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Edited by Lea Pulkkinen and Avshalom Caspi

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## Personality and paths to successful development: an overview

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*Lea Pulkkinen and Avshalom Caspi*

Research traditions in developmental psychology vary with respect to how much emphasis they give to successful development. Historically, most studies of personality development have been biased by the goal of seeking to understand maladjustment and behavioral problems, such as anxiety or aggression, and have tended to overlook the study of pathways to successful outcomes. Whereas the study of problem behavior is clearly oriented toward predicting, explaining, and preventing social and clinical problems, the study of successful development is made more difficult because the end point (success) is more elusive and thus more difficult to operationalize and to promote.

To study successful personality development one must first have a way of thinking about the course of lives and a way of assessing how adaptational processes are patterned over time. We can identify three general approaches to this conceptual problem: growth models, life-span models, and life-course models. Each of these social-developmental approaches provides a framework for understanding adaptational processes and the coherence of personality development by focusing on the distinctive ways individuals organize their behavior to meet new environmental demands and developmental challenges.

### **Growth and stage models**

Growth models of personality development are not homogeneous in their orientation, but are based on different traditions and conceptual backgrounds. For example, humanistic theories of personality development are best known for emphasizing the potential for positive development. People can take charge of their lives and direct them toward creativity and self-actualization which involves self-fulfillment and the realization of one's potential (Maslow, 1954). In contrast, psychoanalytically oriented models tend to emphasize the growth of ego through age stages. Integrity is the goal of successful development in Erikson's (1950) theory, as well as in Loevinger's (1997) model of ego development and in the

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model of Labouvie-Vief (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, Hakim-Larson, DeVoe, and Schoeberlein, 1989) which integrates Piaget's theory of cognitive development with emotions and social relations. Erikson's theory covers eight stages across the life-span. Each stage involves a crisis or an age-specific challenge that should be satisfactorily resolved for optimal development. The theory states that a successful resolution of each crisis results in the refinement of a predominantly positive quality, such as trust in infancy. The psychosocial crises to be solved in adulthood concern intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair. Common virtues or ego skills such as hope, will, purpose, and skill in childhood, fidelity in adolescence, and love, care, and wisdom in adulthood emerge as successful outcomes of the crises. Development is based on successful resolution of psychological crises leading finally to integrity in old age.

The passage from one developmental stage to another is also central to Levinson's work (1978, 1986), who has studied what he calls "life structures": things that a person finds important in work and love, as well as the values and emotions that make these important. Life structures are subjected to change during transitional periods when people reappraise and restructure important things in their lives. According to Levinson, people spend about half their adult lives in transitional periods.

Sanford (1962), another psychodynamically influenced theorist, described a fully developed person as one characterized by high degrees of both differentiation and integration. Specifically, the fully developed person has a rich and varied impulse life, a broad and refined conscience, a strong sense of individuality, and a balance of control and expression of needs. As for when people reach this stage, Sanford placed the development of impulse control in adolescence and the development of ego, or the controlling function of personality (e.g., maturity), in adulthood. In both cases, Sanford did not presuppose that personality ever stopped changing: "The highly developed person is always open to new experience, and capable of further learning."

### **Life-span models**

Research on life-span personality development is concerned with three major influence systems (Baltes, Lindenberger, and Staudinger, 1998): (1) age-graded influences (e.g., education) which shape individual development in relatively normative ways; (2) history-graded influences (e.g., wars) which make development different across historical periods; and (3) non-normative influences (e.g., accidents) which may have powerful effects on an individual's development. Life-span development theories

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hold that psychological functioning is not fixed at a certain age. Rather, “during development, and at all stages of the life span, both continuous (cumulative) and discontinuous (innovative) processes are at work” (Baltes, 1987, p. 613). Development is defined as “selective age-related change in adaptive capacity” (Baltes, Staudinger, and Lindenberger, 1999, p. 479) and special attention is given to the developing person’s contribution to the creation of his or her own development (Brandtstädter, 1998). Individuals steer their physical, cognitive, social, and personality development by constructing strategies for coping with various developmental challenges, by setting goals, and by making choices. According to Brandtstädter (this volume), such intentional self development over the life span is geared to the realization and maintenance of normative representations that individuals construct of themselves and their future.

The function and significance of goals and choices in successful development is especially apparent beyond childhood, and several chapters in this volume are explicitly concerned with these topics in their efforts to study successful development. Pulkkinen, Nurmi, and Kokko (this volume) discuss how individuals steer their development by setting goals and making choices as responses to developmental challenges. On the one hand, personal goals reflect major age-graded transitions and normative demands. On the other hand, individual differences in personal goals reflect motivational orientations, such as security seeking or aiming at personal growth, which result in intraindividual coherence in goal patterns. With data from the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Personality and Social Development, Pulkkinen and her colleagues show that some personal goals are so pervasive that they operate as unifying life themes that define long-term successful and unsuccessful development.

An agentic conception of human nature is also central in Heckhausen’s work on control. Heckhausen (this volume) proposes that humans strive to maximize primary control of their environment throughout life. However, control capacities undergo radical changes and losses and individuals have to disengage from unattainable goals and manage their own emotional responses to such loss experiences. This type of control that is directed at the internal world of the individual is referred to as secondary control. Heckhausen shows how the age-normative structure of life-course transitions allows individuals to anticipate decremental changes in the opportunities to attain developmental goals. For example, an individual can increase primary control striving when approaching “developmental deadlines” (e.g., union formation, health-maintenance in old age) and use secondary control to compensate for potential negative affect and self-evaluation associated with failure to meet or resolve developmental deadlines successfully.

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Brandtstädter's work (this volume) on intentional self-development is also striking in its appreciation of the tension between gains and losses in life-span development. His chapter documents that successful development hinges on the interplay between, on the one hand, activities through which individuals assimilate the actual course of personality development to their goals and, on the other hand, processes through which goals are accommodated to the feasible range.

Although life-span models do not articulate what is success, some commentators have noted that developmental models that emphasize freedom of individual decision and action are plagued by a Western bias associated with an individualistic cultural base (Kagitcibasi, 1988). There is a clear need for cultural psychologists to engage life-span researchers in testing the limits of the developmental models that have been advanced. Still, the models that have been put forth are exciting because they articulate hypotheses about how individuals at different junctures in their lives struggle to derive meaning from and make sense of life events, and of their part in these events.

### **Life-course models**

Especially beyond childhood the study of successful adaptation becomes more complicated, and it may be that a purely psychological approach is insufficient for the study of personality development as the individual increasingly negotiates social roles defined by the culture. Whereas life-span theories specify the temporal order of life stages, such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, life-course researchers tend to emphasize social-role demands at different ages. Social trajectories are influenced by four factors (Elder, 1998). First, they are influenced by human agency, the choices that persons make about their own lives. Second, they are influenced by the timing of life-course events in relation to other events in an individual's life. Third, they are influenced by linked lives, because social changes are expressed in an individual's life through the experiences of related others. Finally, they are influenced by historical changes. Life-span and life-course models are complementary. Biological changes across the life span and social demands across the life course define typical life events and social roles in people's lives. Indeed, some psychological researchers have found it useful to adopt a sociocultural perspective and to conceive of the life course as a sequence of culturally-defined, age-graded roles that the individual enacts over time (Caspi, 1987; Helson, Mitchell, and Moane, 1984).

Helson introduced the concept of a "social clock project" as a framework for studying life-span development. The concept of a social clock

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focuses attention on the age-related life schedules of individuals in particular cultures and cohorts, and organizes the study of lives in terms of patterned movements into, along, and out of multiple role-paths such as education, work, marriage, and parenthood. In this fashion, the life course can be charted as a sequence of social roles that are enacted over time, and adaptational processes can be explored by investigating the ways different persons select and perform different social-cultural roles. In her 30-year longitudinal study of female college seniors, who were first studied in 1958-60, Helson examined the personality antecedents and consequences of adherence to a Feminine Social Clock (FSC) and a Masculine Occupational Clock (MOC). For example, women who adhered to the FSC were earlier in life characterized by a desire to do well and by a need for structure; women in this birth cohort who adhered to a MOC were earlier in life more rebellious and less sensitive to social norms. Helson *et al.* (1984, p. 1079) were thus able to identify “culturally salient need-press configurations through time” and to show predictable and meaningful relations between personality and behavior in different social settings at different ages.

Several chapters in this book either explicitly or implicitly adopt a sociocultural approach in their efforts to study successful development. The chapters by Laursen and Williams and by Silbereisen, Reitzle, and Juang tackle the adolescent age period and examine how youth create sense out of their place in the larger world. Laursen and Williams (this volume) explore the role of ethnic identity, a personally and politically-charged topic that is also a profound source of strength. The authors conceive of ethnic identity as a personality variable that shapes the nature and course of successful adolescent adjustment, and describe how ethnic identity offers an important mechanism through which minority adolescents cope with the tension between the inner self and the psychological environment of the majority culture. Silbereisen and his colleagues have capitalized on a “natural experiment” – the unification of Germany during the 1990s – to examine how historical changes shape the nature of adolescent transitions.

The chapters by Elder and Crosnoe and by Ryff, Singer, and Seltzer tackle a different point in the life course (midlife and old age) in order to examine the pathways to and the mechanisms in successful adjustment. Elder and Crosnoe draw on data from the Terman Study, begun in 1922, to explore how young-adult personality profiles shape the subsequent life course of men, in terms of their family life, civic involvement, career, and health trajectories. What is most remarkable is the emergence of such wide variations in life-outcomes, and in the successful negotiation of adult roles, despite the advantages enjoyed by all study participants by virtue of

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their intellectual prowess. Ryff and her colleagues provide an overview of their exciting research program where they track how different life challenges, both normative and non-normative, influence psychological well being. Included here are experiences of mid-life parenting, caregiving, and community relocation in old age. The authors conclude with a summary of their recent studies that link cumulative profiles of adversity and advantage to cumulative stress physiology. This work successfully links qualitative and quantitative methods as well as research on the mind and body.

One criticism of research on successful development, as studied by life-course researchers, is that it may be too value-laden and too culture-bound. What, for example, is the difference between conforming to social expectations vs. successfully performing socially-valued roles? There is also a serious epistemological issue with which life-course researchers must deal: how is it possible to move from historically specific findings to a more general understanding of life-course processes? At least one historian (Zuckerman, 1993) has argued that the coupling of developmental psychology and history represents a “dangerous liaison” because it is unclear whether psychologists are willing to abandon their quest for lawlike predictions.

Bouchard (1995) correctly argued that a purely sociocultural perspective on the life course “ignores the fact that life-histories themselves are complex evolved adaptations,” and suggests that an evolutionary perspective may complement the sociocultural perspective by exploring how personality variation is related to those adaptively-important problems with which human beings have had to repeatedly contend. Evolutionary psychology thus focuses attention on the coherence of behavioral strategies that people use in, for example, mate selection, mate retention, reproduction, parental care, kin investment, status attainment, and coalition building (Buss, 1999). It focuses research on the genetically-influenced strategies and tactics that individuals use for survival and reproduction. An evolutionary perspective on successful life-course development could thus offer a fusion of concerns in evolutionary theory, behavior genetics, and demography (Stearns, 1992). For example, using the evolutionary perspective, Draper and Belsky (1990) and Gangestad and Simpson (1990) have offered intriguing hypotheses about personality characteristics and reproductive strategies that facilitate adaptations in different environments at different ages. Although these and other specific models have not yet been tested in the context of longitudinal studies of personality development – and are not represented in this volume – they show the promise of evolutionary psychology for organizing longitudinal-developmental data on patterns of successful development.

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Ormel (this volume) tackles this problem from a somewhat different perspective and introduces social production function (SPF) theory as a heuristic for studying successful development. The theory attempts to integrate the various strengths of psychological theories and economic consumer/household production theories. It identifies two ultimate goals that all humans seek to optimize (physical well-being and social well-being) and five instrumental goals by which they are achieved (stimulation, comfort, status, behavioral confirmation, affection). The core notion of SPF theory is that people choose and substitute instrumental goals so as to optimize the production of their well-being, subject to constraints in available means of production.

### **How do personality differences shape successful development?**

Whether one adopts a life-span or a life-course perspective, the question remains: what role do individual differences in personality play in mastering different social-developmental tasks across the course of life? The starting point for such work should be a system for describing individual differences in personality dispositions and temperamental traits. This is not to suggest that these psychological constructs are the only way to study the contribution of personality differences to successful development. Indeed, motivational concepts in personality are better represented in much of the research on adult development. We do think, however, that an exciting bridge to understanding the making of success will derive from advances in the measurement of temperament and personality traits and types.

Over the past 15 years, the intensity and productivity of psychological research on the dimensionality of adult personality has been phenomenal (Lubinski, 2000), and has influenced research in diverse fields such as organizational behavior, psychiatry, and genetics. An emerging consensus points to the existence of five important factors: Extraversion (active, assertive, enthusiastic, outgoing), Agreeableness (generous, kind, sympathetic, trusting), Conscientiousness (organized, planful, reliable, responsible), Neuroticism (anxious, self-pitying, tense, worrying), and Openness to Experience (artistic, curious, imaginative, having wide interests). Each superfactor covers a broad domain of individual differences and includes a number of more specific personality dimensions or facets (John and Srivastava, 1999). Some developmental researchers have noted that this Five-Factor Model of personality does not provide a theory of personality (Block, 1995), which is correct to the extent that most personality taxonomies are focused on describing regularities in behavior

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rather than examining dynamic and developmental processes. Other critics have noted that researchers interested in the Five-Factor Model have not paid attention to issues of personality development (Pervin, 1994). Indeed, whereas the study of personality structure in adulthood has influenced research on adult development and aging, the study of personality structure in childhood has been all but neglected (McCrae and Costa, 1990). But these are criticisms of what has been done, not of what can be accomplished.

An especially important area of integration involves efforts to connect existing models of infant and child temperament with studies of adult personality structure (Clark and Watson, 1999). What are normally understood as personality traits may be aspects of temperament differentiated in the course of life experience. But, surprisingly, there has been virtually no contact between child psychologists who study temperament and personality psychologists who are concerned with personality differences (Diener, 2000; Shiner, 1998). Halverson and colleagues (1994) have made a strong case that research on life-span personality development will remain unintegrated unless child psychologists begin to study the structure of personality. Research linking temperament to the development of personality will be facilitated by two parallel achievements: the development of a consensual system for describing the structure of personality differences in adulthood, as noted earlier, and the development of such a system for temperamental traits.

In the domain of temperament, conceptual reviews and factor-analytic studies have identified several “consensus” dimensions of infant and childhood temperament that might show influences on later developmental outcomes (Martin, Wisenbaker, and Huttunen, 1994; Rothbart and Bates, 1998). In the present volume, and in relation to the study of successful development, the chapters by Rothbart and Putnam and by Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, and Reiser help to clarify several key definitional issues. For example, some researchers cling to the notion that temperament can only be assessed in the young infant and that temperament cannot be shaped by experience. However, as the two chapters in this book make clear, the key definitional component of temperament is not that it is immune from experience nor that it can be measured only in the first few months of life; rather, the key is that behaviors observed and measured should reliably index individual differences in children’s characteristic style of approach and response to the environment.

Rothbart and Putnam (this volume) define temperament as “constitutionally based individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, influenced over time by heredity and experience.” Reactivity refers to the excitability, responsiveness, or arousability of the behavioral and physiological

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systems of the individual, and self-regulation refers to the behavioral processes that modulate this reactivity. Importantly, Rothbart and Putnam note that such temperament differences develop and they are not immune to experience. Recent research shows that infants' temperament is shaped by experience even before birth (e.g., fetal nutrition, fetal substance exposure, daylight during pregnancy). Moreover, behavioral genetic studies have established that individual differences in temperament, measured even during the first year of life, are only partially heritable and are influenced significantly by unique environmental events (Plomin and Caspi, 1999), suggesting that younger age of measurement does not guarantee that temperament is purely "constitutional." The chapter by Rothbart and Putnam, along with related important research (e.g., Kochanska, 1997; Bates, Pettit, Dodge, and Ridge, 1998), points to the important ways in which socialization experiences – with parents and with peers – can shape emergent social competencies and psychological adjustment.

Eisenberg and her colleagues (this volume) provide an overview of their ongoing efforts to differentiate theoretically and empirically among the various aspects of both emotionality and emotional regulation, which are core concepts in practically every model of temperament and personality. The authors propose that individual differences in children's emotionality and regulation predict children's emerging social skills and the quality of their peer relationships. Specifically, they show that children high in emotional intensity and low in attentional and behavioral regulation experience numerous problems in their interactions with peers and in peer relationships, whereas children high in regulation typically function extremely well in their social worlds.

It is possible that a purely dimensional approach may yield confusing developmental portraits because orthogonal dimensions of temperament and personality conceal distinct types of children and adults who are characterized by unique configurations. Person-centered research may offer a promising approach for the study of paths to successful development, as demonstrated by Block (1971) and Pulkkinen (1996). The person-centered approach identifies types of individuals based on their particular configuration of attributes, and thus provides a bridge between purely nomothetic research (which emphasizes the attributes on which all individuals differ) and idiographic research (which emphasizes the unique patterning of attributes within an individual). It aims at a more holistic view of personality which "emphasizes the close dependency of individual functioning and individual development on the social, cultural, and physical characteristics of the environment" (Magnusson and Stattin, 1998, p. 686).

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In this volume, the person-centered approach is utilized in the research conducted by Elder and Crosnoe, by Pulkkinen, Nurmi, and Kokko, and by Ryff, Singer, and Seltzer, but it is Van Aken and his colleagues who take on most directly the challenge of providing a person-centered structural model that could act as a complement to the variable-centered models of temperament and personality that currently dominate research on personality development across the life-span. Van Aken and his colleagues report findings from several of their own studies that point to the existence of a replicable typology of personality types in childhood and adolescence. The three types that are repeatedly identified are labelled Resilient, Overcontrolled, and Undercontrolled. At various ages in childhood and adolescence, the types differ in the quality of their psychological functioning and social relationships. Van Aken and his colleagues point to various ways in which transactions between personality characteristics and social relationships lead to different developmental outcomes. Overall, Resilients have the most favourable relationships, both in terms of perceived support and in terms of peer acceptance. Overcontrolled and Undercontrolled report similarly low social support, and are less accepted and more often rejected by their peers. They differ, however, in their psychological functioning, with Overcontrollers tending toward internalizing problems and Undercontrollers toward externalizing problems. As the authors note, in addition to their own work, over the past decade other independent investigators have identified similar personality types in different parts of the Western world using different data sources and different statistical procedures. The convergence across studies is not perfect, and more typological research needs to be done before anything close to a comprehensive, generalizable personality typology can be said to exist. Nevertheless, at this point, these three types are good candidates to become an integral part of any generalizable personality typology and they can be used effectively to guide future developmental studies of personality development (Mervielde and Asendorpf, *in press*). But this is just a starting point, and the chapter by Bergman offers a sober appraisal of the methodological challenges that lie ahead, on the road to research about paths to successful development.

It should be emphasized that any personality taxonomy, whether of traits or types, is an evolving classification system whose purpose is to integrate and guide research. Rather than foreclose or forestall new approaches to the study of personality structure and development, any such system must remain flexible and be willing to accommodate new empirical information. Most important, it should be noted that our concern is less about the number of factors or types, but with whether the nomological net surrounding personological constructs can be harnessed in