

## BRIEF REPORT

## Maternal Personality Change From Pregnancy Until 12 Months Postpartum: Associations With Parenting

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Although many studies have shown that personality—as a relatively stable characteristic—is a predictor of parenting behavior, personality changes occur during adulthood. Therefore, we do not know whether previous findings based on personality assessed (long) after the birth of the child indicate that personality as assessed before the child is born predicts behaviors parents eventually display. Possibly, personality changes are additionally predictive for parenting behavior. With this three-wave longitudinal study, we aimed to examine whether mothers' personality change from pregnancy to postpartum predicts maternal parenting behavior above and beyond personality traits as assessed during pregnancy. A sample of 239 pregnant women participated in the study ( $M_{\text{age}} = 29.95$  years,  $SD = 4.08$ , range 20–43; 53% primiparous; 95% of Dutch descent). Women reported their big five personality traits during pregnancy (T1), at six- (T2), and 12 months postpartum (T3). At the postpartum assessments, mothers also reported on their affectionate and hostile parenting behavior. Latent Difference Score models indicated that personality at T1 predicted hostile but not affectionate parenting behavior at T2. Changes in personality from T1 to T2 were associated with maternal hostile and affectionate parenting at T2, whereas changes from T2 to T3 were unrelated to parenting. Personality as assessed during pregnancy may thus be helpful in identifying mothers at risk of early hostile parenting behavior. Identifying predictors of personality change may inform preventive efforts aimed at reducing this risk, as personality changes from pregnancy to 6 months postpartum were more predictive of maternal parenting than initial levels.

**Keywords:** personality change, parenting behavior, affection, hostility, parenthood

**Supplemental materials:** <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0001168.supp>

Parental personality is an important determinant of parenting behavior. Parents who are more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, and open, and less neurotic display more affectionate parenting and behavioral control (Prinzle et al., 2009), with these parenting behaviors in turn predictive of fewer internalizing (Schmid et al., 2011) and externalizing adjustment problems (Lorber & Egeland, 2011). As personality is a relatively stable characteristic, it would seem that personality assessment can be used as a screening tool during pregnancy to predict who will become effective parents. However, studies have indicated that changes in personality occur when people become parents, with individual differences in the

degree and direction of change (Hutteman et al., 2014; Paris & Helson, 2002). Personality changes may occur during pregnancy as a result of the transition into a new social role when becoming a parent. Role transitions may induce behavior changes that allow individuals to meet the expectations of the role, and these behavior changes may become entrenched in personality (Roberts et al., 2005). A biological mechanism through hormonal changes that accompany pregnancy may also be responsible (Bridges, 2015). Because of these changes, findings on associations between personality and parenting from research assessing personality after the child is born may not readily generalize to personality as assessed before the child is born.

This article was published Online First November 13, 2023.

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The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The data and analysis code are available at [https://osf.io/nda69/?view\\_only=47fa22739b5c4804970136db2cb99339](https://osf.io/nda69/?view_only=47fa22739b5c4804970136db2cb99339). This study was not preregistered. Parts of these data were presented at the European Conference on Personality, 2018, in Zadar, Croatia.

Alithe L. Van den Akker played a lead role in conceptualization, data

curation, formal analysis, project administration, and writing—original draft and an equal role in investigation and methodology. Floor B. van Rooij played a supporting role in conceptualization and writing—review and editing and an equal role in investigation and methodology. Geertjan Overbeek played a supporting role in conceptualization and writing—review and editing. Jessica J. Asscher played a supporting role in conceptualization and writing—review and editing and an equal role in investigation and methodology.

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Of the studies included in a meta-analysis on personality and parenting (Prinzle et al., 2009), all but one study assessed personality after the child was born. This study included only measures of positive and negative parental affectivity (Goldstein et al., 1996). Prenatal parental negative affectivity (related to neuroticism) was associated with less expressivity toward the child at 3 months postpartum (Goldstein et al., 1996). No associations for trait positive affectivity (related to extraversion), and no associations with either trait and maternal sensitive parenting were found. A recent study examined the predictive value of personality as assessed preconception—when parents were still adolescents—and found that higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability were associated with less hostility toward the child at 12 months, and extraversion and openness were associated with more warmth (Spry et al., 2023). However, as personality changes are expected to occur during the transition to parenthood, findings of personality as assessed either before or after pregnancy may not be readily applicable to this specific time.

Even if personality as assessed during pregnancy is already predictive of parenting behavior to a certain degree, changes in personality traits may also be implicated in parenting behavior through similar mechanisms as initial levels. Parents' personality may for instance determine their cognitions about their own competence as parents (de Haan et al., 2009), as well as their general tendency to experience feelings of warmth and/or negativity toward the child (Kochanska et al., 1997), and their ability to inhibit negative responses when dealing with the frustration that can arise when parenting children (Schofield et al., 2017). Therefore, increasing in traits that are associated with more positive and less negative parenting behaviors can be expected to further impact those parenting behaviors.

If changes in personality traits are associated with parenting behavior over and above initial levels, this has important implications for practice. A body of research on child maltreatment aims to actuarially assess which parents will become abusive, to be able to intervene beforehand (i.e., prevent maltreatment before it occurs rather than dealing with it after it has taken place) by providing support to these parents (e.g., van der Put et al., 2017). It is tempting to include measures of maternal personality as it is relatively easy to assess. However, the changes in personality that will likely still occur may be especially relevant in predicting parenting behavior, rendering these levels of personality traits less important. This would imply that personality changes would need to be monitored across the transition to parenthood. Additionally, interventions may need to be careful in that they do not interfere with a naturally occurring process of personality changes during pregnancy, but rather support it. Especially in a preventive context, doing more than necessary—in addition to being unnecessarily costly—can actually be harmful (Leijten et al., 2018).

## This Study

The first aim of our study was to examine whether maternal big five personality traits as assessed during pregnancy are associated with parenting behavior toward the child after it is born. We examined both affectionate and hostile parenting behavior. Affectionate parenting is necessary to provide the child with a sense of safety and security (Ainsworth, 1979). Additionally, parents need to control frustration when infants cry excessively, for instance, and inhibit

hostile behaviors. It is important to realize that a lack of warmth does not necessarily imply that parents display hostile behavior (or vice versa; Carroll et al., 2013), and it is therefore important to investigate both these behaviors.

The second aim of our study was to examine whether changes in personality traits from pre- to postpartum are predictive of parenting behavior over and above initial levels of these traits. We assessed big five personality traits of women during pregnancy and both personality and parenting when the child was 6 and 12 months old. We had several hypotheses. First, based on a meta-analysis of parental personality and parenting behavior, we expected that higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and lower levels of neuroticism as assessed during pregnancy would predict more affectionate parenting and less hostile parenting (Prinzle et al., 2009). Additionally, we expected that increases in extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness, and decreases in neuroticism would be predictive of more affectionate and less hostile parenting behavior above and beyond associations with initial levels of the personality dimensions. We controlled for whether mothers were having their first child or not, as primiparous women were newly transitioning into the role of becoming a parent and may therefore be more likely to show personality maturation than multiparous women (Galdiolo & Roskam, 2014).

## Method

### Participants

This study is part of a larger project investigating prenatal risk factors for parenting problems and child development outcomes. The project was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the department of Child Development and Education at the University of Amsterdam (2012-COP-2513). A first wave (T1) was collected between December 2013 and April 2014. Three follow-up waves of data were collected for this sample. Follow-ups were at 6 months postpartum (T2; June 2014–June 2015), 12 months postpartum (T3; March 2015–November 2015), and 3.5 years postpartum (T4; September 2017–June 2018). For this study, we included data from T1, T2, and T3 as these contained the measures of interest. Students collected data as part of a research practical—recruiting participants online, through websites for expecting women and young parents, facebook, and face-to-face in Amsterdam. Mothers who participated in Wave 1 were eligible to win a 100 euro gift certificate and a 50 euro gift certificate at each subsequent wave. At T1, 1,305 mothers opened the questionnaire. Of these, 822 mothers gave informed consent and participated; 708 mothers indicated they would like to receive information about a follow-up study and provided their contact information. Of the 621 that could be contacted for follow-up (69 mothers did not fill out information about the expected date of birth of their child; 17 mothers filled out a due date that was either before the start date of T1 or more than 9 months after T1, indicating they could not have been pregnant with that particular child at T1, and one mother indicated the child was stillborn), 248 mothers took part in one of the follow-ups. Of this longitudinal sample, 170 participated at the first follow-up at approximately 6 months postpartum (T2;  $M_{\text{months between T1 and T2}} = 9.4$ ,  $SD = 2.5$ ), and 213 participated when their child was 1 year old (T3). However, nine children were either too young (<5 months at T2) or too old (>7 months at T2). Exclusion of these cases resulted

in a final sample size of  $N = 239$  for T1,  $N = 162$  for T2, and  $N = 206$  for T3. Little's missing completely at random test indicated data were missing at random in the longitudinal sample,  $\chi^2(6,806) = 6498.06$ ,  $p = .996$ .

The final sample of mothers had a mean age of 29.95 years ( $SD = 4.08$ , range 20–43) at T1. Approximately half of the mothers were expecting their first child (53%). Most women were of Dutch descent (95%). Four mothers were Surinamese-Dutch, four mothers were Indonesian-Dutch, one mother was Moroccan-Dutch, one was Antillean-Dutch, one South American, and one South African. Most mothers had a partner (98%). Educational levels for the mothers were as follows: 3% high-school education or less, 31% vocational education, 66% college or higher. Monthly income was distributed as follows: 12% earned <2,000 euros a month, 48% earned 2,000–3,200 euros a month, and 40% earned >3,200 euros a month.

## Measures

### Personality

Mothers filled out the 44 items of the Dutch translation (Denissen et al., 2008) of the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) at T1, T2, and T3. Mothers were instructed to indicate on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) how much they agreed that the item described them. The Big Five Inventory assesses extraversion with eight items (example item: “is talkative”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = .73, T2 = .75, T3 = .78), neuroticism with eight items (example item: “can be moody”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = .82, T2 = .84, T3 = .84), conscientiousness with nine items (example item: “does a thorough job”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = .79, T2 = .85, T3 = .83), agreeableness with nine items (example item: “Starts quarrels with others”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = .68, T2 = .71, T3 = .69), and openness to experience with 10 items (example item: “Has an active imagination”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T1 = .76, T2 = .78, T3 = .79).

### Parenting

At T2 and T3, mothers reported on their parenting behavior by filling out the Dutch Comprehensive Parenting Behavior Questionnaire (Majdandžić et al., 2008). The present study included the subscales hostility (six items, example item: “When my child cries for a long time, I yell at him/her”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T2 = .62, T3 = .70) and affection (seven items, example item: “I give my child lots of kisses”; Cronbach's  $\alpha$  T2 = .64, T3 = .79). Mothers indicated how much the item applied to them on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). We also assessed parents' tendency to shield their infants from noise and other stimuli and their willingness to let others approach their child, but these parenting behaviors were not included here as these constructs are not yet well established in the parenting literature, and it is not clear whether and how these are implicated in child development.

### Plan of Analysis

To examine how (changes in) mothers' personality dimensions predicted parenting behavior, we first examined measurement invariance across the three measurement moments. For each wave, items were modeled to load on a latent personality dimension.

Error covariances for the same items at different measurement waves were allowed to correlate. Based on modification indices, error covariances between different items within the same wave were added. To assess metric invariance, factor loadings were then constrained to be equal across waves. Scalar invariance was assessed by constraining the item intercepts to be equal across waves. Whenever noninvariance was concluded, modification indices were examined for noninvariant items. The procedure was then performed from the beginning, excluding the noninvariant item. Absolute model fit was assessed with the Comparative Fit Index (CFI > .90 = good fit), the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI > .90 = good fit), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .05 = good fit; for an overview of model fit statistics, see Hu & Bentler, 1999).  $\Delta$ CFI was used to compare models ( $\Delta$ CFI < .01 indicating a nonsignificant difference; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). As measures were self-report, noncompliant responses were examined by computing the intraindividual  $SD$  across all items each wave (Lee & Ashton, 2018). We found a maximum of four cases that were  $\leq .70$  (all  $\geq .60$ ). Incoherent responding was examined with the mean  $SD$  for responses within scales (after recoding). These were  $\leq 1.60$  for all cases (all  $\leq 1.18$ ). We conclude that there are no serious issues with these problematic response styles in our data.

Next, we fitted five latent difference score models (Selig & Preacher, 2009), one for each personality dimension. As the mothers were assessed at different times in their pregnancy at T1, and were all reassessed when their child was 6 months old (T2), we controlled for the number of months between T1 and T2 in all analyses, as well as for maternal age. We examined whether maternal hostile and affectionate parenting at T2 and T3 were predicted by personality (change), controlling for whether mothers were primi- or multiparous (coded primiparous = 1, multiparous = 0); for a graphical representation of the estimated final models, see Figure 1. Analyses were performed in Mplus Version 7.31, with missing data handled using full information maximum likelihood (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2015).

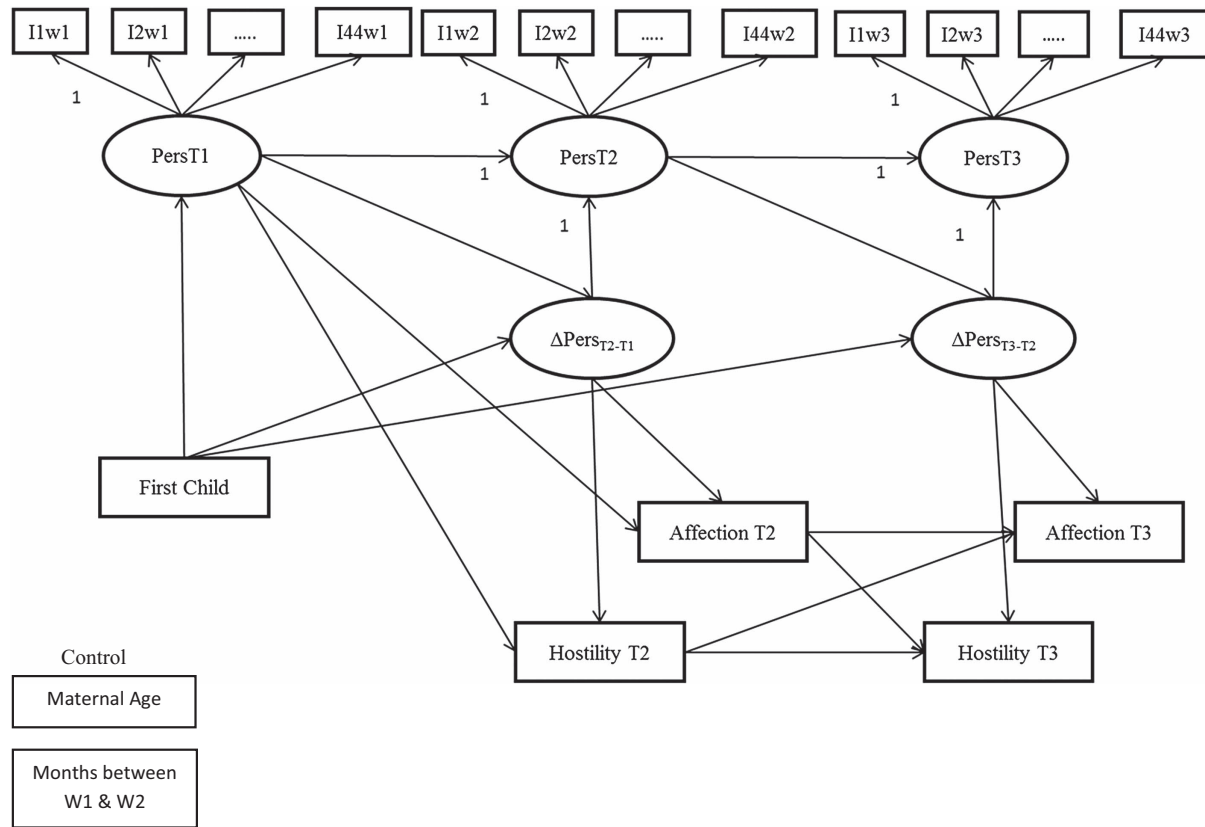
### Transparency and Openness

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all relevant measures in the study, and we follow Journal Article Reporting Standards (Appelbaum et al., 2018). The data and analysis code are available at [https://osf.io/nda69/?view\\_only=47fa22739b5c4804970136db2cb99339](https://osf.io/nda69/?view_only=47fa22739b5c4804970136db2cb99339). This study was not preregistered.

## Results

We first examined measurement invariance for the personality dimensions. All fit indices indicated that the models fit the data well (all CFI  $\geq .902$ , TLI  $\geq .924$ , RMSEA  $\leq .050$ ), with the exception of the TLI and RMSEA for Openness (TLI  $\geq .870$ , RMSEA  $\leq .064$ ), which indicated mediocre fit. For all dimensions except neuroticism, structural invariance was established, with all  $\Delta$ CFI < .01. For neuroticism, the item “can be tense” was not invariant. After this item was removed, structural invariance was established, with  $\Delta$ CFI = .01. Although the relative fit supported scalar invariance, not all fit indices for openness indicated a good fit to the data with CFI = .903, but TLI = .884 and RMSEA = .061. For all model fit statistics and model comparisons, see Supplemental Material Table 1. Descriptives

**Figure 1**  
Graphical Representation of the Models



*Note.* Each model included the items for a single personality dimension as observed variables that loaded on latent personality factors for T1, T2, and T3. Covariances between the latent difference scores and between affection and hostility at T2 were also included but not shown here. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; Pers = personality factor; I1 = item 1; I2 = item 2; I44 = item 44; w1 = wave 1; w2 = wave 2; w3 = wave 3.

and intercorrelations of the study variables are provided in [Supplemental Material Table 2](#).

Latent difference scores indicated that there was significant variability in personality change across time, for each of the personality dimensions, both from T1 to T2 and from T2 to T3, except for conscientiousness from T2 to T3. Primiparous women were significantly more extraverted than multiparous women at T1, with no other differences in personality (change) between primi- and multiparous women. Model fit statistics are provided in [Supplemental Material Table 3](#), and parameter estimates for predictive paths are provided in [Table 1](#).

With regards to the prediction of parenting behavior, none of the personality dimensions assessed during pregnancy were predictive of affectionate parenting behavior at T2. However, lower conscientiousness and higher neuroticism at T1 were predictive of more maternal hostility at T2. Over and above these concurrent personality trait indicators, the assessed changes in personality from pre-to-postpartum were significantly predictive of parenting behavior: decreases in agreeableness and conscientiousness were predictive of hostile parenting behavior at T2—above and beyond the associations with initial levels of these personality dimensions. Similarly, increases in neuroticism were predictive of less affectionate and more hostile

parenting behavior at T2. Changes in personality from T2 to T3 were not predictive of parenting behavior at T3.

## Discussion

In this study, we investigated how personality development of women from pregnancy to when their child was 12 months old, affected their parenting behavior. Maternal conscientiousness and neuroticism as assessed during pregnancy were predictive of hostile parenting behavior when the child was 6 months old. Previously, a measure of antisocial personality disorder characteristics administered during pregnancy has been shown to be predictive of harsh parenting in a clinical population ([Bosquet & Egeland, 2000](#)). Results of this study imply that in a nonclinical population, personality measurement during pregnancy can also be useful in predicting who is more likely to display harsh parenting and may be useful to include in screening during pregnancy. However, over and above the associations between personality assessed during pregnancy, intraindividual changes in personality were more predictive of parenting behavior, with decreases in agreeableness and conscientiousness and increases in neuroticism predictive of hostile parenting behavior. Increases in conscientiousness and

**Table 1**  
Standardized Estimates for the Models Including Predictors and Outcomes of Maternal Personality Change

Dimension	First child → personality T1		First child → personality $\Delta_{T1-T2}$		First child → personality $\Delta_{T2-T3}$	
	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>
Extraversion	.174 (.070)	.013	-.036 (.101)	.721	.113 (.147)	.442
Agreeableness	.042 (.079)	.600	.218 (.121)	.071	-.046 (.141)	.745
Conscientious	.089 (.075)	.236	.164 (.123)	.181	-.231 (.156)	.140
Neuroticism	-.057 (.073)	.439	-.104 (.096)	.278	-.064 (.174)	.712
Openness	.131 (.074)	.078	.050 (.171)	.768	-.173 (.145)	.234

Dimension	Personality T1 → parenting T2				Personality $\Delta_{T1-T2}$ → parenting T2				Personality $\Delta_{T2-T3}$ → parenting T3			
	Affection		Hostility		Affection		Hostility		Affection		Hostility	
	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>	$\beta$ (SE)	<i>p</i>
Extraversion	.035 (.085)	.681	-.055 (.087)	.529	.173 (.096)	.071	-.088 (.104)	.393	-.112 (.108)	.300	.010 (.112)	.930
Agreeableness	-.047 (.091)	.610	-.016 (.100)	.875	.133 (.114)	.242	-.334 (.117)	.004	-.121 (.114)	.291	.113 (.116)	.330
Conscientious	-.146 (.085)	.087	-.174 (.088)	.049	.226 (.113)	.046	-.270 (.119)	.023	.002 (.112)	.989	-.072 (.124)	.563
Neuroticism	.041 (.082)	.614	.214 (.080)	.008	-.194 (.091)	.033	.250 (.091)	.006	.044 (.184)	.811	.194 (.161)	.228
Openness	-.100 (.093)	.282	-.051 (.106)	.634	.048 (.134)	.719	-.180 (.170)	.289	.098 (.117)	.403	-.101 (.118)	.395

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3; SE = standard error.

decreases in neuroticism were predictive of affectionate parenting behavior. As early parenting behaviors have in turn been shown to be predictive of major outcomes for children, such as conduct problems in childhood (Lorber & Egeland, 2011) and depressive and anxiety symptoms even in adulthood (Schmid et al., 2011), these personality changes may thus be important to monitor as well. More research is necessary to investigate whether these associations of personality changes with parenting behavior are ultimately predictive of later child outcomes.

Although extraversion and openness have been found to be related to parenting in older children (Prinz et al., 2009), neither levels nor changes in these characteristics were predictive of parenting behavior in our study. These characteristics may be less important in determining parents' ability to show affectionate parenting and inhibit hostile behaviors during this early phase. Perhaps extraversion and openness become more important in determining affectionate and hostile parenting behavior as mother and child start to interact with the outside world more and start to engage in all sorts of new experiences. Therefore, these aspects may become more relevant in the second year of the child's life, when they start to walk around and expand their area of exploration, encountering more interaction partners and novel situations. Parents will also be encountering new (social) situations, and extraversion and openness may be resources to navigate these situations, making it easier for them to remain warm and affectionate. Future research may investigate these possibilities. At the same time, it will be important to replicate these findings across this early period of development to see whether a lack of association with extraversion and openness is a consistent finding.

As personality changes are associated with parenting behavior in meaningful ways, more research is also necessary to investigate what drives these personality changes in expecting mothers. Theoretical accounts have posited that these changes are due to the social roles that are taken on in this life phase, the successful adoption of which requires individuals to become more mature (Roberts et al., 2005). Although becoming a parent is an important role transition for young adults, our findings do not support it as a

driver of the changes that occurred; mothers who were first time parents did not change more in our study than mothers who already had children—and would thus have already experienced the role transition. Several other studies have also not found support for the impact of the parental role transition per se (Galdiolo & Roskam, 2014; Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001; Specht et al., 2011; van Scheppingen et al., 2016). Rather the direction of personality change appears to be determined more by how the transition to parenthood is experienced, with positive experiences associated with personality maturation (Paris & Helson, 2002), but stressful experiences associated with the opposite development (Hutteman et al., 2014). More knowledge on the drivers of these personality changes may be helpful in predicting who will experience positive personality change, as well as aid in determining what to target in intervention of mothers at risk for negative development.

### Limitations and Strengths

Some limitations to this study are worth noting. First, models for openness had a somewhat less optimal fit, which may indicate that not all items were measuring a single construct in our study. Additionally, the original neuroticism scale was not completely invariant across time. To achieve an invariant measure, we removed an item, which changes the meaning of the construct slightly from the neuroticism scale as originally constructed. Both these issues may limit comparability of our findings to other studies using these measures. Second, the mothers in this study were quite homogeneous with regards to ethnicity and educational level. Replication of these findings in more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse samples is needed. Third, the measures were all self-report. Although no serious issues with noncompliant responding or incoherent response styles were found (Lee & Ashton, 2018), we cannot rule out that there was some socially desirable responding for instance. In addition to these limitations, this study has several important strengths: the prospective longitudinal design, with a careful examination of measurement invariance across measurement moments, the focus

on personality changes in addition to mean-levels, and the inclusion of both hostile and affectionate parenting, two dimensions of parenting that are relevant to the care for infants.

## Conclusion and Implications

This study aimed to investigate associations between personality changes of mothers from pregnancy across the first year of their newborns' lives and how these changes are associated to their parenting behavior, above and beyond initial levels. For all personality dimensions, there was significant variability in change across time, with some mothers increasing and others decreasing in personality maturity. Personality as assessed during pregnancy predicted hostile (but not affectionate) parenting, and may thus be of some use in risk assessment of early child maltreatment for instance. As personality changes from pregnancy across the first half year of the child's life are implicated in hostile as well as affectionate parenting, future research may investigate potential predictors of maternal personality change during this time to inform prevention efforts aimed at helping families in caring for their newborns.

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Received November 8, 2022

Revision received October 6, 2023

Accepted October 8, 2023 ■

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