire to acquire desirable personality traits in navigating these new transitions, which is one of the preconditions behind volitional personality change (Hennecke et al., 2014; Hudson & Fraley, 2015; Smith & Freund, 2002). Indeed, age-related changes in personality conceptually map on to existing developmental theories describing the changes that occur during the second half of life (Chopik et al., 2015). Retirement may lead to lower levels of conscientiousness as the social role expectations to act in a conscientious way are no longer present (Specht et al., 2011). Other research suggests that changes in conscientiousness may be related to physical health and illness in older adulthood. In fact, the onset of a chronic illness is associated with declines in conscientiousness over periods ranging from four to ten years (Jokela et al., 2014). As such, declines in physical health could make it hard for individuals to maintain high of conscientiousness and may be one explanation for why conscientiousness declines in older adulthood. Thus, older adulthood could be a time during which large age differences in personality emerge.

1.2. Conscientiousness facets and health

The associations between conscientiousness, its facets, and health over time were also examined. The finding that conscientious people are healthier has been replicated across different samples and measures, including ratings of physical health and health behavior at every point in the lifespan (Roberts, Walton, et al., 2005; Shanahan et al., 2014). Indeed, individuals who increase in conscientiousness also engage in more health-promoting activities, which explains their higher levels of physical health over time (Takahashi et al., 2013). In their validation paper that identified the six conscientiousness facets, Roberts et al. (2005) correlated each of the facets with a self-report measure of drug use and preventative health behaviors. Some facets (i.e., orderliness and responsibility) were consistently associated with lower drug use and more preventative health behaviors. However, the degree to which facets uniquely predict health *over time* is currently unknown. In thinking of the mechanisms linking conscientiousness to health behavior, perhaps facets that might predict greater exercise, healthier dieting, and medication adherence would also be predictive of better health over time (Bogg & Roberts, 2004). Perhaps being more orderly, industrious, and responsible is associated with remembering where medications are and when to take them, scheduling and keeping a doctor's appointment, and other health-related commitments and considerations. Likewise, higher levels of self-control may prevent individuals from engaging in risky health behavior (Mann & Ward, 2007). As such, it was hypothesized that the facets of self-control, orderliness, industriousness, and responsibility would be associated with health. The facets of traditionalism and virtue are less obviously related to health. Nevertheless, they could be associated with avoiding new, risky situations that could jeopardize health. In the current study, we examined the unique contributions of these facets, and broader conscientiousness, in predicting health over time.

2. The current study

The current study examined age differences in conscientiousness and its facets during the second half of life. A large, nationally representative sample of older adults followed over a four-year period was used. First, linear, quadratic, and cubic patterns of age differences in conscientiousness and its facets were examined. It was expected that conscientiousness, self-control, orderliness, industriousness, and responsibility would all decrease with age. Traditionalism and virtue were expected

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