

Understanding BPD in Adolescents: New Findings from Research on Personality Development in Young People

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Who I Am

- Clinical psychologist by training
- Researcher who studies personality development in children and adolescents: how do we become the people we are over the first two decades of life
- A fellow parent



Overview

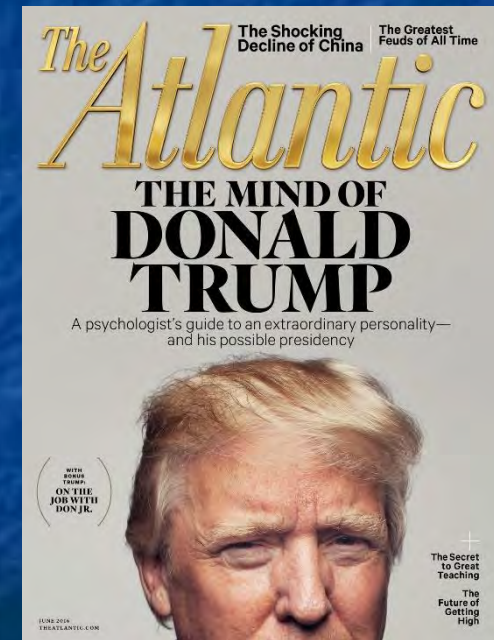
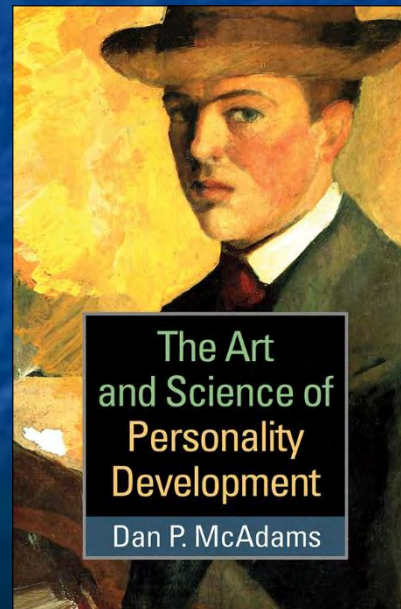
1. Personality traits and the development of BPD
 - a) The most relevant traits
 - b) How do youth's traits change over time?
 - c) How traits affect life tasks
2. Aspects of personality beyond traits in BPD
 - a) Mental representations and coping
 - b) Life stories
3. Conclusion: The potential for personality change

Two big themes

- Adolescence likely represents a key developmental period for the development and manifestation of BPD.
- Normal personality development processes are highly relevant for understanding the emergence of BPD.
 - *Developmental psychopathology perspective*

What are the main components of personality?

- What makes us distinct and different from others?
- Dan McAdams' model



What are the main components of personality?

■ LEVEL 1: TRAITS

- Tendencies in behavior, emotion, and thought expressed with some consistency across time and situation

■ LEVEL 2: PERSONAL CONCERNS

- Mental representations, coping styles

■ LEVEL 3: NARRATIVE IDENTITY

- Evolving stories about who one is

I. Personality traits and the development of BPD

LEVEL 1: TRAITS

a) The most relevant traits

- Tendencies in behavior, emotion, and thought expressed with some consistency across time and situation
- Earliest emerging aspect of children's individuality, often called "temperament" earlier on
- Reflect heritable, biological differences across people, but are influenced by experiences and the environment

The Five-Factor Model of Personality

Openness to Experience

Conscientiousness

Extraversion

Agreeableness

Neuroticism

Neuroticism

- ❖ Tendencies toward negative emotions, including worry, irritability, sadness, vulnerability, insecurity



Neuroticism: Two components

- ❖ Includes two related but separable components:
 1. Withdrawal: worried, easily overwhelmed, feels threatened and fearful
 2. Volatility: moody, easily upset and angered

From Colin De Young, *Big Five Aspects Scale*



I am someone who . . .

- Worries a lot.
- Gets nervous easily.
- Can be moody.
- Is depressed, blue.
- Can be tense.
- Feels insecure.
- Is relaxed, handles stress well.
- Is emotionally stable, not easily upset.
- Remains calm in tense situations.

From the *Big Five Inventory*, Soto and John

Neuroticism

- Propensity to experience negative emotions more often, more intensely
- Trait is measureable in rudimentary form in infants
- Young people with BPD experience complex negative emotions at the same time, and this often precedes self-harm; also show lower acceptance of negative emotions (Andrews et al., 2017)



ANXIETY GIRL

able to jump to the worst conclusion
in a single bound!

Conscientiousness



- ❖ Tendencies toward organization, planfulness, high striving, responsibility, attention, impulse control
- ❖ At the low end: high impulsivity, difficulty with planning and maintaining responsible behavior

I am someone who . . .

- Is systematic, likes to keep things in order
- Is persistent, works until the task is done
- Is reliable, steady
- Tends to be disorganized
- Tends to be lazy
- Remains calm in tense situations.
- Sometimes behaves irresponsibly



Agreeableness



- High: considerate, empathic, kind, generous, gentle
- Low: aggressive, rude, spiteful, stubborn, cynical, manipulative
- Motivation to maintain harmonious relationships
- Low A predicts more conflicts and more destructive conflict tactics
 - Less distressed by conflicts

I am someone who . . .

- Is compassionate, has a soft heart
- Treats others with respect
- Assumes the best about people
- Can be cold and uncaring
- Is sometimes rude to others
- Tends to find fault with others

So, what traits are most relevant to BPD in young people?

- Neuroticism, especially Volatility
- Low Conscientiousness, especially impulsivity
- Low Agreeableness, especially interpersonal aggression and distrust
- Neuroticism and low Conscientiousness and Agreeableness are common across PDs in general, but especially pronounced in BPD

b. How do young people's traits change over time?

- Two kinds of change:
 - 1. Rank-order stability: How much do people maintain their “rank” relative to others over time
 - 2. Mean-level stability: How much do people change on average as they get older?

Example from height

Rank-order stability

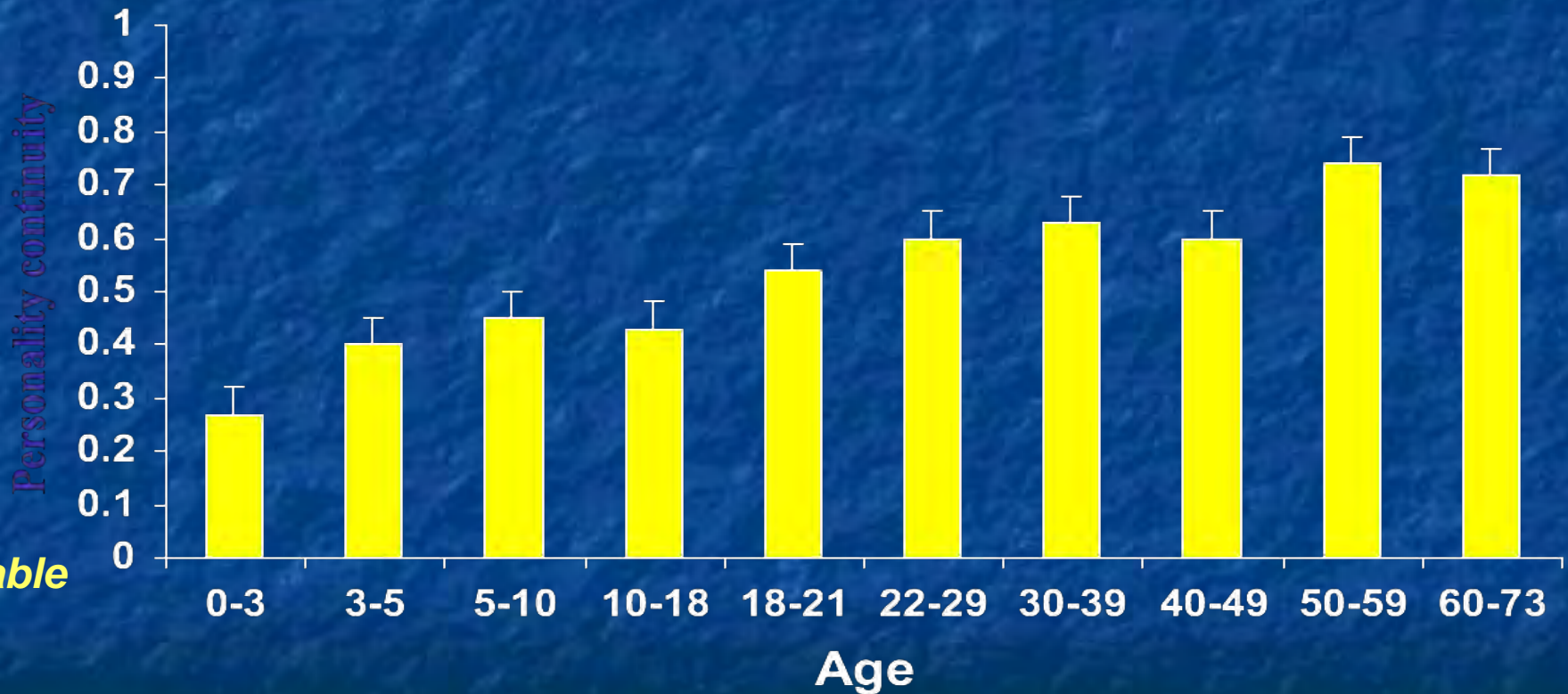


Mean-level stability



Personality trait rank-order stability across the life course: Meta-analysis of 152 studies based on 50,207 people

Perfect stability



Mean-level change

- Neuroticism increases in adolescence among girls, decreases overall in young adulthood
- Agreeableness and Conscientiousness at lowest in adolescence, increase in young adulthood and middle age
- Some young adults don't show these positive personality changes, especially those lacking normative experiences in adult roles
 - Plus, these are the traits that adolescents with BPD struggle with

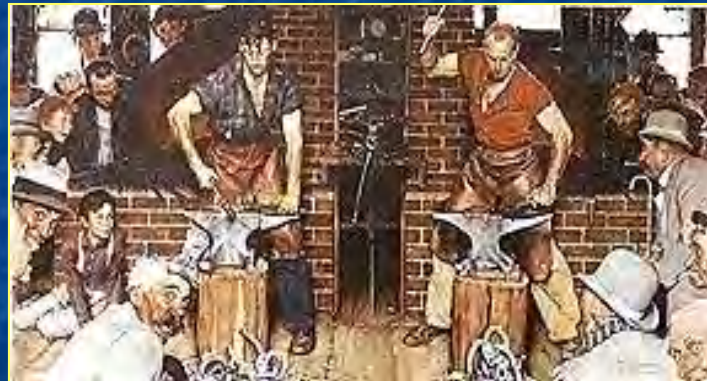
c) How our personality traits affect life tasks . . .

OCEAN

Love

Work

Health



Birth

Teens

Mid Life

Old age

Life tasks of adolescence: Critical juncture in development of BPD

- Many new life tasks
 - Academic achievement
 - Charting a future course for school and work
 - More intimate relationships with peers and romantic partners
 - Negotiating more independence from parents while maintaining relationships

Personality traits, including BPD traits affect how adolescents negotiate these life tasks

- For example, high Neuroticism undermines all of these life tasks
- Low Conscientiousness negative impacts academic achievement
- Low Agreeableness interferes with relationships
- BPD symptoms cause impairment, and impairment causes worsening BPD symptoms

Traits: In summary

- So, traits help explain some of the genetically influenced BPD tendencies youth may struggle with
- Problems in
 - emotion regulation
 - self-control
 - relationship behaviors
- But, traits cannot be the whole picture

LEVEL 2: PERSONAL CONCERNS

- Mental representations: how do people perceive and think about themselves and their experiences?
- Motivations: what do people want?
 - Goals and coping
- These aspects of personality seem especially important in the development of impairment, as defined in the *DSM-5* Alternative Model for PDs
 - Identity, Self-Direction, Empathy, and Intimacy
 - Impairment in these domains predicts later worsening of PD symptoms in adolescents (DeFife, Goldberg, & Westen, 2013)

Mental representations

- The ways that young people perceive and think about their experiences of themselves and other people
- In BPD, mental representations are disturbed
 - Overly positive or negative self-views
 - Mistrust, or tendencies to idealize others
 - Deviant thinking: perfectionism, black-and-white thinking
- These disturbed mental representations evoke strong feelings

- Example: **Hypermentalizing** in Borderline Personality Disorder in adolescents
- From Sharp et al. 2012: Person A invites person B to dinner, but B replies hurriedly that she is unavailable because she has a prior engagement. A then assumes that B does not want to spend time with her because of a minor misunderstanding that she recalls from several years ago, where A did not turn up for B's birthday party.

Coping strategies

- Youth vary in how they approach stressful situations
- Adolescence: less adaptive strategies emerge, e.g., rumination, aggression, blaming others
 - More advanced strategies don't emerge until later (e.g., planning, strategizing)
- Chronic use of poor coping (e.g., avoidance) may lead to BPD symptoms and impairment

LEVEL 3: NARRATIVE IDENTITY

- Stories about lives that reflect and create personal identity
- Aspect of contemporary Western society
 - No inherent story
- Who am I? Purpose and meaning
 - Lends coherence to self across time
 - Reconstructed past
 - Imagined future

Narratives in adolescence

- Erik Erikson noted crucial role of narratives and identity in adolescence
 - Youth's more complex cognitive skills enable them to start working on narratives
- Young people connect current identity with
 - specific memories
 - recurrent themes

Narratives gone awry: PDs in adolescence

- Difficulties incorporating negative experiences into a positive, functional life story
 - Contamination sequence: E.g., happy about new boyfriend, then betrayal
- Struggles to develop a coherent life story
 - E.g., problems committing to a life path
 - Miss out on benefits of coherent narrative in transition to adulthood

III. Conclusion: The potential for change

BPD and the potential for change

- A recent study found that BPD features are as unstable as depression in adolescence (Conway et al., 2017)
- A recent meta-analysis by Roberts et al. (2017) found that Neuroticism decreases often through therapy
- Personality can change as the result of other environmental changes as well (e.g., decreasing stress and adversity) (Shiner et al., 2017)

Conclusions

- Many personality processes can be targeted
 - Changing traits OR learning to live with traits
 - Addressing disturbed mental representations
 - Developing new means of coping
 - Developing a healthy life story
- Clinicians and parents have great potential to help youth with BPD move onto a healthier life path

Questions?

- rshiner@colgate.edu
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- Shiner, R. L., & Tackett, J. L. (2014). Personality disorders in children and adolescents. In E. J. Mash & R. A. Barkley (Eds.), *Child Psychopathology*, 3rd Ed (pp. 848-896). New York: Guilford Press.