

Parental perceptions of child personality: Relations with parent, child, and family variables

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This study aims at linking the development of child personality with demographic characteristics and psychological properties of the family environment. Five hundred and twelve (512) parents evaluated the personality of 12-year-old children by means of a newly designed questionnaire, based on the Five-Factor Model of personality. In addition, data were collected concerning the family (structure, values, and emotional bonds), the parents (gender, age, and education), and the child (gender, birth order, and school performance). The main findings are the following: (a) Fathers' and mothers' evaluations reach high levels of agreement; (b) The differences between boys and girls reflect widely known gender stereotypes; (c) The first-born children are expected to be more competitive and achieve higher performance while the later-born children are encouraged to develop communication skills; (d) Parents' education influences the appearance of certain personality dimensions which, in turn, result in differentiated school performance; (e) Extended family structure and strong emotional bonds are related to child personality components, especially those containing interpersonal elements. On the contrary, the effect of family values appears to be non-significant.

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Introduction

Parents are often used as a source of information regarding children's psychological properties. There are some good reasons for this: (a) Parents and family are generally accepted as the most important socialization agents in the course of development; (b) teachers are thought to be more objective judges than parents but their experience with children is restricted in the school environment (Mervielde, 1994) and they tend to overestimate aspects of children's behavior that are related to school performance; (c) the validity of young children's self-reports is questionable because they have not yet developed the appropriate cognitive and speaking skills (Costa & McCrae, 1994).

Parental perceptions are expected to influence the development of their children's personality in many ways (Pervin, 1989): (i) They constitute role models in the process of imitation learning; (ii) parents' ideas are reflected in children's personality through self-fulfilling prophecies, since children's expected or desirable behaviors are selectively rewarded and reinforced by parents; (iii) the most central cultural elements and social rules are transferred to children through the filter of their parents' personality characteristics.

On the other hand, there are several factors that may influence parents' perceptions of their own children and that we should be aware of. These factors are well reviewed by authors such as Goodnow and Collins (1990) or Bates and Bayles (1984). Some of them are, among others, cultural aspects, parental roles, the sharing of responsibility for childrearing, the amount of time spent with the child, parents' psychological properties (e.g., values, belief systems and expectations regarding the course of development). The above indicate that the study of child personality should take into account the cultural and social context where the parent-child interaction takes place, namely the family.

Method

In our study we used a new questionnaire measuring individual differences in children as viewed by their parents. It is the result of the participation of the University of Athens in a cross-cultural project for the tracing of developmental antecedents of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) in childhood. The new tool is based on parental free descriptions of children's personality. It contains 99 items that are assessed by a 5-point, Likert-type scale from 1= "not at all like my child" to 5="very much like my child". Its content is summarized by five factors: Emotional Reactivity, Conscientiousness, Intellectual Development, Agreeableness, and Extraversion.

The questionnaire was given to 562 parents who rated the personality of 306 children aged 12 years, living in Athens, Greece. Demographic characteristics of children, parents and family are used as independent variables: Children's gender, birth order and school performance, parents' gender and education level, family type and emotional bonds. For the definition of family type a tool developed by Georgas and collaborators (1997) was used. Subjects were asked to place their relatives in a series of concentric circles where the distance from the center indicates respective psychological distance from self. No suggestion was made regarding the identity of relatives. Subjects who mentioned father-mother, husband-wife, and son-daughter were coded as belonging to the nuclear family type; subjects who included brother-sister, uncle-aunt, nephew-niece and grandparents were coded as belonging to extended family schemes. For the assessment of emotional bonds, a 13-item questionnaire developed by Gronvold (1988) was used.

Results

This presentation deals with the effect of demographic variables on the assessment of child personality by parents.

Gender of child. The first independent variable to examine is gender of child. Parents produced significantly higher means for the boys' Emotional Reactivity, Intellectual Development and Extraversion, and for the girls' Conscientiousness. No differences were found in the mean of Agreeableness although girls scored higher than boys in one of its three facets, Affection. This picture reflects stereotypes regarding the two sexes; it may also indicate that parents' childrearing practices result in psychological differentiation of boys and girls so that in early adolescence they have already formed the social identity of their gender which is in accordance to the roles they are prepared to take over as adults.

Birth order. Birth order was another variable that affected the means of child personality factors. First-born children are rated higher in Conscientiousness and Intellectual Development than second-born, the latter scoring higher in Extraversion. It seems that birth order influences parental expectations in such a way that first born or single children are encouraged towards achievement and academic success while later born children develop more interpersonal qualities.

School performance. School performance is known to correlate positively with the Big Five factors Conscientiousness and Intellect/Openness to Experience (e.g., Digman, 1989). These findings are replicated in our study. In addition, excellent pupils are perceived as more agreeable and less reactive than pupils of lower performance. Thus, academic success is related not only with intellectual skills and motivation but also with social and emotional properties.

Gender of parent. Gender of parent was the only independent variable that did not differentiate any mean of children's personality factors. We believe that this high interrater agreement adds to the validity and reliability of the questionnaire used. That is, parental evaluations are guided by children's psychological properties and overt behavior rather than by their fathers' and mothers' bias. Or, another way to look at it is that both parents are biased towards the same direction! The truth is that we don't have enough evidence to support either of the two explanations, though the first one makes more sense to us.

Education of parents. Contrarily to gender of parents, the effect of education level on the dependent variables was significant. Our findings indicate that education of parents is related to children's Conscientiousness and Intellectual Development, i.e., parents who received University education evaluate their children's perseverance, diligence, intelligence and autonomy in a more positive way than parents of Primary and, to a lesser extent, Secondary education. These characteristics are also related with academic success and may explain why children of highly educated parents do better at school.

Family type. Family type, as defined earlier, is an important variable because it goes beyond parent-child dyadic relationships and examines family as a dynamic system of interactions. We found that parents in extended families produced higher means for their children's interpersonal components, namely Extraversion and Agreeableness, than parents in nuclear families. In accordance to this, children's Emotional Reactivity is found to be higher in nuclear than in extended families. Taking into account that our sample comes from an urban population, the above findings suggest that extended family networks are not extinct in modern cities. Instead,

they have been modified and play an influential role in child development at least in Greece, which is rather a collectivist than an individualistic culture.

Emotional bonds. Emotional bonds between members is another variable that refers to the family system as a whole. As one would expect, emotional bonds between parents and children correlate significantly with all children's personality factors. This is especially true for Agreeableness that produced clearly higher coefficients (about .50) than the rest personality factors, perhaps because agreeable children are also more manageable for parents and easy-going. A similar explanation would go then for the negative correlation coefficients of emotional bonds with Emotional Reactivity (since disobedient, stubborn and demanding kids give a hard time to parents). Also, it seems that parental evaluations are influenced more by the way parents perceive *their children's* feelings towards them rather than by *their own* feelings towards their children.

Conclusion

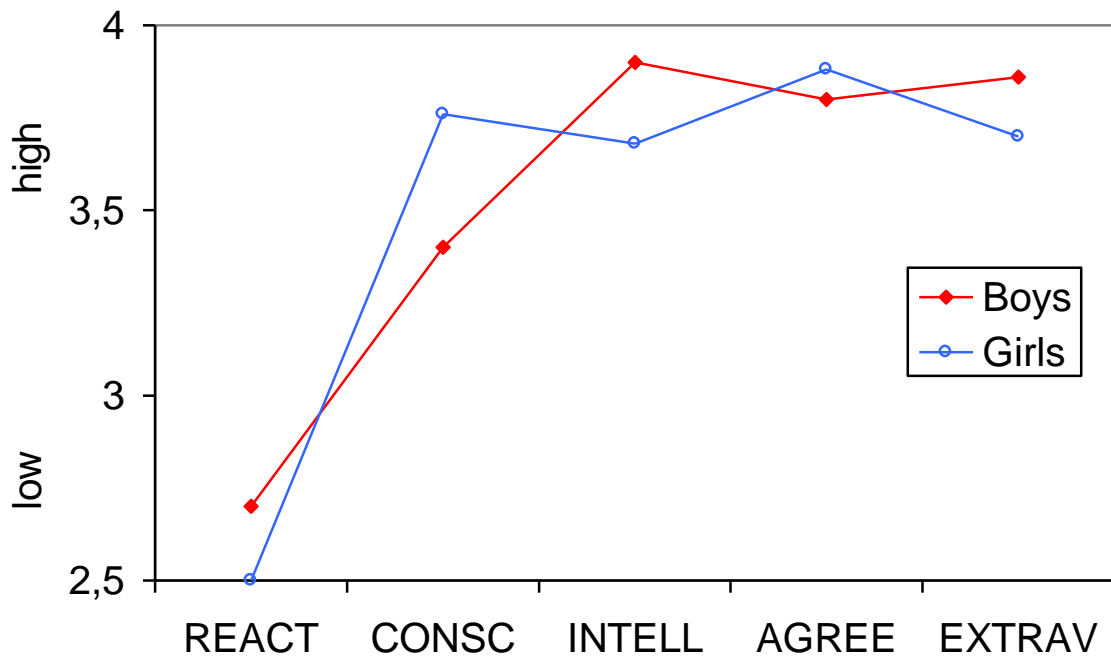
Results indicate that family is a useful framework for the study of child personality. Georgas (1999) argues that family can be employed as a context variable together with social and environmental factors to study cross-culturally the effect of family type on psychological variables. A model of family may be used to integrate relevant research. Georgas (1988, 1991, 1993) has presented an ecosocial model of the impact of family on the psychological differentiation of the individual under a contextual approach. Also, our findings on the Greek family seem to fall within the third pattern of Kagitcibasi's (1994, 1996) model of family change, called emotional interdependence. (According to this, the individual manifests interdependence in the emotional realm at both family and individual levels but manifests independence at both levels in the material realm). These models may be used to summarize in a systematic way research data on family and to explain the observed similarities and differences.

Table 1
Research variables and sample

DV's (child personality factors)	
Emotional Reactivity	Mean of 23 items, $\alpha=.92$
Conscientiousness	Mean of 19 items, $\alpha=.93$
Intellectual Development	Mean of 18 items, $\alpha=.91$
Agreeableness	Mean of 22 items, $\alpha=.91$
Extraversion	Mean of 17 items, $\alpha=.87$
IV's (characteristics of child, parents, and family)	
Gender of child	Boys (N=152) Girls (N=154)
Birth order of child	First-born (N=164) Later-born (N=141)
School Performance of child	A "Excellent" (N=202) B "Very good" (N=90)
Gender of parents	Fathers (N=266) Mothers (N=296)
Education level of parents	Primary (N=123) Secondary (N=158) Higher (N=266)
Family type	Nuclear (N=228) Extended (N=334)
Emotional bonds between family members	Parents to children (mean of 5 items) Children to parents (mean of 5 items) Quality of relations (mean of 3 items)

Figure 1

Means of child personality factors by gender of child

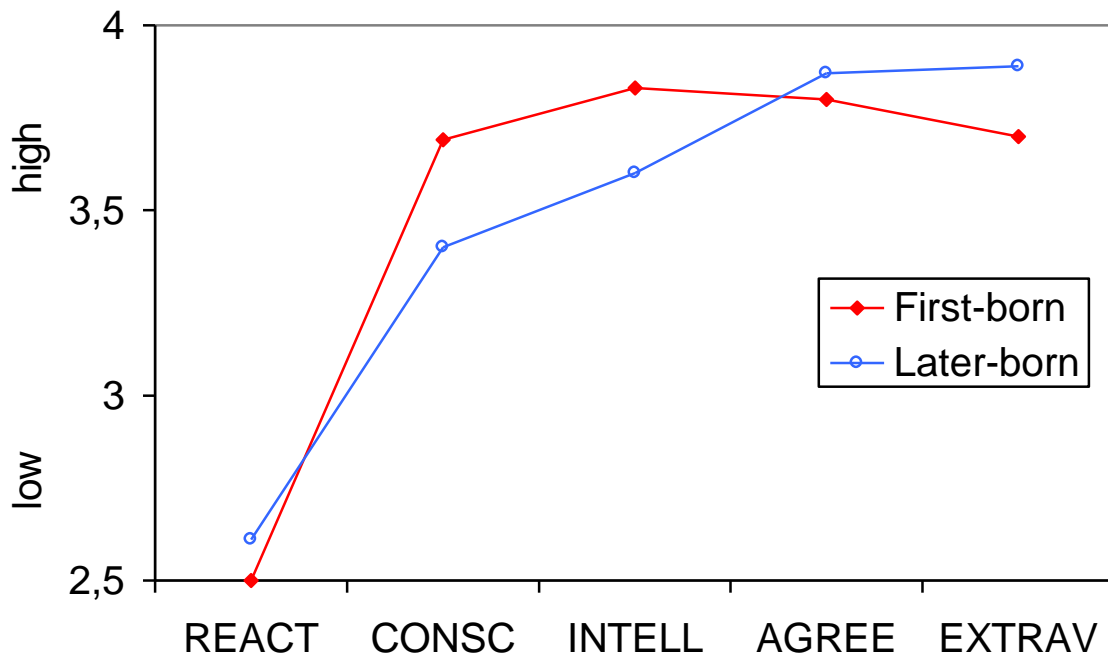


REACT	Emotional Reactivity
CONSC	Conscientiousness
INTELL	Intellectual Development
AGREE	Agreeableness
EXTRAV	Extraversion

Note. Underlined factor names refer to statistically significant differences of means ($p < .05$ for single underline; $p < .01$ for double underline)

Figure 2

Means of child personality factors by birth order of child

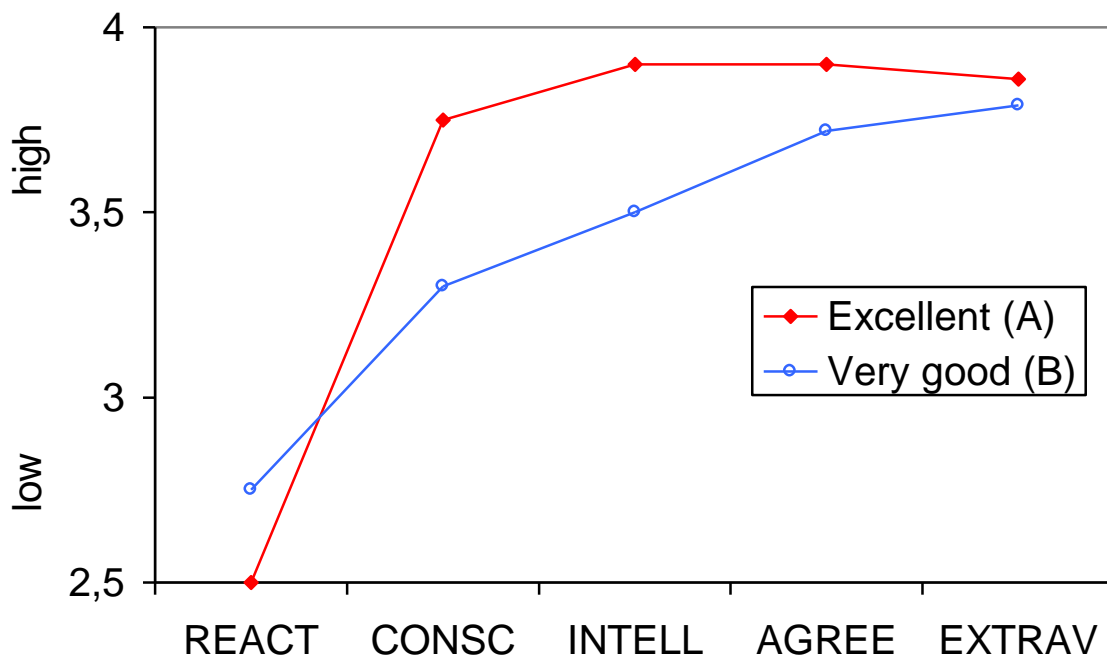


REACT	Emotional Reactivity
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Figure 3

Means of child personality factors by school performance

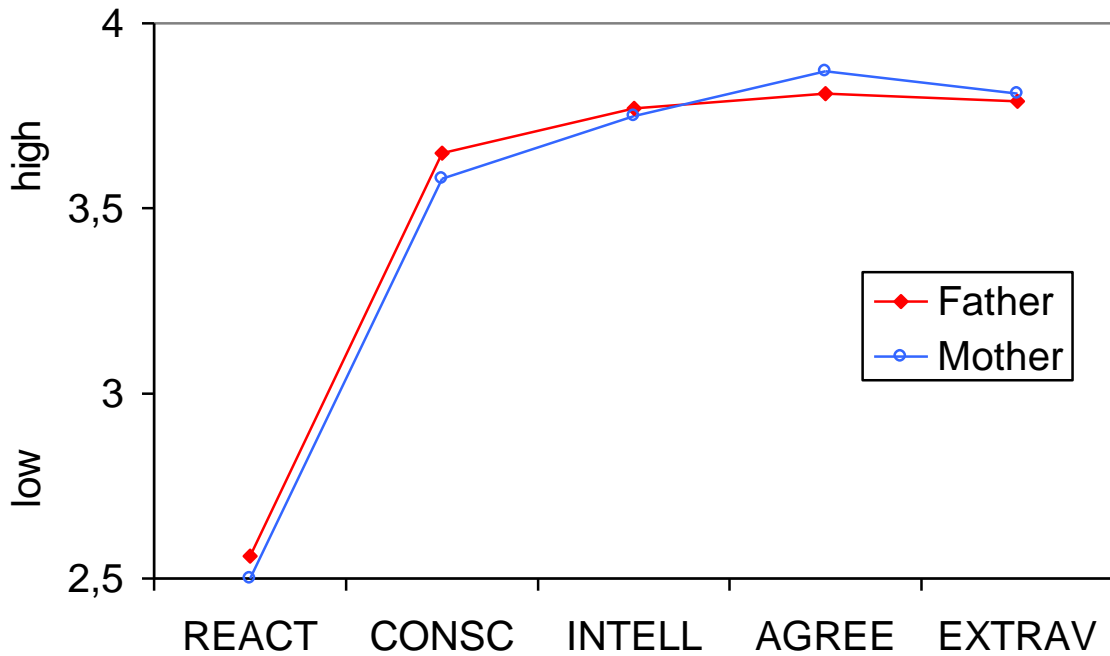


REACT	Emotional Reactivity
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Note. Underlined factor names refer to statistically significant differences of means ($p < .05$ for single underline; $p < .01$ for double underline)

Figure 4

Means of child personality factors by gender of parent

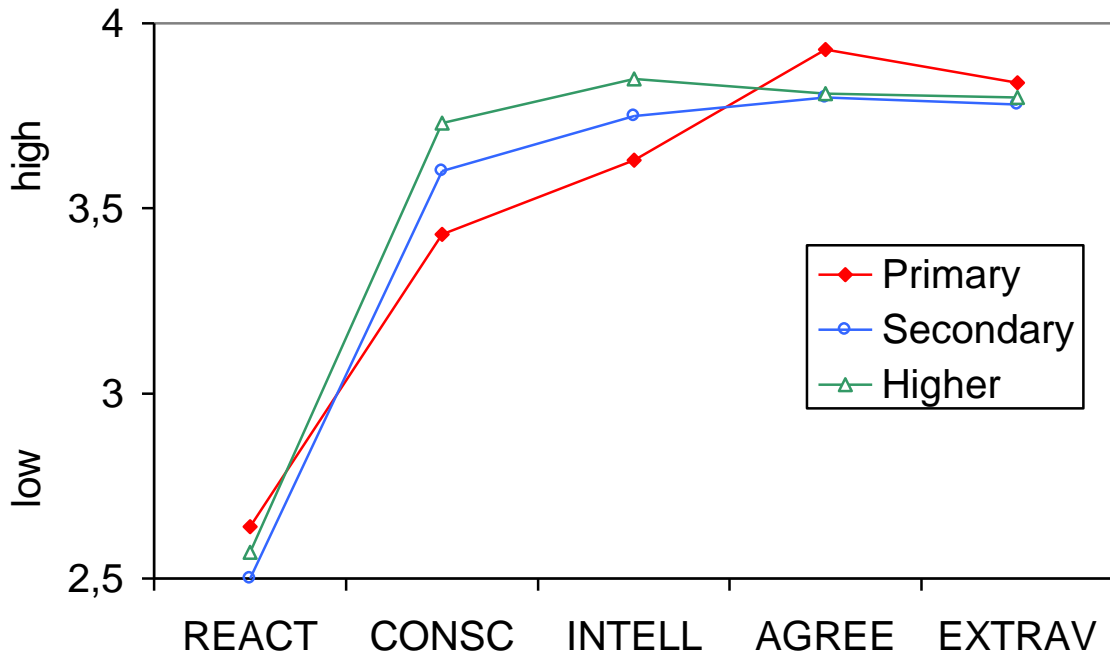


REACT	Emotional Reactivity
CONSC	Conscientiousness
INTELL	Intellectual Development
AGREE	Agreeableness
EXTRAV	Extraversion

Note. Underlined factor names refer to statistically significant differences of means ($p < .05$ for single underline; $p < .01$ for double underline)

Figure 5

Means of child personality factors by education level of parent

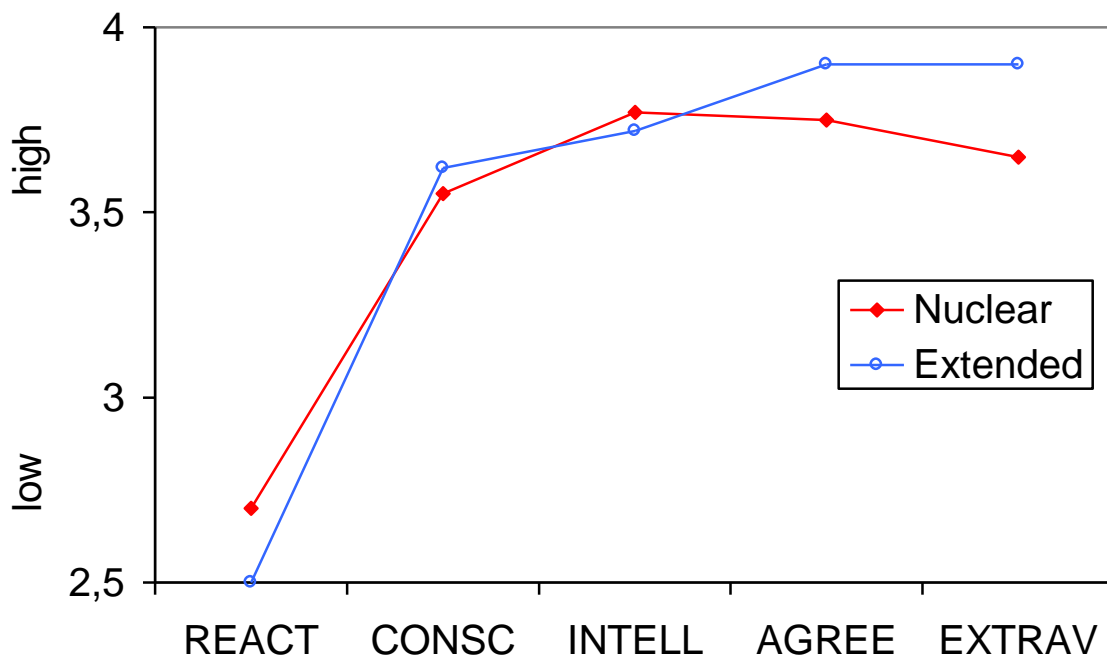


REACT Emotional Reactivity
CONSC Conscientiousness
INTELL Intellectual Development
AGREE Agreeableness
EXTRAV Extraversion

Note. Underlined factor names refer to statistically significant differences of means ($p < .05$ for single underline; $p < .01$ for double underline)

Figure 6

Means of child personality factors by family type



REACT	Emotional Reactivity
CONSC	Conscientiousness
INTELL	Intellectual Development
AGREE	Agreeableness
EXTRAV	Extraversion

Note. Underlined factor names refer to statistically significant differences of means ($p < .05$ for single underline; $p < .01$ for double underline)

Table 2

Correlation (Pearson r) of child personality factors
with emotional bonds between family members

Child personality factors	<u>Emotional bonds</u>			Total
	Children to parents	Parents to children	Quality of relations	
Emotional Reactivity	-.26	-.15	-.13	-.22
Conscientiousness	.31	.23	.19	.29
Intellectual Development	.33	.31	.28	.35
Agreeableness	.51	.41	.37	.51
Extraversion	.26	.22	.24	.27

Notes. All coefficients are significant ($p < .01$). Coefficients higher than $|.30|$ in bold.