



Work as a Context for Adult Development: Insights from MIDUS



Elyssa Besen, Michael Smyer, PhD¹, & Christina Matz-Costa, MSW
Boston College

Introduction

Work plays a major role in the lives of adults, from early adulthood to later adulthood. A considerable amount of research has focused on the relationship between employment and well-being, specifically which characteristics of a job lead to different levels of well-being (see for example Wright, Cropanzano, & Bonnett, 2007). There are individual differences in the relationship between job characteristics and well-being. Certain job characteristics in one person's life may be associated with elevated levels of well-being while those same job characteristics in another person's life may lead to lower levels of well-being.

The effects of work in adulthood differ from person to person. Research has consistently found a link between job characteristics and well-being (ter Doest & de Jonge, 2006), and job characteristics and personality (Thomas, Buboltz, & Winkelspecht, 2004). However, few studies have looked at the complex interactions among all three or how the relationship between the three constructs change across the lifespan.

Research Questions

This study addresses three questions:

1. Do personality and job characteristics predict well-being?
2. Does personality moderate the relationship between job characteristics and well-being?
3. Does this relationship vary by age?

Data

The Midlife in the United States: A National Study of Health and Well-being (MIDUS) collected data from over 7,000 Americans, ages 25 to 74. Data from the first wave of the study were gathered during 1994 and 1995. Respondents completed a telephone questionnaire as well as a mail back questionnaire.

Measures

Dependent Variable

Psychological well-being was measured using an 18-item scale, with six subscales; positive relations with others, self-acceptance, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). Respondents were asked on a 6-point scale how much they agree/disagree with the statements. Sample items include, "I like most parts of my personality" and "The demands of everyday life often get me down." High scores on the measure indicate greater levels of well-being.

Control Variables

Gender was dummy coded as female = 1 and male = 0.

Education was dummy coded as bachelors degree or higher = 1 and less than bachelors degree = 0.

Race was dummy coded as white = 1 and other races = 0.

Socioeconomic status was controlled for using the square root of total household income.

Independent Variables

Job characteristics were measured using a 19-item scale, with five subscales: skill discretion, decision authority, demands scale, coworker support, and supervisor support (Schwartz, Pieper, & Karasek, 1988). Respondents were asked on a 5-point scale how true the statements are. Sample items include, "How often do you learn new things at work?" and "How often you have a lot of interruption?"

Personality was measured using 30 self-descriptive adjectives. There are six subscales: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and agency (Rossi, 2001). Respondents were asked on a 4-point scale how much each adjective described them. Sample items include "creative" and "hardworking."

Age Groups

Age was measured as young (25-39), midlife (40-49), and old (50-74). Separate models were calculated for each age group: young (n=1399), midlife (n=1064), and old (n=988).

Abstract

Work is central to the lives of adults. This study investigated the relationships among personality, job characteristics, and well-being in young (n=1399), midlife (n=1064), and older (n=988) adults. Using three hierarchical regression models, one for each age group, the role of personality as a moderator between job characteristics and well-being was tested. Personality and job characteristics were found to predict well-being in all age groups. Personality was found to moderate the relationship between job characteristics and well-being only minimally and those relationships differed across age groups. Overall, the experiences of and at work were found to impact well-being across the lifespan.

Analysis

Hierarchical regression models were estimated for each age group to test the relationship between personality, job characteristics, and well-being. Age, gender, race, and income were controlled for in the model. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), moderation was tested by building our model in a step-wise fashion. In the first step, control variables and job characteristics variables were entered. In the second step, personality variables were added. Finally, in the third step, job characteristics by personality interaction terms were added. Figures 1-6 show the final step of the regression models for all six well-being subscales by age group. Only the interaction terms that were significant for at least one age group are presented.

Figure 1

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Self-Acceptance by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.13	0.04	.31**	0.12	0.04	.27**	0.17	0.04	.39**
Decision Authority	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02
Demands Scale	-0.11	0.04	-.09*	-0.07	0.04	-.04	-0.14	0.04	-.10**
Coworker Support	0.11	0.06	0.05	0.14	0.07	.09*	0.09	0.07	0.04
Supervisor Support	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.08	0.04	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.02
Agency	0.71	0.16	.35***	0.49	0.13	.29**	0.31	0.17	.28**
Agreeableness	0.13	0.19	-.02	0.02	0.24	0.02	0.47	0.25	.07*
Extraversion	-1.62	0.42	-.38***	-0.48	0.23	-.14*	-0.71	0.22	-.29**
Neuroticism	-1.82	0.12	-.31***	-1.74	0.15	-.32***	-1.79	0.15	-.35***
Conscientiousness	1.29	0.19	.36***	1.24	0.22	.31***	1.22	0.24	.31***
Openness to Experience	0.15	0.2	0.02	0.22	0.23	0.03	0.06	0.22	-.05*
Demand Scale by Conscientiousness	0.175	0.09	.048*	N/A	N/A	0.11	0.12	0.03	
Demand Scale by Agreeableness	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.3	0.14	.09*	
Skill Discretion by Openness	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.25	0.11	.08*	
Coworker Support by Neuroticism	N/A	N/A	0.23	0.11	.05*	N/A	N/A	N/A	
R2	.36**			.38***			.33***		

Figure 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Positive Relations with Others by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.03	0.05	0.01	0.17	0.05	.09*	0.01	0.07	0.01
Decision Authority	0.02	0.02	0.02	-0.05	0.03	-.05	-0.02	0.03	-.02
Demands Scale	-0.09	0.05	-.09*	-0.13	0.05	-.08*	-0.06	0.05	-.04
Coworker Support	0.14	0.07	0.05	0.08	0.09	.08*	0.07	0.09	.09*
Supervisor Support	0.01	0.04	0.01	-0.02	0.05	-.02	0.06	0.05	0.04
Agency	0.64	0.19	.30***	0.61	0.22	.28**	0.4	0.21	.26**
Agreeableness	1.65	0.23	.21***	1.42	0.28	.18**	1.51	0.32	.22**
Extraversion	1.8	0.44	.26**	1.16	0.27	.22**	1.47	0.28	.25**
Neuroticism	-1.4	0.15	-.23***	-1.62	0.19	-.27***	-1.5	0.19	-.23**
Conscientiousness	0.43	0.23	0.05	0.47	0.27	.11*	0.62	0.31	.08*
Openness to Experience	-0.23	0.23	-.09	-0.67	0.27	-.09*	-0.48	0.27	-.08
Demand Scale by Agreeableness	0.18	0.11	.06*	0.06	0.12	.02	N/A	N/A	N/A
R2	.32**			.31**			.31**		

Figure 5

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Environmental Mastery by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.08	0.04	.25*	0.02	0.05	.01	0.14	0.04	.29*
Decision Authority	0.07	0.02	.36***	0.08	0.03	.19*	0.03	0.03	0.04
Demands Scale	-0.17	0.04	-.32***	-0.16	0.04	-.11**	-0.14	0.05	-.05*
Coworker Support	0.11	0.05	0.05	0.14	0.07	.08	0.09	0.07	0.04
Supervisor Support	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.1	0.04	.08*	0.07	0.04	0.06
Agency	0.76	0.16	.34***	0.63	0.19	.31***	0.44	0.19	.28**
Agreeableness	-0.19	0.18	-.03	0.16	0.24	0.02	0.25	0.28	0.03
Extraversion	1.02	0.19	.29**	1.22	0.24	.04	1.09	0.44	.19*
Neuroticism	-1.82	0.12	-.36***	-1.83	0.15	-.34***	-1.8	0.16	-.36***
Conscientiousness	1.76	0.18	.35***	1.68	0.22	.31***	1.52	0.24	.28**
Openness to Experience	-0.26	0.18	-.04	-0.23	0.23	-.03	-0.49	0.24	-.08*
R2	.40***			.39***			.39***		

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Notes: Only the final step in the model is presented; only the interaction terms which were significant for at least one age group are presented; and control variables included in the model but left out here due to space limitations: gender, race, education, income.

Figure 2

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Personal Growth by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.09	0.04	.20**	0.19	0.05	.28**	0.19	0.06	.19**
Decision Authority	0.08	0.02	.20**	0.06	0.02	.09*	0.02	0.02	-.03
Demands Scale	-0.01	0.03	-.01	-0.07	0.04	-.05	0.07	0.04	0.05
Coworker Support	0.06	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.06	0.01	0.07	0.07	.04*
Supervisor Support	-0.01	0.03	-.01	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.04	0.01
Agency	0.26	0.14	.08*	0.46	0.17	.19**	0.26	0.17	.08*
Agreeableness	0.3	0.17	0.05	0.57	0.22	.09*	0.22	0.26	0.03
Extraversion	0.44	0.17	.16**	0.61	0.21	.04	0.64	0.23	.11**
Neuroticism	-0.6	0.11	-.14**	-0.69	0.14	-.14**	-0.89	0.15	-.17**
Conscientiousness	0.62	0.17	.28**	1.15	0.21	.19**	0.84	0.24	.11**
Openness to Experience	1.24	0.17	.23**	1.32	0.21	.19**	1.08	0.22	.15**
Skill Discretion by Conscientiousness	0.44	0.08	.02	0.28	0.11	.09*	0.23	0.11	.07*
Demand Scale by Agreeableness	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.24	0.11	.07*	
Coworker Support by Neuroticism	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0.23	0.11	.07*	
R2	.25**			.34***			.28**		

Figure 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Purpose in Life by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.001	0.05	0.001	0.01	0.05	0.004	0.04	0.07	0.02
Decision Authority	0.03	0.02	0.04	0.07	0.03	.08*	-0.01	0.03	-.01
Demands Scale	-0.05	0.04	-.03	-0.13	0.05	-.09*	0.03	0.05	0.03
Coworker Support	0.11	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.08	0.03	0.11	0.08	0.06
Supervisor Support	-0.02	0.04	-.02	-0.03	0.04	-.02	-0.02	0.05	-.02
Agency	0.2	0.16	0.04	0.04	0.22	-.01	0.03	0.21	-.0006
Agreeableness	0.16	0.2	0.03	0.48	0.26	0.07	0.46	0.32	0.06
Extraversion	1.05	0.2	.09*	1.14	0.24	0.02	0.92	0.28	0.03
Neuroticism	-0.5	0.13	-.19**	-0.61	0.17	-.11**	-0.79	0.19	-.14**
Conscientiousness	1.3	0.2	.28**	2.01	0.26	.26**	1.64	0.31	.25**
Openness to Experience	0.55	0.2	.09*	1.14	0.25	0.02	1.12	0.27	0.02
R2	.18**			.21**			.19**		

Figure 6

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Model for Personality and Job Characteristics Predicting Autonomy by Age Group

	Young Adults			Midlife Adults			Older Adults		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Skill Discretion	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.05	0.02	-0.01	0.06	-.003
Decision Authority	-0.02	0.02	-.03	-0.04	0.03	-.05	0.05	0.03	0.07
Demands Scale	0.04	0.04	0.03	-0.15	0.04	-.11**	-0.05	0.05	-.03
Coworker Support	-0.04	0.06	-.02	0.12	0.07	.08	0.21	0.08	.19*
Supervisor Support	-0.003	0.04	-.002	-0.03	0.04	-.02	-0.11	0.04	-.10*
Agency	1.14	0.16	.22**	1.04	0.19	.20**	0.92	0.19	.19**
Agreeableness	-0.33	0.2	-.05	0.05	0.24	0.01	0.43	0.28	0.05
Extraversion	-0.02	0.18	-.01	-0.03	0.23	-.01	0.11	0.21	-.01
Neuroticism	-1.13	0.13	-.22***	-1.31	0.15	-.28***	-0.91	0.17	-.19**
Conscientiousness	0.88	0.21	.21**	1.03	0.26	.19**	1.04	0.28	.21**
Openness to Experience	1.25	0.2	.19**	1.14	0.23	.18**	0.44	0.24	.07*
R2	.21**			.25**			.19**		

Results

Both personality and job characteristics predict well-being. The relationship between job characteristics and well-being differed across age groups with different job characteristics facets predicting different facets of well-being (see figures 1-6). In all cases, job characteristics and personality accounted for a significant amount of variance in well-being. While both personality and job characteristics predicted well-being, personality moderated the relationship between job characteristics and well-being only minimally, and this relationship was not consistent across age groups.

Discussion

As expected, both personality and job characteristics predicted well-being. However, the second research question that asked if personality would act as a moderator between job characteristics and well-being was only partially supported. There were only a few cases in which personality was found to be a significant moderator. In addition, personality moderated the relationship between different factors of job characteristics and well-being across age groups.

This study helps to illustrate the importance of work in the lives of adults. Having a better understanding of how work experiences lead to well-being is important at all ages and the relationship between those work experiences and well-being changes throughout adulthood. One next step in this program of research is to assess stability and change in these patterns by drawing on two waves of MIDUS data that are now available.

References

Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(6), 1173-1182.

Brim, O. G., Ryff, C. D., & Kessler, R. C. (2004). *The MIDUS national survey: An overview*. Chicago, IL, US: University of Chicago Press.

Rossi, A. S. (2001). Developmental roots of adult social responsibility. In A. S. Rossi (Ed.), *Caring and doing for other: Social responsibility in the domains of family, work, and community*. (pp. 227-320). Chicago, IL, US: University of Chicago Press.

Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.

Schwartz, J. E., Pieper, C. F., & Karasek, R. A. (1988). A procedure for linking psychosocial job characteristics data to health surveys. *American Journal of Public Health*, 78(8), 904-909.

ter Doest, L., & de Jonge, J. (2006). Testing causal models of job characteristics and employee well-being: A replication study using cross-lagged structural equation modeling. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 79(3), 499-507.

Thomas, A., Buboltz, W. C., & Winkelspecht, C. S. (2004). Job characteristics and personality as predictors of job satisfaction. *Organizational Analysis*, 12(2), 205-219.

Wright, T. A., Cropanzano, R., & Bonnett, D. G. (2007). The moderating role of employee positive well-being on the relation between job satisfaction and job performance. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12(2), 93-104.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Sloan Center on Aging and Work at Boston College for their support.
¹Michael Smyer is currently at Bucknell University