



Before and after: Personality pathology, childhood conditions, and life history outcomes



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ABSTRACT

In this study ($N = 253$), we examined how pathological personality traits are related to (self-reported) childhood conditions and the adult life outcomes of rates of education, socioeconomic status, income, and number of offspring for men and women. We found (1) childhood unpredictability was more strongly associated with pathological personality traits than was harshness; (2) higher levels of psychoticism were associated with a broad-spectrum of adverse life history outcomes; (3) men reported higher levels of detachment, antagonism, disinhibition, and psychoticism than women reported; and (4) moderated-mediational analyses suggested detachment and antagonism differentially mediated the associations between childhood socioecological conditions and adult life outcomes for men and women.

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Most research on personality disorders relies on criminal/clinical samples and clinically-based diagnostic tools making it limited in generalizability and based on categorical as opposed to continuous thinking. That is, by relying on clinical samples, researchers might be undermining their ability to make broader claims about *darker* aspects of personality, and by focusing on yes/no diagnoses, researchers may be making conceptual errors in that few things in human psychology are dichotomous. In addition, the latter limitation may perpetuate us-vs-them thinking in the public when talking about personality disorders. Recently, a new measure (i.e., *Personality Inventory for the DSM-5*; Krueger, Derringer, Markon, Watson, & Skodol, 2012) has been developed to capture the continuous nature of “maladaptive” traits like *negative affectivity* (i.e., the tendency to experience an array of negative emotions), *detachment* (i.e., characterized by introversion, social isolation, and anhedonia), *antagonism* (i.e., aggressive tendencies accompanied by assertions of dominance and grandiosity), *disinhibition* (i.e., impulsivity and sensation seeking), and *psychoticism* (i.e., a disconnection from reality and a tendency to experience illogical thought patterns). The traits captured by this model are socially undesirable variants (Chmielewski, Bagby, Markon, Ring, & Ryder, 2014; Few et al., 2013) of the Big Five personality dimensions of emotional stability (i.e., negative affectivity), extraversion (i.e., detachment), agreeableness (i.e., antagonism), conscientiousness (i.e., disinhibition), and openness (i.e., psychoticism) and predict interpersonal and intrapersonal dysfunctions (Pollock, McCabe, Southard, & Zeigler-Hill, 2016; Southard,

Noser, Pollock, Mercer, & Zeigler-Hill, 2015). Research concerning these traits is still in its infancy. Here we add to that discussion by examining the role of (self-reported) childhood conditions in accounting for variance in these traits and the life outcomes associated with these traits.

There is little doubt that early life experiences (i.e., the before) shape adult personality and interpersonal functioning (Bowlby, 1979) with adverse childhood conditions sending people on a (dark) path towards personality pathologies (Bjorklund, 2015; Volk & Atkinson, 2013). However, not all adverse conditions are the same, with two main sources of volatility in the shape of predictability and the availability of resources or harshness (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009). The unpredictability of one's childhood environment may influence the development of predictive heuristics that guide decision-making in the future (Hurst & Kavanagh, 2017) like those seen in traits like psychopathy and narcissism (Jonason, Icho, & Ireland, 2016) whereas the harshness may affect the development of psychopathologies and neurological disorders (Moreria, 2003). We contend that traits like disinhibition and interpersonal antagonism are not really psychopathologies, but, instead, represent cognitive adaptations calibrated by childhood conditions that happen to have socially undesirable outcomes linked to them. As a result, we expect that both harshness and unpredictability will be positively correlated with the PID traits (H1a) and we expect unpredictability to be more important (H1b).

In addition, as socially undesirable variants of the Big Five traits, they should be related to undesirable *sequelea* (i.e., the after). In particular, there are likely to be a number of associations between these personality traits and life outcomes. First, detachment may undermine one's ability to successfully navigate one's life given the centrality of social

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interactions to both of these life outcomes (H2a). Second, negative affectivity may have a suppressive effect on the financial success that is attainable in adulthood just as neuroticism undermines work-related success (H2b; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). Third, disinhibition may undermine educational success because impulsivity may reduce the likelihood that individuals will finish school and increase the probability that they will make other choices characterized as *fast* life choices such as using drugs and alcohol, prioritizing immediate rewards over delayed ones, and engaging in selfish behaviors (H2c; White, Jarrett, & Ollendick, 2013). Fourth, and perhaps more sweepingly, psychoticism – with its delusional and quasi-schizophrenic nature – may fundamentally undermine one's ability to be successful in education, reproduction, and finances (H2d). Individuals with high levels of psychoticism may view the world so differently than others that it may make them unattractive to potential romantic partners, lead to conflict with educational institutions, and result in difficulties maintaining conventional forms of employment.

And last, we conjecture about potential sex differences in the personality reactions to childhood stressors. First, the scarcity of resources in one's childhood may encourage men to distance themselves from their social and family group. Doing so may allow men to go out and find the resources they need, unfettered by emotional and familial attachments. In contrast, the survival risks of venturing out like this may continue to be too high for women and the role of affective bonds too central to make such a response to scarcity a viable option. Second, the reasons for the development of antagonism – as well as the consequences of antagonism – may be different between the sexes. For instance, aggression and competitiveness may be adaptive responses in men (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009) that result from the experience of unpredictable childhoods and may pay off in terms of adult outcomes such as status. That is, men may be sensitive to unpredictability which helps them achieve important, male-specific life outcomes through the development of antagonistic social strategies (Hurtz & Kavanagh, 2017; Jonason et al., 2016), whereas men may be relatively insensitive to resource scarcity during childhood. In contrast, given the relatively high rates of resources that are demanded from women by offspring, women who are sensitive and responsive to this information might have better survival rates than those who are indifferent to these resource demands. As resources in the environment improve, women may become more competitive (i.e., antagonistic) in hopes of acquiring even more resources for their offspring. Alternatively, childhood abundance may provide women the safety needed to offset the potential dangers associated with engaging in an antagonistic social strategy. That is, instead of being activated by childhood abundance, this condition may simply set the stage for women who are latently antagonistic to express that part of their nature.

1. Method

1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 253 community adults from the United States (40% male) who were recruited using Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid US\$2 in exchange for completing the below measures – along with other measures that are not relevant to the present study – via a secure website. The mean age of our participants was 37.08 years ($SD = 11.52$, $Range = 18–80$).¹ The majority of the sample was European American (72%), followed by African American (8%), Hispanic (5%), Asian (5%), and “other” (6%).

¹ Age was negatively correlated with each of the PID-5 traits ($r_s = -0.15$ to -0.36 , $p_s < 0.05$) which suggests that people may report lower levels of pathological personality traits as they get older. However, we controlled for age in our preliminary analyses but it did not significantly alter the results that are reported throughout this article. As a result, we trimmed age from our final analyses and it will not be discussed further in the present study.

1.2. Measures

We assessed childhood conditions with a self-report, retrospective measure (Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, & Tybur, 2011). Participants completed the measures of family resources (8 items; e.g., “Familial support for food” [Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$]) and childhood unpredictability under ten years of age (3 items; e.g., “Things were often chaotic in my house” [$\alpha = 0.77$]). Items were averaged to create indexes of each.

We used brief form of the PID-5 (Krueger et al., 2012) which is composed of 25 items that assess *negative affectivity* (5 items; e.g., “I worry about almost everything” [$\alpha = 0.78$]), *detachment* (5 items; e.g., “I don't like to get too close to people” [$\alpha = 0.80$]), *antagonism* (5 items; e.g., “I use people to get what I want” [$\alpha = 0.79$]), *disinhibition* (5 items; e.g., “People would describe me as reckless” [$\alpha = 0.83$]), and *psychoticism* (5 items; e.g., “My thoughts often don't make sense to others” [$\alpha = 0.82$]). Participants were asked to rate how accurately (0 = *very false or often very false*; 3 = *very true or often true*) each of the items described them. Items were averaged to create indexes of each.

We assessed an assortment of potential life outcome data. We assessed number of offspring and found that our participants had, on average, one child ($M = 1.01$, $SD = 1.20$; $Range = 0–5$). We assessed level of education: <1% of our participants did not complete high school, 10% completed high school, 26% completed some college, 12% had an Associate's degree, 29% had a Bachelor's degree, and 16% had a graduate degree.² We assessed current socioeconomic status by asking agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly disagree*) with three self-report items (e.g., “I feel relatively wealthy these days”; $\alpha = 0.88$; Griskevicius et al., 2011) and current household income on a scale that ranged from 1 (*Less than US\$15,000*) to 8 (*More than US\$150,000*).

2. Results

We found no sex differences in self-reports of childhood conditions, level of education, current SES, or current income. Women had slightly more negative affectivity than men did ($t[251] = 1.79$, $p < 0.08$, Cohen's $d = 0.23$) and men were more detached ($t[251] = -3.05$, $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.38$), antagonistic ($t[251] = -5.72$, $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.74$), disinhibited ($t[251] = -3.46$, $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.45$), and psychotic ($t[251] = -2.89$, $p < 0.01$, $d = -0.35$) than women were.³ In Table 1, we document the correlations between each of the pathological traits, their relationships with harshness and unpredictability (H1a), and how they are associated with life outcome data (H2a–d).⁴ Generally, these effects were weak, but they suggest an array of deleterious outcomes associated with pathological personality traits, mostly detachment (H2a) and psychoticism (H2d). When we controlled for unpredictability, the correlations were all near zero and not significant. In contrast, when we controlled for harshness, unpredictability was still correlated with all of traits that we measured ($p_r s = 0.17$ to 0.24 , $p_s < 0.01$)⁵ confirming our contention that predictability is the more important determinant of personality variance than harshness (H1b).

2.1. Moderated-mediation

We employed a moderated-mediation analysis (see Fig. 1) using model eight of the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013) with 10,000 bootstrapped samples. Our hypotheses were consistent with an indirect effects model such that the association between childhood socioecological conditions (i.e., childhood unpredictability and childhood resource availability) and adult life outcomes (i.e., number of

² Given this distribution, we treat this variable in a continuous fashion below.

³ Full details are available upon request.

⁴ We found one weak moderated correlation. A stronger association was observed between childhood resource availability and antagonism for men than for women ($r_{Men} = -0.23$, $r_{Women} = 0.02$; $z = -1.97$, $p < 0.05$). Full details are available upon request.

⁵ Full details are available upon request.

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