Age differences in maximization

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DIFFERENCES LIEES A L'AGE ET MAXIMATION

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Résumé

Des différences interindividuelles dans le comportement de choix existent. Plus précisément, certaines personnes cherchent la meilleure option (personnes maximiseurs) alors que d'autres cherchent une option suffisamment bonne (personnes optimiseurs). Ici nous explorons si ces différences interindividuelles sont influencées par l'âge et par des traits de personnalité (i.e., modèle du Big Five). Des jeunes adultes (n = 125 ; 19 ans) et des adultes plus âgés (n = 101 ; 86 ans) ont complété différentes échelles mesurant entre autre la maximation et les traits de personnalité évalués dans le Big Five. Nos résultats ont indiqué une plus grande proportion de maximiseurs chez les jeunes adultes par rapport aux adultes plus âgés. Nous avons également trouvé une association mineure entre la maximation et les traits du Big Five dans les deux groupes. En résumé, l'âge influence le comportement de choix, mais ceci ne peut être expliqué par les changements de traits de personnalité.

Mots-clef : Maximation, Comportement de choix, Vieillissement, Big Five, Personnalité

Abstract

Studies have shown the existence of inter-individual differences in choice behavior, some people seeking for the best (maximizers) and others for a good enough option (satisficers). Here we explored whether these inter-individual differences are influenced by aging and common personality traits (i.e., Big Five model). Young (n = 125; 19 years old) and elderly adults (n = 101; 86 years old) completed different scales assessing – among others – maximization and Big Five traits. Our results indicated a greater proportion of maximizers in elderly than in young adults. We also found a minor association between maximization and Big Five traits in both groups. In sum, aging influences choice behavior, but this cannot be explained by changes of common personality traits.

Keywords: Maximization, Choice Behavior, Aging, Big Five, Personality

AGE DIFFERENCES IN MAXIMIZATION

1. Introduction

In our lives, we have to make choices, such as choosing between going to the nearby grocery store or to the supermarket, namely, a situation with few options (limited-choice situation) and another with a large variety of options (large-choice situation). An important question is how people are satisfied by their choice in these two types of situations. Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White and Lehman (2002) demonstrated that some people are more willing to search the "good enough" or optimal option, what they called "satisficers". By contrast "maximizers" seek the best or maximal option, spending more time and more energy to find it. Interestingly, the degree of satisfaction with choice can vary differently according to whether people are maximizers or satisficers in limited-choice versus large-choice situations. Supporting this view, Dar-Nimrod, Rawm, Lehman and Schwartz (2009) asked participants to select and consume one chocolate by choosing between two assortments of chocolates, that is, one assortment composed of six chocolates and another containing 30 chocolates. Results showed that satisficers were equally satisfied with their choice whatever the assortment selected. By contrast, the maximizers who selected the 30-options assortment were less satisfied with their choice than the maximizers who selected the 6-options assortment. Besides, it is noteworthy that maximizers experienced in everyday life more regret and depression as well as less satisfaction with their life than satisficers (Schwartz et al., 2002; Schwartz, 2004).

Studying the inter-individual differences of choice behavior is interesting inasmuch as human societies and, particularly occidental societies, offer always more and more choices. Most of the research has been done in adults who are confronted with a lot of choices

everyday (e.g., work, school for children, car, and house). Unfortunately, data on elderly people are lacking. However, elderly people grew up in societies offering fewer choices, raising the issue of how they cope with this change of society, which involves a greater number of choices. Moreover, satisfaction with life in elderly people is an important question. As mentioned above, satisfaction with life is negatively linked to maximization, so it appears interesting to explore this link in elderly people too. The first goal of the present study was to compare the degree of maximization in two samples, one of young adults and another of old adults, as well as the links with the other variables of interest (i.e., satisfaction with life and regret).

If an age difference in maximization was found, we would wonder why. A potential hypothesis is that maximization differs between young adults and older adults because some personality traits evolve with age (McCrae et al., 1999). Generally, evidence indicates that personality can be explored through five traits, called the "Big Five" (McCrae & Costa, 1999; John & Strivastana, 1999; Ashton & Lee, 2007; Block, 1995). These five traits are Extraversion ("E"; traits like energetic and sociable), Agreeableness ("A"; considerate and kindness), Conscientiousness ("C"; hard-working and orderly), Neuroticism ("N"; nervous and tense), and Openness ("O"; artistic and creative). These personality traits have been shown to change with age. More precisely, Costa and McCrae (1994; see also McCrae et al., 1999) found that young adults (18-29 years old) reported higher levels in E, N, and O than older adults (30 years old and more) and smaller levels in A and C. In the same way, Caprana, Gentilomo and Barbaranelli (1993) noted that young adults (18-28 years) were more E and less C than older people (85 years). More recently, a very large cross-sectional study with more than 1,260,000 participants (ages 10-65) describes the evolution of different traits over age (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). They found that C, O and A tend to decrease from childhood to adolescence and then increase during adulthood. E tends to decrease from

childhood to adolescence and then remains relatively stable during adulthood. Finally, N Increases during childhood and adolescence and decreases over adulthood. Other studies have specified the evolution of traits after 65 years, indicating that a decrease of E, C and O after 65 years (Noftle & Fleeson, 2010; for somewhat similar results, see also Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). To account for these age-based differences in personality traits, two hypotheses have been offered. First, these differences can be explained from the intrinsic maturation perspective, suggesting that these variations are due to a "preprogrammed" biological process (Costa & McCrae, 2006). Second, they can be interpreted from the life course perspective, implying that our roles, status and pursuits evolve with age and consequences. For instance, some events we encounter in our life, such as being parents, can involve changes in our personality, such as being less E (Helson, Kwan, John, & Jones, 2002; Roberts, Wood & Smith, 2005). Whatever the hypothesis, these five traits cover the whole personality domain and seem to be appropriate to account for age-based variations in personality. So, the second goal of the present study was to examine whether maximization was related to at least one of the Big Five traits.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

In total, 226 French participants from two different samples took part in this study. The first sample was recruited among undergraduate students in psychology (n = 125). The mean age was 19 (SD = 2.37; 87 females). The second sample consisted of 101 French elderly participants. The mean age was 86.8 (SD = 6.96; 79 females). They were recruited according to their cognitive level. More specifically, all the elderly participants obtained a score above 24 on the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE; Folstein, Folstein, & McHugh, 1975).

2.2. Measures

Maximization scale. For both samples, the degree of maximization was measured with the French version of the maximization scale adapted to the elderly people (Faure, Joulain & Osiurak, 2014). This scale was composed of 11 items[1], which are scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A high score indicated a tendency to seek the best option (maximization) and a low score a tendency to seek the good enough option (optimization). Coefficient alpha reliabilities were α = 0.73 for elderly participants and α = 0.55 for young participants[2].

French Big Five Inventory (BFI-Fr). Dimensions of the Big-Five model were measured with the French Big Five Inventory (Plaisant, Courtois, Réveillère, Mendelsohn & John, 2010). This version was composed of 45 items, that is, 8, 10, 9, 8, and 10 items for the E, A, C, N and O scales, respectively. Each item was scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher the scores, the more participants were E, A, C, N and O.

Satisfaction with life scale. Satisfaction with life was assessed with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985), which is composed of five items scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A low score indicated low satisfaction and a high score a high degree of satisfaction (α_{young} = 0.82; $\alpha_{elderly}$ = 0.84).

[1] The 11 items corresponded to the 13 items of the original maximization scale of Schwartz et al. (2002) minus the items 4 (“No matter how satisfied I am with my job, it’s only right for me to be on the lookout for better opportunities”) and 9 (“Renting videos is really difficult I’m always struggling to pick the best one”).
[2] The alpha-Cronbach value may appear somewhat low here. However, similar values have been already reported in other studies (e.g., Dar-Nimrod et al., 2009).

Regret. Participants completed a four-item version of the regret scale[3] (Faure et al., 2015) using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the more the participant experienced regret (α_{young} = 0.71; $\alpha_{elderly}$ = 0.79).

2.3. Procedure

After informed consent was obtained, participants completed first the BFI-Fr, then the maximization and the regret scales, and finally the satisfaction with life scale. The completion of the instruments took approximately 15 minutes.

3. Results

3.1. Comparisons between young and elderly participants

Maximization. Descriptive data for all the scales are presented in **Table I**. A significant age difference was found on the maximization scale. Young participants were more likely to be maximizers than elderly participants, $t(224) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, *Cohen' s d* = 0.89.

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BFI-Fr. No significant age difference was found on N, $t(224) = 1.23$, $p = .22$. A trend was reported on E, $t(224) = 1.94$, $p = .054$, in that young participants were more E than elderly participants. Moreover, results showed significant age differences in A, C and O, respectively, $t(224) = 7.04$, $p < .001$, *Cohen' s d* = 0.94; $t(224) = 10.61$, $p < .001$, *Cohen' s d*

[3] The four items corresponded to the five items of the original regret scale of Schwartz et al. (2002) minus the item 5 (« Once I make a decision, I don't look back »).

= 1.42; $t(224) = 3.19$, $p < .01$, *Cohen' s d* = 0.43. Elderly participants were more A and C but less O than young participants.

Satisfaction with life. The effect of age did not reach statistical significance on the satisfaction with life scale, $t(224) = 0.46$, $p = .65$.

Regret. Likewise, a significant age difference was observed for the regret scale, $t(224) = 5.20$, $p < .001$, *Cohen' s d* = 0.69. Young participants experienced more regret than elderly participants.

3.2. Correlational analyses

Young participants. Results of correlational analyses are shown in **Table II**. All the correlations between maximization and each of the dimensions of BFI-Fr failed to reach significance. Significant associations between maximization and regret, and between regret and satisfaction with life were found. Moreover, the correlation between maximization and satisfaction with life was almost significant, $r = -.17$, $p = .066$. Globally, these results indicated that the more participants were maximizers, the more they experienced regret and the less satisfied they were with their life.

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Elderly participants. With regard to the association between maximization and the different dimensions of BFI-Fr, only the correlation between maximization and N was significant. The more elderly participants were maximizers, the more they were N. As for young participants, we obtained significant correlations between maximization and regret, and between regret and satisfaction with life. In other words, the more elderly participants

experienced regret, the more they were maximizers and the less satisfied they were with their life. The link between maximization and satisfaction with life was negative, but not strong enough to reach significance, $r = -.15$, $p = .14$.

3.3. Stepwise regression

A stepwise regression was conducted in the two samples to examine the weight of predictor variables (dimensions of BFI-Fr) on maximization. The analysis revealed that in young participants none of the dimensions of BFI-FR was a good predictor of maximization. Concerning elderly participants, the analysis revealed that N and O were two predictors of maximization, nevertheless explaining only 8% of variance (**Table III**).

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4. Discussion

To sum up, results revealed that young participants tended to be more maximizers, that is, they were more willing to seek the best option and experienced more regret than elderly participants. However, there was no difference in satisfaction with life. Concerning the personality trait (BFI-Fr), results demonstrated that young participants were more extraverted (E) and opened (0) and less pleasant (A) and conscientious (C) than elderly participants. No age difference was reported for neuroticism (N). Except the absence of age difference for neuroticism (see Soto et al., 2011), this is roughly consistent with previous data obtained by Costa et al. (1986; see also Helson et al., 2002; Mroczek, Spiro, & Griffin, 2006). Correlational analyses indicated significant positive associations between maximization and regret, and negative associations between regret and satisfaction with life in both samples. In

other words, the more participants were maximizers, the more they experienced regret and the more they experienced regret, the less they were satisfied with their life. Moreover, the correlation between maximization and satisfaction with life were negative and almost significant in young participants (the more they were maximizers, the less they were satisfied with their life), but did not reach significance in elderly participants. Finally, no significant correlation between any of the different dimensions of personality and Maximization was obtained in young participants. In elderly participants, results showed that neuroticism, and to a lesser extent openness, were two predictors of maximization. Before discussing in more detail these results, we would like to stress that the lack of significance in the results obtained (particularly concerning the linear regression) and the unexpected differences observed (i.e., greater neuroticism in elderly people than in young people) lead us to be cautious with regard to the generalization of any of our conclusions.

The first aim of this study was to compare the degree of maximization in young and elderly people. As mentioned, our results demonstrated that elderly people were more satisficers than young people, namely, they tended to content themselves with good enough options and not to try to choose the best option. More specifically, we obtained a 0.9 difference between our two samples on the maximization scale. Interestingly, Schwartz et al. (2002) also observed age differences between two samples. Their first sample consisted of students of about 20 years old (n = 401; $M_{\text{maximization}}$ = 4.39) and their second was composed of older adults of about 40 years old (n = 335; $M_{\text{maximization}}$ = 3,98). Taken together, their results and ours suggest that maximization might decrease with age. For Schwartz et al., the age difference in their samples was of 20 years and a difference of 0.4 was observed for the maximization scale whereas in our study, the age difference was of 60 years and we noted a difference of 0.9. Life-span studies may be conducted to analyze if this trend is linear. We shall discuss the interpretation of this age difference latter.

In addition, we obtained correlations in both samples between maximization and regret (positive correlation), as well as between regret and satisfaction with life (negative correlation). That is, the more people are maximizers, the more they experience regret and the more they experienced regret, the less they are satisfied with their life. But, the link between maximization and satisfaction with life was not clear in that we did not obtain significant correlations in both samples, with nevertheless a trend in young participants. In broad terms, our results are consistent with those of Schwartz et al. (2002; see also Faure, Joulain & Osiurak, 2015) for the young participants, suggesting that maximization plays a key role in satisfaction with life in young people. However, it appears that in elderly people satisfaction with life is more multi-determinated, maximization being a less central factor.

The second aim of this study was to explore if maximization could be explained by dimensions of personality. Stepwise regression revealed that only neuroticism and openness were predictors of maximization in elderly participants. But it explained only 8% of variance. Furthermore, correlational analyses revealed no association between maximization and personality in young participants. These results seem to point out that maximization is not the expression of one or several factors of the Big-Five model. Said differently, maximization might be a personality trait apart.

To conclude, we discuss the age differences observed here for the maximizations scale, what might be useful for understanding why people express maximization. On the one hand, we can wonder if this personality trait is due to a “preprogrammed” biological process, as this has been suggested for other dimensions (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 2006). Another hypothesis is that maximization is modulated by events encountered in life (Iyengar, Wells & Schwartz, 2005). One way to disentangle between these two alternatives (biological versus environmental) is to examine the difference occurring between the different societies. In this way, it is noteworthy that the student samples of Schwartz et al. (2002) obtained a score of

maximization of 4.39. This score is clearly higher than that found in our French student sample (3.91), which is closer to that of their adult samples (approximately 3.95). This difference found at a societal level suggests that maximization might be modulated by environmental pressures. Nevertheless, the fact that in both Schwartz et al.'s (2002) study and ours age-differences were observed concerning the maximization scale might also suggest that non-environmental factors, such as cognitive decline or other biological factors might also influence maximization.

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Tableau I

Données descriptives (Etudiants : *N* = 125 ; Personnes âgées : *N* = 101)
Descriptive date (Students: *N* = 125; Elderly: *N* = 101)

		M	*ET*	*Centile*							*Kurtosis*
				Min	*10*	*25*	*50*	*75*	*90*	*Max*	
Maximization	Students	3.91	0.83	1.18	2.91	3.36	3.82	4.45	4.91	5.99	0.46
	Elderly	3.00	1.22	1.00	1.45	2.00	3.00	3.73	4.73	6.09	-0.62
Extraversion	Students	3.18	0.73	1.62	2.25	2.63	3.12	3.63	4.20	5.00	-0.63
	Elderly	2.95	1.01	1.00	1.75	2.13	2.87	3.75	4.38	5.00	-0.86
Agreeableness	Students	3.97	0.51	2.70	3.30	3.60	4.00	4.40	4.66	4.90	-0.42
	Elderly	4.47	0.53	2.80	3.70	4.20	4.60	4.90	5.00	5.00	1.19
Conscientiousness	Students	3.07	0.69	1.44	2.22	2.55	3.00	3.44	4.11	4.67	-0.30
	Elderly	4.06	0.71	1.33	3.11	3.67	4.11	4.56	4.89	5.00	1.86
Neuroticism	Students	2.85	0.79	1.12	1.80	2.25	2.88	3.38	3.88	4.87	-0.64
	Elderly	2.69	1.15	1.00	1.13	1.63	2.75	3.63	4.25	5.00	-1.19
Openness	Students	3.41	0.63	1.80	2.64	3	3.40	3.80	4.30	4.80	-0.38
	Elderly	3.06	1.04	1.00	1.60	2.20	3.10	3.90	4.40	5.00	-0.89
Satisfaction	Students	4.78	1.22	1.6	3.00	4.00	4.80	5.80	6.40	7.00	-0.59
	Elderly	4.87	1.65	1.4	2.20	3.60	5.20	6.40	6.80	7.00	-0.96
Regret	Students	4.14	1.43	1.00	2.10	3.25	4.25	5.25	6.00	6.50	-0.83
	Elderly	3.00	1.86	1.00	1.00	1.75	2.50	4.25	6.25	7.00	-0.47

M: Mean; *SD*: Standard Deviation; *Min*: Minimum; *Max*: Maximum

Tableau II

Analyses corrélationnelles

Correlational Analyze							
Students (*N* = 125)							
	Maximi	Regret	Satis	E	A	C	N
Regret	0.35						
Satisfaction	0.17	-0.43**					
Extraversion	0.07	-0.02	0.14				
Agreeableness	-0.13	-1.90*	0.17	0.07			
Conscientiousness	-0.04	-0.01	0.11	0.04	0.19*		
Neuroticism	0.12	0.40**	-0.44**	-0.13	-0.12	-0.08	
Openness	-0.03	-0.10	0.15	0.27**	-0.03	0.04	-0.06
Elderly (*N* = 101)							
	Maximi	Regret	Satis	E	A	C	N
Regret	0.27**						
Satis	-0.15	-0.33**					
Extraversion	0.05	-0.15	0.33**				
Agreeableness	-0.19	-0.12	0.13	-0.14			
Conscientiousness	0.02	-0.20*	0.09	0.16	0.40**		
Neuroticism	0.20*	0.32**	-0.51**	-0.36**	-0.18	-0.29**	
Openness	0.17	0.00	0.20*	0.33**	0.13	0.26**	µ0.17

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0;01$

Tableau III

Analyse de régression pas à pas avec pour critère la Maximation et pour prédicteurs N et O dans l'échantillon de personnes âgées

Stepwise regression analysis with Maximization as criteria and N and O as predictors in elderly sample.

Criteria	Predictor	BETA	*t*(98)
Maximi	Neuroticism	0,24	2,43*
	Openness	0,21	2,14*

$r = .29$, $r^2 = .08$, $F(2,98) = 4,48$, $p < .02$.

* $p < 0,05$.