Personality and Aging

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- What is Personality?
- Personality Theory and Types
- Does personality change in late life?
- How does personality relate to psychological and physical health in late life?
What is personality?

• How would you describe someone’s personality? How about an older adult’s personality?

• There is NO universal agreement on just what IS personality.

• Seem to have some biological basis (dimension of approach…withdrawal?)
What is Personality?

• A definition of personality is likely to include…
  – An organized, distinctive ‘pattern of behavior’ that is characteristic of a particular person
  – Characteristics may include physical, mental, emotional, and social behaviors
  – How would we study such a construct? Obviously, people have different ways of ‘operationalizing’ the construct of personality.
Types of Personality

• Stage Theories
  – Erik Erikson (for example)
  – Advantages – cover a wide age range
  – Disadvantages -

• Trait Theories
  – Most popular theory/method
  – Traits – see personality as representing specific components that guide behavior. See personality as somewhat static and unchangeable (compared to state theories)
  – Examples: ‘friendliness’ ‘shyness’ ‘conscientiousness’
Types of Personality

• Trait Measurements of Personality
  – MMPI – Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory
    • 550 items, self-report
    • Used to diagnose psychopathology
  – NEO Inventory (aka BIG FIVE) – Costa & McCrae
    • Neuroticism
    • Extraversion
    • Openness to experience
    • Agreeableness
    • Conscientiousness
    • Fewer Items, self-report
    • Most common measure of personality in aging research
Types of Personality

• Mayo Clinic findings using the MMPI
  – cross-sectional study-MAJOR LIMITATION
  – See increases in introversion with age
  – See only female increase in masculinity
  – Psychopathology decrease with age
  – Other limits: geographic/social changes, scaled used mostly to discriminate psychopathology
The Big 5 – Costa & McCrae

- Baltimore **Longitudinal** Study of Aging
- Age range 20-80
- Mostly healthy, wealthy, educated, white men
- Began study in mid 1950s and is ongoing
- Actually a cross-sequential longitudinal study design
- Most research focused on NEO part of the Big 5

**ACTIVITY – TAKE THE NEO**
The Big 5 and the BLSA

• Neuroticism
  – Anxious, hostile, depressed, self-conscious, impulsive, and vulnerable

• Extraversion
  – Attachment, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement-seeking, and positive emotions

• Openness to Experience
  – Openness to fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, and values
The Big 5 and BLSA

Major findings
- Results replicated in Philippines, Germany, Italy, France, Portugal, Croatia, and South Korea.
- Overall, personality remains stable throughout adulthood and late life (continuity).
- However, some men did change (discontinuity).
  - Openness to experience seemed more likely to change.
  - Life events were unlikely to change personality. However, events such as major changes in marital status and job status might have been a ‘large enough force’ to change personality.
Seattle Longitudinal Study
Schaie and Willis

- Measured traits of...
  - Behavioral rigidity
  - Attitudinal flexibility
  - Social responsibility

- 3,442 participants, age range 22-84, 10 different birth cohorts, sequential study design
Major findings

• Looked mainly at cohort differences and found that over the last 70 years, more recent generations have become more flexible in their attitudes and personality style (thus, hard to look at age change when **cohort differences are affecting personality**)

• If become more flexible with each successive generation...then may be more able to adapt to social change.
Berlin Aging Study
Baltes

- >10,000 participants, longitudinal
- Old-old purposely included (95-103)
- Studied ages 70-103yr olds
- Included equal numbers of men and women
- Created ‘profiles’ of personality and health in general...found relative stability but in late-late life, a decline. Related to the terminal drop?
Other Research

• Masculinity and Femininity as a personality construct.
• See a crossover in with age…
  – See more androgyny
Types of Personality

• Problems with the Trait method…

• Ways to improve research on personality…
Other findings as Personality relates to Well-being

- Neuroticism highly related to depression or experiencing depressive symptoms
- Conscientiousness (dependability, orderliness, self-control, trustworthy, diligent) predicted longevity
- Other traits, such as optimism has predicted better success before, during, and after heart surgery! Similar findings with Parkinson’s, Multiple Sclerosis, and Breast Cancer.
Other findings as Personality relates to Well-being

• But what if I am neurotic? What can I do?
  – Often requires therapy…psychotherapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy.
  – The earlier the better!!
Main Conclusions

• Personality is remains stable as we age.
• Most change is due to cohort, or generational differences (cohort effects)
• Change may only occur in some circumstances
  – MAJOR life events (individual change)
  – Old-old age (general change)
  – Older adults may become more introverted (general change)
  – There may be a crossover in masculinity and femininity in older males and females (general change)
Other Conclusions

• What is the best type of personality to have in late life?
• Stability and niche picking
• Stability as ‘GOOD’ for longevity and health