

Dependency in Caregiving Contexts:  
The Role of Personality

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In place of our dependence upon one another for support, today, wherever possible we tend to rely on machines and services. We find modern living so organized so that it demands the least possible direct dependence on others. Of course this is natural and understandable. But with these developments, there has arisen a sense that my future is not dependent on my neighbor, but rather on my job, or at most, my employer. This in turn encourages us to suppose that because others are not important for my happiness, their happiness is not important to me.

Excerpt taken from *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World*  
the Dalai Lama

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## **Introduction**

To write a dissertation is truly to embark on a journey. As every writer who has traveled down this road knows, it is filled with twists and turns. Decisions must be made on where to go and how best to get there. By the end of the journey, for better or worse, the writer has learned to ignore the many different forks in the road. Others, however, may require some assistance -- a roadmap as it were -- to understand the journey, and this introduction is intended to provide one.

This manuscript is divided into three parts. The first section (**Chapters 1-3**) discusses the theoretical foundations of dependency from gerontological and psychological perspectives. Personality, it is proposed, influences interpersonal dependency in caregiving contexts. Key personality constructs, both old and new, are explored and discussed. In the second section (**Chapters 4-5**), the assessment of personality using questionnaire items is reviewed. Standardized instruments, as well as new measures, are described and tested in a series of pilot studies. Finally, the third section of the manuscript (**Chapters 6-8**) puts forward a number of hypotheses, chief of which concerns the expression of dependent behavior in caregiving contexts. Employing the battery of measurement instruments developed in preceding sections, differential and developmental assumptions are tested on a sample of elderly individuals receiving care. Conclusions and future perspectives are presented in **Chapter 9**.

## **An Overview**

### *Section 1: Theoretical Explanations of Dependency in Later Life*

**Chapter 1** reopens the discussion of dependency among the elderly, an issue that appears to have lain dormant for some time. Professional caregiving is shown to be one form of interpersonal dependency that arises from loss: loss of functional health coupled with loss of social support. Although models of successful aging have been widely used to explain how older adults cope with loss, such models focus on personal autonomy and thus have neglected to acknowledge interpersonal dependency as a natural and adaptive means of dealing with age-related decline. It is argued that dependency and autonomy can both be functional, and hence, form a dialectic of particular developmental significance for the aging adult.

**Chapter 2** reviews empirical research on dependency in caregiving contexts. This research is based largely on a social reinforcement paradigm, which asserts that dependency is fostered by the caregiving environment. Findings from observational studies are presented, confirming that dependency is contingently reinforced by caregivers, i.e., caregivers tend to reward dependent behavior and ignore independent behavior. However, the social reinforcement paradigm, it is argued, does not account for individual differences that influence dependent behavior. The approach has furthermore restricted itself to an analysis of the caregiving interaction -- and the most essential, tangible forms of support received therein -- rather than upon the caregiving relationship and the many other kinds of social and emotional support provided in this unique dyad.

**Chapter 3** explores individual differences that are likely to have an impact on dependent behavior in caregiving context. Empirical findings on the dependent personality, trait affiliation, and attitudes toward authority demonstrate that these constructs could be the source of dependent behavior. Theoretical considerations, as well as personal observations, suggests that stoicism, caregiver affiliation, and respect for medical authority may afford even more accurate explanations of dependency, especially among elderly care recipients. A brief **Excurs** into personality change across the lifespan strongly suggests that the progressive deterioration of functional capacity at the end of life could well prompt an increase in trait dependency.

*Section 2: The Selection and Development of Psychometric Measures for the Study of Dependency in Later Life*

**Chapter 4** begins with a review of the general criteria used in constructing psychometric scales. Particular emphasis is paid to the special problems associated with personality assessment in frail, older adults. Standardized measures of the personality constructs in question are then reviewed and selected on the basis of these criteria. In conclusion, the reliability of these measures in a sample of elderly care recipients is tested.

**Chapter 5** discusses the development of new measures, including three new personality scales and one behavioral rating scale. The development of these measures entailed various problems and challenges, and the process of selection and refinement, both in terms of the personality construct and its operationalization, is described. In conclusion, the psychometric properties of the revised scales, including evidence of item-scale consistency and convergent validity, are presented.

*Section 3: An Empirical Investigation of Dependency in Caregiving Contexts*

**Chapter 6** puts forward three sets of hypotheses concerning interpersonal dependency in caregiving contexts. The differential hypotheses contend that higher scores on dependency, affiliation, and authoritarian constructs are associated with higher dependency upon one's caregiver. The developmental hypotheses focus on the changes in personality one might expect with age-related decline (maturational effects), as well as the differences in personality one might expect between generations (cohort effects). Finally, questions with relevance for applied research probe the typical elderly care recipient's attitudes and behaviors in institutional and home-care settings with a view to optimize healthcare service delivery.

**Chapter 7** reports findings from a sample (N=114) of elderly care recipients who were rated by their caregivers (N=24). Wherever possible, the results of the personality assessment are compared to existing norms. A convenience sample of students (N=72) serves as a further contrast, allowing tentative conclusions to be drawn regarding cohort differences. Bivariate correlations illustrate the association between various traits, sociodemographic variables, and outcomes, in particular, well-being. The report concludes with the prediction of social

dependency based upon sociodemographic, personality, and environmental variables, perhaps the most critical test of the entire analysis.

**Chapter 8** discusses the present findings, some of which were unexpected and provocative. The discussion centers on the role of personality, environment, and above all, functional health in the prediction of the major outcome variable, social dependency. The interaction between some personality factors and the caregiving context on well-being is also discussed. In-depth examination of the responses given by some study participants seems to indicate defensive posturing; such reactions might be construed to be psychological resilience, positive illusions, or alternately, denial. Methodological shortcomings in the study, in particular, the failure to account of mediating variables, such as the amount of informal social support received by the elderly individual, are presented. Finally, the practical implications of these findings for the provision of healthcare to the elderly are also discussed.

**Chapter 9** delineates the most important theoretical insights and empirical findings that this study has produced. Emphasis is placed upon a person-environment perspective of dependency, the conceptual elaboration of the dependency construct, and the influence of social history on personality. In conclusion, recommendations for the future study of personality and dependency in later life are presented.