



Personality profiles and adolescents' maladjustment: A longitudinal study

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ABSTRACT

During adolescence, some personality characteristics may represent vulnerabilities to adolescents' adjustment. Adopting a person-centered approach, the aims of this study were (a) to examine the relations of early adolescents' personality profiles to internalizing (i.e., anxious/depressed, withdrawal, and somatic complaints) and externalizing (i.e., aggressive and rule breaking behavior) problems three years later, and (b) to explore the moderating role of gender in these relations. Six hundred fifteen Italian preadolescents (mean age = 12.5) completed the Big Five Questionnaire for Children at age 12 and the Youth Self-Report at age 12 and three years later. Four personality types were identified using Latent Profile Analysis: Resilient, Moderate, Undercontrolled and Vulnerable. In multiple-group path analysis, after controlling for the stability of the outcomes, for both genders, Resilient reported low levels of externalizing problems three years later, whereas Vulnerable youths reported high levels of internalizing problems. Finally, Undercontrolled reported high levels of subsequent externalizing problems. The present study corroborated the unique and specific prediction by personality profiles of different types of subsequent maladjustment.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a time of challenges due to adolescents' exposure to many developmental demands and changes (i.e., biological, cognitive, emotional, relational, or social). How adolescents face those challenges is crucial for their successful or unsuccessful development (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Personality characteristics may affect how adolescents experience and react to this developmental transition, during which emotional and behavioral problems, such as internalizing (e.g., social withdrawal, psychosomatic reactions, anxiety, or depression) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggressive and rule breaking behavior; Achenbach, 1991), tend to increase (Zahn-Waxler, Shirlcliff, & Marceau, 2008).

Results from a variety of studies support the role of personality in predicting adolescents' emotional and behavioral problems (Klimstra, Akse, Hale, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2010). Based on the *vulnerability model* (see Tackett, 2006), which proposes that personality traits can increase or decrease individuals' vulnerability to emotional and behavioral problems, we examined the associations among early adolescents' personality profiles and different indicators of internalizing and externalizing problems three years later. In addition, we explored the moderating role of gender in these associations.

1.1. Personality profiles

In the last 30 years, within a person-centered approach, numerous researchers have adopted the Big Five model (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1995) to identify three or four personality profiles that have been substantially replicated across different ages and cultures (e.g. Asendorpf & van Aken, 1999; Meeus, Van de Schoot, Klimstra, & Branje, 2011; Robins, John, Caspi, Moffitt, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1996; Xie, Chen, Lei, Xing, & Zhang, 2016). Most of those studies have identified three profiles: the Resilient profile, characterized by high levels of all the personality traits (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Openness); the Overcontrolled profile, characterized by low levels of Extraversion and Emotional Stability and high levels of Conscientiousness; and the Undercontrolled profile, characterized by low levels of Emotional Stability and Conscientiousness, and high levels of Extraversion. Those profiles generally have confirmed research conducted by Block and Block (1980) who hypothesized and corroborated empirically the aforementioned three personality profiles and hypothesized a fourth profile, the most unadaptable, labeled Brittle, that was not empirically confirmed.

The three-profile structure has been found for adults, as well as for late adolescents (e.g., Akse, Hale III, Engels, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2004; Steca, Alessandri, & Caprara, 2010). However, findings in early

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and middle adolescents are mixed. In particular, whereas some researchers have confirmed the three-profile solution (e.g. Asendorpf & van Aken, 1999; Meeus et al., 2011), other investigators (e.g., De Clercq, Rettew, Althoff, & De Bolle, 2012; Xie et al., 2016) have identified four personality profiles. The four-profile solution confirmed the Resilient and Undercontrolled profile, but also included a Moderate profile (average levels of the Big Five Traits), and a Vulnerable profile (low in all traits). Although the Moderate profile was a novelty, the Vulnerable was previously hypothesized by Block and Block (1980) as the Brittle profile, the opposite of the Resilient.

Researchers have tried to explain the partial inconsistency of findings not only with a variety of methodological reasons (e.g., different instruments, analytic procedures, or age of participants Isler, Fletcher, Liu, & Sibley, 2017), but also with theoretical reasons. For example, Asendorpf (2006) highlighted the importance of taking into account the global variability within profiles, whereas Caspi and Shiner (2006) focused the attention on the utility of different personality profiles' for predicting adolescents' (mal)adjustment over time.

1.2. Adolescents' personality profiles, externalizing and internalizing problems

Personality characteristics may have a role in increasing (or decreasing) youths' vulnerability to specific problematic tendencies through a variety of cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal mechanisms, such as the nature of reactions elicited from others or how youths construe their experiences (Caspi & Shiner, 2006). Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have found differences in the psychosocial functioning associated with the three or four personality profiles. In particular, researchers have found that Resilients exhibit fewer internalizing and externalizing problems and the Moderate profile is generally a well-adapted profile, but with a slightly lower level of adjustment than the Resilient profile (e.g., De Clercq et al., 2012). In contrast, Undercontrollers tend to manifest aggressive and transgressive behaviors, probably related to their pervasive self-regulatory difficulties, and Overcontrollers tend to experience anxious and depressive feelings (e.g., Akse et al., 2004; Akse, Hale, Engels, Raaijmakers, & Meeus, 2007). Overcontrollers, because they are introverted and emotionally unstable, are more vulnerable to negative emotions and more at risk for establishing negative interpersonal relationships and for experiencing high levels of stressors and low social support (Caspi & Shiner, 2006), factors that could increase the risk of internalizing problems (e.g., Hankin & Abramson, 2001). Finally, Vulnerable adolescents exhibit the most compromised profile on all traits and evidence concurrent risk for anxiety and depression (or internalizing problems) and aggression and problematic behaviors (externalizing problems). Vulnerable adolescents likely experience a variety of difficulties and risks, such as low self-regulation and a tendency to interpret events negatively, responses that elicit negative interpersonal reactions and lead to isolation and rejection (e.g., Caspi & Shiner, 2006), increasing the risk of pervasive maladjustment.

1.3. The present study

We first attempted to identify the personality profiles of Italian pre-adolescents adopting the Big Five Traits model (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1995), and using Latent Profile Analysis (LPA; Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). Consistent with previous research, we expected to find a relatively small number of personality profiles.

Second, we examined the longitudinal associations of the personality profiles with narrow categories of internalizing problems (i.e., withdrawn, somatic complaints, and anxiety/depression), and narrow externalizing problems (i.e., aggressive behavior and rule breaking behavior), evaluated three years later, during middle adolescence. Internalizing and externalizing problems are often correlated, especially in adolescence (Krueger, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000), so we addressed both kinds of problems simultaneously.

Unlike other studies, we examined longitudinal associations between profiles and outcomes while taking into account the stability of the outcomes and correlations among them. We tested the unique prediction of each personality profile, and we hypothesized that (a) profiles presenting pervasively maladaptive patterns of personality traits would uniquely predict, and would be concurrently associated with, high levels of narrow internalizing and externalizing problems; (b) profiles presenting pervasively adaptive patterns of personality traits would uniquely predict, and be concurrently associated with, low levels of both internalizing and externalizing problems; and (c) profiles presenting partially maladaptive patterns of personality traits would uniquely predict, and be concurrently associated with, narrow internalizing or externalizing problems.

Finally, we examined the moderating role of adolescents' gender in the relations of personality profiles to both internalizing and externalizing problems. To our knowledge, no studies have specifically addressed this moderating role of gender, although researchers have found gender differences both in personality profiles and in internalizing and externalizing problems (Achenbach, Ivanova, Rescorla, Turner, & Althoff, 2016; Akse et al., 2004). Compared to boys, girls have had higher probabilities of being Resilient or Overcontrolled and reporting internalizing problems, and lower probabilities of being Undercontrolled and reporting externalizing problems (e.g., Akse et al., 2004; Crijnen, Achenbach, & Verhulst, 1997; Meeus et al., 2011). Furthermore, gender has been considered as moderator of developmental processes (e.g., Perry & Pauletti, 2011). For example, boys have been found to be more vulnerable to peer influence than girls, so we hypothesized that that some profiles (e.g., Undercontrolled) render boys more vulnerable than girls to externalizing problems because of their higher vulnerability to transgressive peer pressure (Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009).

2. Method

For additional informations on the method, please see Supplementary materials.

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were part of the Genzano Longitudinal Study (Caprara & Pastorelli, 1993). For the present study, we examined two of the total four cohorts of participants at 6th and 7th grades of junior high school. A total of 615 students (M age = 12.6 years, SD = 0.67; range age = 11–16), 331 males (53.8%) and 284 females (46.2%) were available at Wave 1 (W1). Three years later (Wave 2; W2), data were available for 427 adolescents (M age = 15.5 years, SD = 0.65). Written informed consent was obtained every year from both parents and schools. The questionnaires were administered in classrooms during lessons by trained researchers who provided information and clarification about the aims of the project and the procedure.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Socio-demographic variables

Adolescents reported information concerning parents' education and job (higher scores refer to higher level of socio-economic status).

2.2.2. Personality traits

We used a 30-item short form (6 item for each dimension) of the Big Five Questionnaire for Children (BFQ-C; Barbaranelli, Caprara, Rabasca, & Pastorelli, 2003) to assess personality traits at Wave 1. The questionnaire measured Energy/Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Instability and Openness with Likert scales ranging from 1 = "very false for me" to 5 = "very true for me." In the present study, we reversed Emotional Instability in Emotional Stability to measure the adaptive pole of all the Big Five Traits because, as

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