

Statement of Research Interests November 2008
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My work spans the sub-disciplines of developmental, personality, and social psychology as my research agenda is broadly concerned with two themes: (1) Understanding how individual differences in personality and self-esteem develop across the life span; and (2) Understanding how individual differences in personality are associated with important life outcomes such as satisfying romantic relationships, economic well-being, and antisocial behavior. In pursuing these broad goals, I have also developed interests in psychological assessment (Donnellan, 2008; Donnellan, Conger, & Burzette, 2005; Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006; Witt & Donnellan, 2008; Witt, Donnellan, Blonigen, Krueger, & Conger, in press) and in the resolution of polarizing debates about the relative importance of intrinsic (e.g., genes, dispositions) versus extrinsic factors (e.g., nurture, situational factors) for determining behavior and developmental outcomes (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Donnellan, Burt, Levendosky & Klump, 2008; Donnellan, Conger, McAdams, & Neppl, revision submitted; Donnellan, Lucas, & Fleeson, in press; Ge, Donnellan, & Harper, 2003).

I. Personality Development Across the Life Span

I have an overarching interest in understanding the patterns of stability and change in personality characteristics across the life span (e.g., Donnellan, Conger, & Burzette, 2007; Donnellan & Robins, in press; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Conger, & Conger, 2007; Donnellan, Trzesniewski, & Robins, 2006). Recently, I used two national datasets from Britain and Germany to examine age differences in the Big Five personality domains (Donnellan & Lucas, 2008; see also Lucas & Donnellan, in press). This paper is an important complement to existing research because we used nationally representative samples to investigate age trends. The pattern of results was generally consistent across both datasets suggesting that age trends are replicable across these two Western countries. Extraversion and Openness were negatively associated with age whereas Agreeableness was positively associated with age. Average levels of Conscientiousness were highest for participants in middle age. Cross-sectional age differences in the Big Five were detectable past age 30 which seems inconsistent with the idea that personality traits are completely fixed at some point in the life span (e.g. James, 1890).

The next step is to try to understand the processes underlying these age differences. As it stands, there is controversy over the underlying impetus for adult personality development. To address this issue, I am currently pursuing work to evaluate whether life events are linked with changes in personality. Such work holds the potential for distinguishing between the two dominant explanations in the literature. The *intrinsic maturational position* holds that normative age-related changes in personality are driven by naturally unfolding biological processes (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 2006) whereas the *life course position* posits that changes stem from involvement in particular social roles and associated life experiences (e.g., Roberts et al., 2008). In particular, I have evaluated whether work experiences in young adulthood are associated with changes in personality. Preliminary indications suggest that there is replicable evidence for links between work experiences and personality changes (Donnellan, Le, & Conger, invited resubmission).

I interpret cross-sectional age-differences as support for the claim that there are normative personality changes with age. On the one hand, this interpretation is consistent with my previous longitudinal research (e.g., Donnellan et al., 2007; Witt et al, in press) and with research conducted by others (e.g., Roberts et al., 2006; reviewed in Donnellan & Robins, in press). For example, I found that individuals tend to become considerably more self-controlled during the transition from adolescence to adulthood and this trend was consistent with the cross-sectional age differences for Conscientiousness in Britain and Germany. On the other hand, there is always the possibility that birth-cohort influences confound interpretations of cross-sectional research concerning personality development.

Accordingly, the investigation of cohort effects has assumed a central place in my recent research activities. An important focus of this work (in collaboration with my colleague Kali Trzesniewski) has been to use data from the Monitoring the Future project (MTF; Johnston et al., 2003) to evaluate recent claims about the psychological characteristics of today's young people (e.g., Donnellan & Trzesniewski, under review; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, in press; under review; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008a; 2008b).¹ Dr. Trzesniewski and I have argued that there are no clear differences between members of more recent cohorts such as so-called "Generation Me" (i.e. those born in the 1970s-1990s; see Twenge, 2006) and earlier generations. For example, in contrast to some well-publicized work by Twenge and her colleagues, we found no compelling evidence for cohort-related differences in self-esteem in the MTF from 1977 to 2006. This work has proven to be fairly controversial as this debate now spans several papers that are either published, in press, or under review.

II. Personality, Experiences in the Family of Origin, and Qualities of Adult Romantic Relationships

Another facet of my work is dedicated to furthering the scientific understanding of why some adults are involved in distressed and dissatisfied romantic relationships whereas others are involved in satisfying and stable romantic relationships (e.g., Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Donnellan, in press; Donnellan, Assad, Robins, & Conger, 2007; Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, & Conger, 2005; Hatton, Donnellan, et al., 2008). For example, I have proposed and tested a model that links personality differences and experiences in the family of origin to observable behaviors in early adult romantic relationships (Donnellan et al., 2005). These behavioral patterns then serve as the key proximal influence on relationship satisfaction. Thus, I furthered the argument that a complete account of satisfying early adult romantic relationships requires a life span perspective that draws upon insights from several literatures. This work generated some media attention when it was described in the *Wall Street Journal* (13 July 2006). I am extending this model to also include contextual factors such as stressful economic conditions (e.g., Donnellan et al., revision submitted; Donnellan, Cui, Spilman, Larsen-Rife, Widaman, & Conger, revise & resubmit). Initial results indicate that economic pressure is reciprocally associated with relationship distress over time and that this effect is somewhat independent of the effects of personality. In short, I am working to develop a comprehensive model that explains how dispositional, developmental, and contextual factors are related to experiences in intimate unions such as marriages and cohabiting relationships.

III. The Correlates and Consequences of Individual Differences

Gordon Allport famously noted that "Personality *is* something and *does* something" (1937, p. 48). Taken most broadly, a number of my papers help provide empirical support for the later part of his assertion. For example, I have presented evidence for an association between personality and relationship quality (e.g., Donnellan, Conger, & Bryant, 2004), prospective evidence for associations between low self-esteem and externalizing problems (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005; Trzesniewski, Donnellan, et al., 2006), and evidence for links between personality attributes in adolescence and distressing socioeconomic conditions in young adulthood (Donnellan et al., revision submitted).

A particularly striking example of the relevance of individual differences is presented in a paper that will likely appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Personality*: We found that self-reports of low Conscientiousness in adolescence predicted mortality in young adulthood. Perhaps less dramatically, my graduate student and I have found evidence linking difficulties with impulse control and high sensation seeking with heavy drinking and hang-over symptoms in a longitudinal study of college students selected at random from incoming students at Michigan State University (McAdams & Donnellan, in press). Likewise, my other graduate student and I have shown that measures of trait impulsivity and interpersonal

¹A note appears in all papers in this series explaining that Dr. Trzesniewski and I contributed equally to the reports.

antagonism predict aggressive behavior in a laboratory setting (Witt & Donnellan, under review; see also Witt & Donnellan, 2008; Witt et al., in press).

IV. Methodological Interests and Contributions

In addition to substantive concerns, I have interests in data reporting practices, longitudinal research design, and dyadic data analysis (e.g., Donnellan & Conger, 2007; Kashy, Donnellan, Burt, & McGue, 2008). For example, we recently completed a content analysis of all of the papers published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* over a six month period (Kashy, Donnellan, Ackerman, & Russell, in press). In our paper, we identify several areas where current reporting practices could be enhanced and provide concrete guidelines for authors. In addition, we comment on the value of data archives and provide our perspectives on several current methodological issues (e.g., null hypothesis significance testing, evaluating mediation). I believe that this paper will be useful to the field as it provides reporting guidelines and methodological insights that are widely applicable across many sub-disciplines of psychology.

I have also pushed myself to learn groundbreaking techniques and apply such techniques to provide new insights to even old questions. Most recently, I have become very interested in applying trait-state statistical models (see Hatton, Donnellan, et al., 2008; Lucas & Donnellan, 2007) to further substantive debates about the nature of self-esteem and self-esteem development (see Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). For example, I am currently working on a multivariate extension of a particular latent trait-state model (Kenny & Zautra, 2001) with David Kenny that distinguishes state variance (i.e., systematic variability that is unique to a given measurement occasion) from pure error (i.e. unsystematic variance). We have applied this model to a dataset that includes 9 longitudinal assessments of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale that spanned from 1989 to 2005. Results indicate that global self-esteem is a far more trait-like than state-like construct. We also found that self-esteem becomes increasingly stable with development. These new findings complement and extend the original self-esteem conclusions drawn by Trzesniewski et al. (2003).

V. Summary

I am interested in a range of questions related to the development and life course consequences of individual differences. I approach these questions from an integrative approach that combines methodological rigor with insights from multiple literatures and disciplines within psychology. Indeed, the most interesting questions about human lives transcend clear disciplinary boundaries. Thus far, I believe that my work has contributed to on-going debates and made contributions to several literatures. I have published 34 papers, 6 book chapters, and 4 encyclopedia articles. According to the Web of Science, I have been cited at least 194 times and the trajectory of citations is increasing as my work was cited 32 times in 2006 whereas it was cited 73 times in 2008.