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2 Personality, age and the well-being of older Europeans

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- ▶ SHARE Wave 7 collected, for the first time, a measure of personality traits.
 - ▶ Agreeableness shows a moderate increase across age groups.
 - ▶ Openness to experience and extraversion showed small declines.
 - ▶ The personality attributes are variously related to life satisfaction.
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2.1 Introduction

Personality traits and, specifically, age related differences in personality attributes have been the focus of research attention for quite some time. Numerous variable sets and several taxonomies of personality structure have been suggested to reflect the complexity of personality, that is, the most characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving among people. In the late 1980s, a five-factor structure of personality that reflected five broad dimensions was introduced. This framework stands, until today, as the prevailing conceptual construct for the identification and understanding of individual personality differences (John and Srivastava, 1999). The five factors, known simply as ‘the Big Five’, are *openness to experience* (vs. closedness), *conscientiousness* (vs. lack of direction), *extraversion* (vs. introversion), *agreeableness* (vs. antagonism) and *neuroticism* (vs. emotional stability). They are often referred to by the acronym OCEAN. Using the OCEAN data that were collected for the first time in SHARE Wave 7, we present in this chapter an initial description of the personalities of the age 50+ population in Europe. We also examine whether different personality traits are differentially associated with well-being in late life.

2.2 Measuring personality in SHARE

Based on the 10-item version of the Big Five Inventory from Rammstedt and John (2007), the SHARE Wave 7 questionnaire included a similar brief means to measure personality traits. For each of the Big Five dimensions, two prototypical

traits that represent the high and the low pole of each factor, respectively, were queried. Each such item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree). SHARE utilized an 11-item version of the inventory because the trait of agreeableness sometimes varies in this measure. For the analyses in this chapter, we employed the version of the brief Big Five inventory using the two agreeableness items that were the most fitting. More information on the Big Five Inventory in SHARE may be found in the methodology volume (in preparation).

The domain that reflects *openness to experience* includes both ‘open’ characteristics (e.g., artistic, curious, original, imaginative and with broad interests) and ‘intellectual’ attributes (e.g., intelligent, insightful and sophisticated) (John and Srivastava, 1999). To measure the high pole of this particular personality trait, respondents are asked about the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement, ‘I see myself as someone who has an active imagination’. In contrast, the assertion, ‘I see myself as someone who has few artistic interests’ measures its opposite, that is, the low pole of the trait.

Conscientiousness refers to individual differences in the propensity to be self-controlled and to delay gratification, to be task and goal directed, organized, efficient, precise and deliberate (John and Srivastava, 1999). The factor is measured positively by the declaration, ‘I see myself as someone who does a thorough job’ and negatively by the sentence ‘I see myself as someone who tends to be lazy’.

Extraversion implies an energetic approach to the social world and includes characteristics such as sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotions (John and Srivastava, 1999). The statements, ‘I see myself as someone who is outgoing, sociable’ and ‘I see myself as someone who is reserved’, measure the positive and negative ends of this dimension, respectively.

The trait *agreeableness* covers themes such as tender-mindedness (sensitive, kind, soft-hearted, sympathetic), altruism (generous, helping, praising) and trust (trusting, forgiving), in contrast to hostility and quarrelsomeness (John and Srivastava, 1999). The high pole of this trait is reflected in the assertion, ‘I see myself as someone who is generally trusting’. The second statement relating to this domain, ‘I see myself as someone who tends to find fault with others’, measures the low pole of the trait.

Finally, *neuroticism* is characterized by tension, anxiety and the tendency to be temperamental. Emotional stability, in contrast, is characterized by calmness and contentedness. Hence, the high pole of neuroticism is reflected in the comment, ‘I see myself as someone who gets nervous easily’. Conversely, the remark, ‘I see myself as someone who is relaxed, handles stress well’, reflects the low pole of this same personality trait.

2.3 Personality differences over the life course

The first analysis in this chapter examines the association between age and personality attributes among older Europeans. Until recently, theories of personality development generally offered a static depiction of the developmental process in adulthood, suggesting that around age 30, once adulthood is reached, no subsequent change in personality traits occurs (Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer, 2006). Since then, however, both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have revealed age-related differences in the Big Five personality traits (Donnellan and Lucas, 2008; Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer, 2006). In addition, recent literature contradicts the perception that, at a specific age, personality traits stop changing. In contrast, the literature suggests that personality traits show patterns of change across the life course and even into later life. For example, older people tend to demonstrate a decrease in the traits of openness to experience and extraversion, whereas the attribute of agreeableness shows the reverse pattern; that is, it tends to increase with increasing age. Empirical results are less conclusive, however, with respect to the traits of conscientiousness and neuroticism. Some studies suggest that these two traits increase with age, whereas others indicate that they trend downward with older age. Moreover, of the two, the attribute of neuroticism showed the least consistent age-related differences (Donnellan and Lucas, 2008; Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer, 2006).

In the current analysis, we regressed the respective personality trait variables on age group (60–69, 70–79, 80+; reference category: 50–59), controlling for the effects of the potentially confounding variables of gender, years of education and country of residence. The scores on the personality probes were reverse-coded where necessary, such that the summed trait scores represented the presence of each of the respective personality traits. The sample for the analysis consisted of all respondents for whom data existed on all relevant variables – 46,708 individuals representing all of the SHARE countries in Wave 7. Figure 2.1 presents a graph of the results. The bars in the graph (representing the beta coefficients) show that two personality attributes – conscientiousness and neuroticism – hardly varied across age. This result supports prior evidence that suggests that these two characteristics are, indeed, largely age-invariant traits within the personality structure. However, age-related differences emerged in the other three personality attributes, in line with the trends reported in the literature. The trait of agreeableness revealed a moderate rise as age increases [beta = 0.02; $p < 0.05$ for those in the 70–79 age group, and beta = 0.041; $p < 0.01$ for those aged 80+ (relative to respondents aged 50–59)]. The traits of extraversion and openness, in contrast, showed a decline across the age groups (extraversion: beta = -0.03 ; $p < 0.01$ for individuals aged 70–79

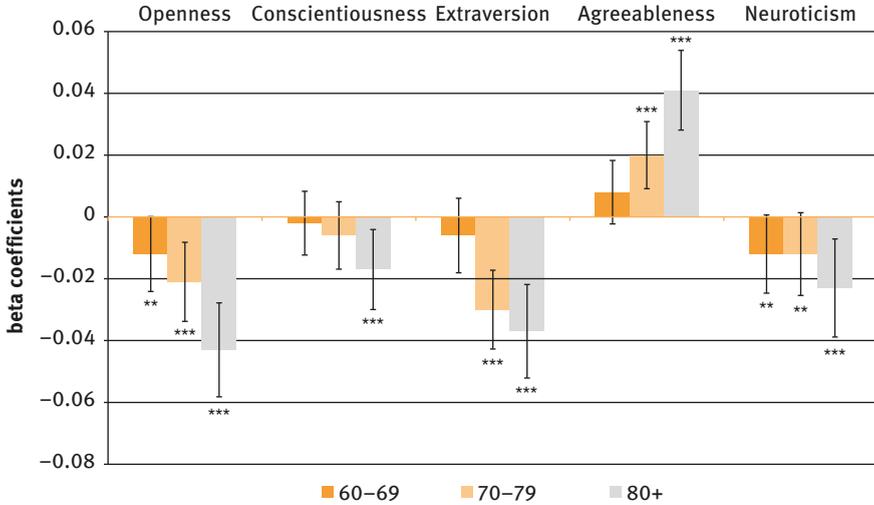


Figure 2.1: Trends in personality attributes by age group (beta coefficients and S.E.).

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Adjusted for gender, years of education and country of residence. Reference category: ages 50–59.

Source: SHARE Wave 6 release 6.1.0, Wave 7 release 0.

and beta = -0.037 ; $p < 0.01$ for individuals aged 80+, and openness: beta = -0.012 ; $p < 0.05$ for individuals aged 60–69, beta = -0.021 ; $p < 0.01$ for individuals aged 70–79, beta = -0.043 ; $p < 0.01$ for individuals aged 80+).

Two caveats are in order:

- 1) In a cross-section, older individuals are born earlier. Thus, in fact, age differences could be cohort differences;
- 2) Age differences may also reflect differences in survival.

2.4 Personality traits and well-being

The current analysis also looks at the association between the five personality attributes and well-being in later life. A growing body of research supports the existence of a strong relationship between personality and subjective well-being. Moreover, a reported systematic examination of the multivariate impact of all major personality traits simultaneously reveals that individuals who are more open to experience, conscientious, extraverted, agreeable and emotionally stable tend to experience greater satisfaction with life (Steel et al., 2008).

To confirm the posited association between personality and subjective well-being among older Europeans as well, we examine the respective key personality traits in relation to a global measure of life satisfaction. This particular outcome measure is a widely accepted indicator of well-being. The analysis regresses the life satisfaction score, which ranges from 0 to 10 on the personality trait variables, controlling again for age group, gender, years of education and country of residence. The results, presented in Figure 2.2, show that the personality attributes are related to life satisfaction after controlling for the potential confounders. Among the respective traits, neuroticism emerges as the most powerful of the personality predictors and its association is negative ($\beta = -0.191$; $p < 0.01$). That is, the more neurotic people are in later life, the less satisfied they are with their lives. The remaining four personality attributes also show a meaningful association (all $p < 0.01$) with life satisfaction as well, in this case positive. The trait of extraversion is the most positively related of the four attributes, relatively ($\beta = 0.100$), whereas agreeableness is the least related ($\beta = 0.034$).

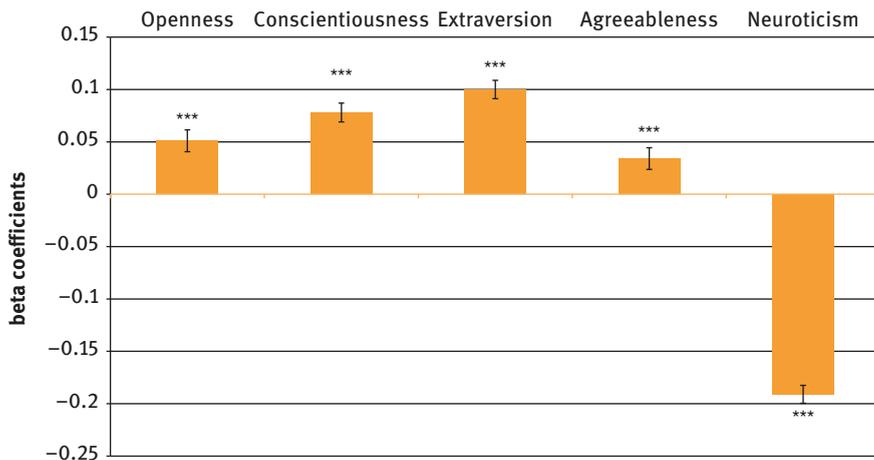


Figure 2.2: Personality and life satisfaction (beta coefficients).

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Adjusted for age, gender, years of education and country of residence.

Source: SHARE Wave 6 release 6.1.0, Wave 7 release 0.

2.5 Personality, age and well-being among older Europeans

The current findings, albeit preliminary, suggest that efforts to guarantee life satisfaction in later life cannot ignore the effect of personality. The results of this analysis, which are consistent with those reported in the contemporary literature, indicate that the traits of extraversion, openness and agreeableness are potentially age-related and are related in varying degrees to the well-being outcome considered in this study. This indication raises the possibility that appropriate intervention programmes might modify the respective trajectories of these attributes across the latter part of the life course. Specifically, diminishing the downward trend in extraversion and openness might be possible. As the current analysis showed, these two particular personality attributes are associated with better well-being.

Regarding the trait of conscientiousness, our analysis tentatively suggests that it undergoes only minor changes in the latter half of life. Therefore, given the relative stability of this particular personality attribute and its positive association with life satisfaction, efforts should be made to allow older adults to continue to control their lives as much as possible. Public services and facilities sometimes undermine the independence of older people in the name of efficiency and, thus, may compromise their conscientiousness as well, along with its positive contribution to quality of life.

Finally, this study shows that the trait of neuroticism is, perhaps, the most challenging of the five personality attributes. The trait lessens only to a small degree later in life and has the greatest (negative) association with life satisfaction. Given this important observation, policymakers should expand the availability of mental health services, which will help those older people who suffer from serious neurotic tendencies to more easily address their personality difficulties and prevent an unnecessary downward spiral in their morale and quality of life as they age.

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