



Personality traits and reasons for residential mobility: Longitudinal data from United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia

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ABSTRACT

Personality traits have been associated with differences in residential mobility, but details are lacking on the types of residential moves associated with personality differences. The present study pooled data from four prospective cohort studies from the United Kingdom (UK Household Longitudinal Survey, and British Household Panel Survey), Germany (Socioeconomic Panel Study), and Australia (Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia) to assess whether personality traits of the Five Factor Model are differently related to residential moves motivated by different reasons to move: employment, education, family, housing, and neighborhood (total $n = 86,073$). Openness to experience was associated with all moves but particularly with moves due to employment and education. Extraversion was associated with higher overall mobility, except for moves motivated by employment and education. Lower emotional stability predicted higher probability of moving due to neighborhood, housing, and family, while higher agreeableness was associated with lower probability of moving due to neighborhood and education. Adjusting for education, household income, marital status, employment status, number of children in the household, and housing tenure did not substantially change the associations. These results suggest that different personality traits may motivate different types of residential moves.

1. Introduction

Residential mobility is a recurring life event that has the potential to change a person's living circumstances. The basic motivations for residential mobility are easy to characterize. A study of the OECD countries (Sánchez & Andrews, 2011) showed that housing-related factors were the most commonly self-reported reason (37%) for relocation; individuals and families in different life stages may need homes that are larger, cheaper, or in better condition than their current home. Family-related factors were the second-most common reason (32%) for residential mobility; married couples move together, divorced couples move apart, or individuals may want to move closer to their aging parents. Ten percent of the moves were motivated by employment-related factors, such as getting a new job or wanting to move closer to the workplace. In addition to these three leading reasons, many demographic explanations of residential mobility often emphasize the role of neighborhood satisfaction in guiding people's mobility decisions (Clark & Coulter, 2015; Kley, 2011; Lu, 1999). For example, some individuals are drawn to tranquil rural environments whereas others seek out urban areas that offer more active social life (Jokela et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2005).

Studies in geographical psychology have demonstrated that aggregate personality traits are spatially clustered at different levels of geography (Götz et al., 2018; Götz et al., 2020; Rentfrow et al., 2015; Rentfrow & Jokela, 2016), such as regions of the United States (Rentfrow et al., 2013), cantons of Switzerland (Götz et al., 2018), and postal areas of London metropolitan area (Jokela et al., 2015). Thus, some neighborhoods and regions are more likely to be inhabited by people who resemble each other in personality characteristics. Longitudinal studies, in turn, have associated personality traits with people's overall propensity to change residence (Campbell, 2019; Jokela, 2009) and to move selectively to specific locations, such as moving between rural and urban areas (Jokela, 2020; Jokela et al., 2008). For example, extraversion and openness to experience have been associated with higher residential mobility rates (Campbell, 2019; Ciani & Capiluppi, 2011; Jokela, 2009).

It is unclear how the findings on personality and residential mobility should be integrated with demographic and economic perspectives on mobility. If people's residential choices are largely determined by practical issues related to housing, employment, and family circumstances, it might seem dubious to suggest that personality characteristics

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have any influence on people's mobility decisions. However, there are at least two possibilities that combine the perspectives of personality and sociodemographic drivers of residential mobility. First, personality traits may be relevant for mobility decisions only for moves that are not directly motivated by issues related to practical reasons, for example, employment, family, or housing. Here personality traits would be expected to predict only the residue category of moves unrelated to sociodemographic reasons. Second, personality traits might increase or decrease the importance of different sociodemographic mobility motivations for different individuals. For example, lower emotional stability has been associated with lower perceptions of neighborhood quality (Jokela, 2009), and thereby low emotional stability might increase people's likelihood of moving because of neighborhood dissatisfaction. By contrast, emotional stability might be related to motivations to move due to employment.

The current study used data from four large prospective cohort studies to examine whether the personality traits of the Five Factor Model—extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience—were differently related to residential moves driven by different categories of mobility motivations. Specific personality traits tend to be more important for some life domains compared to others. For example, agreeableness and extraversion are particularly important for social relationships (Laakasuo et al., 2017); emotional stability is crucial for phenomena related to stress and negative emotions (Jeronimus et al., 2016); conscientiousness is relevant for work-related aspirations (Dudley et al., 2006); and openness to experience is related to eagerness to try out new ideas (Silvia & Christensen, 2020). These domain-specific associations of personality traits might be relevant for different motivations that drive people's residential mobility decisions, but there are no studies that have examined this empirically.

2. Materials and methods

Participants were from four prospective cohort studies from the United Kingdom (UK Household Longitudinal Study, UKHLS; and British Household Panel Survey, BHPS), Germany (Socioeconomic Panel Survey, SOEP), and Australia (Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia, HILDA). Given that the rates of residential mobility decrease considerably by age, participants older than 65 were not included in the analysis. The details of the cohort studies are provided in the online supplementary material.

In the BHPS, personality was assessed in 2005 using the short 15-item Big Five Inventory (BFI) (Hahn et al., 2012), and the follow-up time extended to 2008 (3 study waves). In the UKHLS, personality was assessed in 2010–2012 using the short 15-item BFI, and the follow-up time extended to 2016–2018 (6 study waves). In HILDA, personality was assessed in 2005, 2009, and 2013 using the Goldberg Big Five Markers Scale, and the follow-up extended to 2014–2015 (10 study waves). In SOEP, personality was assessed in 2005, 2009, and 2013 using the short BFI, and the follow-up extended to 2017 (10 study waves). In HILDA and SOEP, all participants with at least one personality assessment were included, and the participant's baseline year and personality scores were determined from the first available year of personality assessment for each participant.

Covariates included age, gender, education (1 = primary, 2 = secondary, 3 = tertiary), household income (deciles), marital status (1 = married/cohabiting, 2 = single, never married, 3 = divorced/separated, 4 = widow), number of children living in the household (top-coded at 4 or more children), employment status (1 = working, 2 = unemployed, 3 = not in labor market), and housing tenure (1 = owns house/apartment, 2 = rent, social housing, 3 = rent, open market).

Participants who had moved between study waves were asked for the main reasons why they had moved. In SOEP and UKHLS, these reasons were already categorized in the data collection phase into reasons related to family, housing, employment, neighborhood, and education

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	BHPS	HILDA	SOEP	UKHLS
Reason for move †				
Family	569 (5.0)	3237 (16.2)	2436 (8.9)	2791 (7.7)
Employment	1140 (9.5)	4326 (20.6)	2855 (10.3)	4474 (11.9)
Housing	290 (2.6)	1770 (9.5)	1259 (4.8)	976 (2.8)
Neighborhood	295 (2.6)	2246 (11.8)	860 (3.3)	1362 (3.9)
Education	107 (1.0)	457 (2.6)	–	993 (2.9)
Other	403 (3.6)	2616 (13.5)	2242 (8.3)	4468 (12.0)
Any	2226 (17.2)	7871 (32.7)	6549 (21.1)	10,768 (25.0)
Education				
Primary	2293 (21.1)	5763 (30.2)	4078 (15.4)	11,348 (34.6)
Secondary	6839 (62.8)	8915 (46.8)	14,775 (55.6)	12,118 (37.0)
Tertiary	1761 (16.2)	4381 (23.0)	7704 (29.0)	9328 (28.4)
Marital status				
Married or cohabiting	7728 (67.0)	8460 (43.1)	15,159 (55.4)	23,314 (63.7)
Other	3804 (33.0)	11,189 (56.9)	12,227 (44.6)	13,306 (36.3)
Housing tenure				
Owned	8685 (75.4)	12,899 (62.6)	14,640 (52.0)	24,398 (67.7)
Rent/other	2829 (24.6)	7709 (37.4)	13,505 (48.0)	11,623 (32.3)
Employment status				
Not working	3680 (30.1)	7591 (35.0)	11,334 (36.0)	15,282 (37.2)
Working	8546 (69.9)	14,075 (65.0)	20,173 (64.0)	25,812 (62.8)
Parenthood status				
No children in household	7525 (64.8)	11,849 (59.3)	19,451 (66.6)	23,060 (61.7)
Children in household	4085 (35.2)	8129 (40.7)	9751 (33.4)	14,323 (38.3)
Gender				
Men	4927 (45.2)	8034 (47.7)	11,880 (47.6)	14,561 (43.6)
Women	5966 (54.8)	8818 (52.3)	13,053 (52.4)	18,834 (56.4)
Age ‡	40.5 (13.7)	40.4 (13.9)	44.2 (12.9)	43.2 (13.2)
n(person-observations)	30,589	97,883	124,060	146,027
n(persons)	10,893	16,852	24,932	33,395

Note: Values are numbers (and percentages) unless otherwise indicated. † Calculated from person-observations. ‡ Values are means (and standard deviations). BHPS = British Household Panel Survey; HILDA = Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia; SOEP = Socioeconomic Panel Survey; UKHLS = UK Household Longitudinal Study.

(the education category was not included in SOEP). In BHPS, the participants were first asked whether or not the move was due to work-related reasons, and they could then report two other reasons from a list of various reasons, which I categorized into reasons related to family, housing, employment, neighborhood, and education. In HILDA, the participants were given a list of possible reasons that they could endorse, and I categorized these as in BHPS. Thus, in each study the participants could report more than one reason for a move (see details of the wordings in the supplementary material). For participants who had moved but who did not endorse any of the reasons of these categories, the reason was coded as “other”.

The associations between baseline personality traits and subsequent reason-specific residential mobility were assessed first separately in each cohort study. The data were stacked into long format of repeated person-observations. Random-slope multilevel logistic regression analysis was used to estimate associations between baseline personality traits and

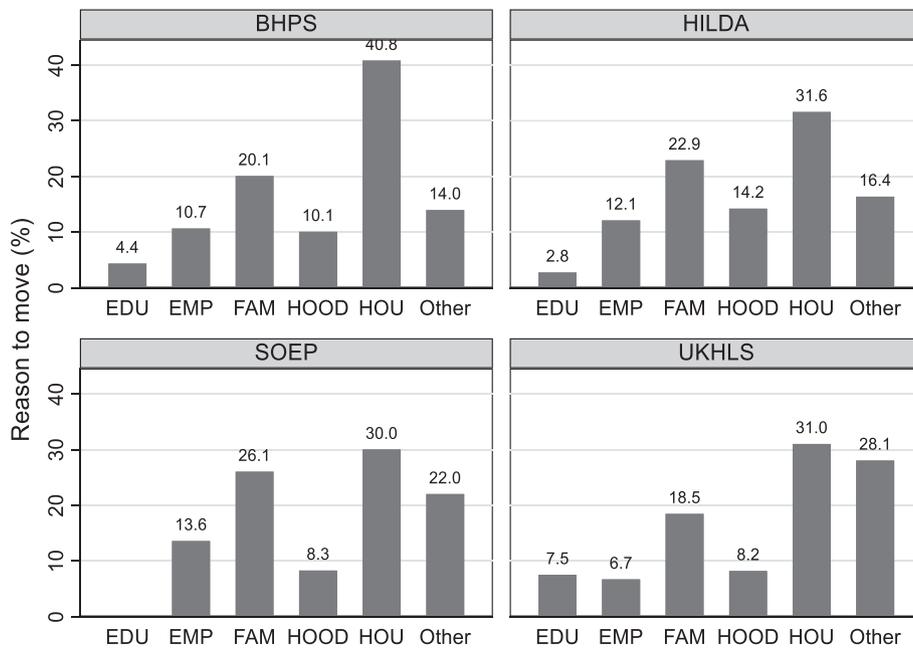


Fig. 1. Proportions of reasons to move (%) in the four cohort studies calculated among those who had moved. EDU = Education (not included in SOEP), EMP = Employment, FAM = Family, HOOD=Neighborhood, HOU=Housing. BHPS=British Household Panel Survey; HILDA = Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia; SOEP=Socioeconomic Panel Survey; UKHLS=UK Household Longitudinal Study.

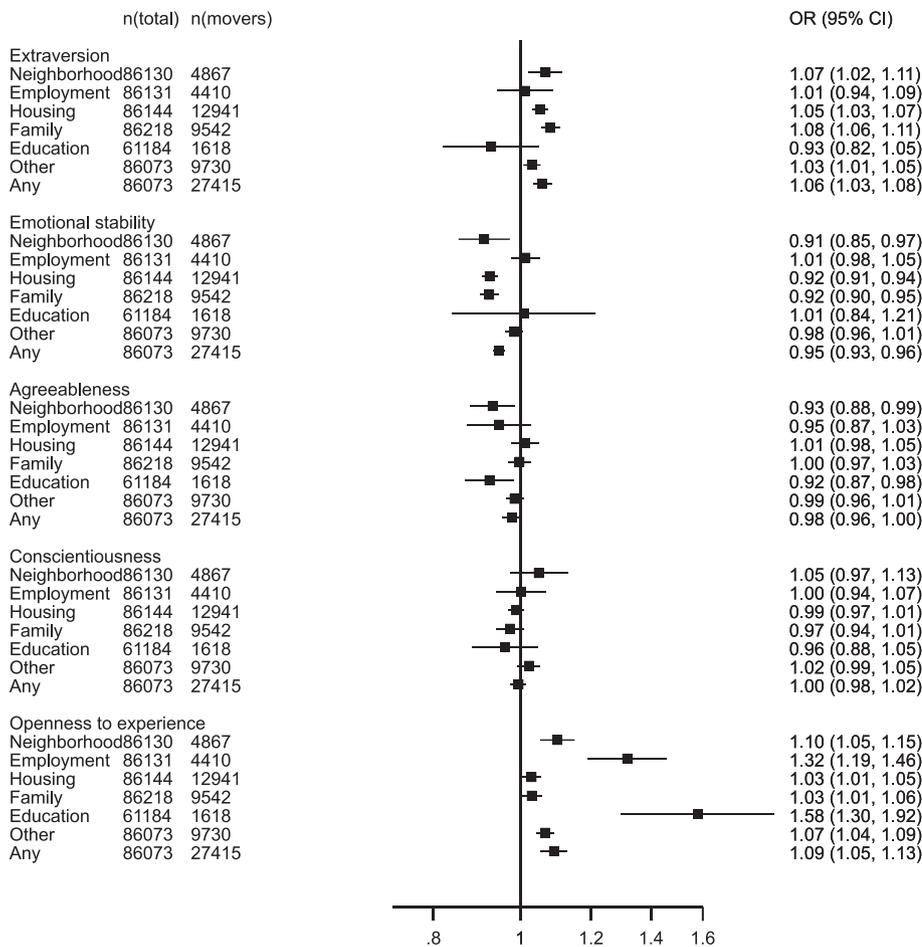


Fig. 2. Associations between personality traits and residential mobility by reason for the residential move, adjusted for age and gender. Values are odds ratios of standardized personality scores (SD = 1) predicting subsequent moves, pooled across four prospective cohort studies using random-effect meta-analysis. Associations are adjusted for gender, linear and quadratic effects of age. n(total) = number of participants, n(movers) = number of participants who moved at least once during the follow-up time.

Table 2
Correlations between personality traits and covariates (n = 73,188 to 74,815).

	E	S	A	C	O
Number of children in household	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.03	-0.04
Education	0.00	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.15
Household income decile	0.06	0.09	-0.03	0.04	0.07
Married/cohabiting (vs not)	-0.02	0.03	0.03	0.16	-0.04
Rent (vs owned)	0.02	-0.05	0.00	-0.03	0.01
Employed (vs not/other)	0.05	0.09	0.00	0.14	0.04

Note: All correlations of $|r| \geq 0.01$ are statistically significant. E = extraversion, S = emotional stability, A = agreeableness, C = conscientiousness, O = openness to experience.

residential mobility between consecutive study waves. The multilevel regression took into account the non-independence of the repeated person-observations from the same participants over the follow-up period in estimating the standard errors. Separate logistic regression models were fitted for each reason for moving (0 = reason not endorsed, 1 = reason endorsed), and the same move could thus be coded as an endorsed reason in more than one logistic regression model if the participant had reported more than one reason for that particular move. All personality traits were standardized (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1) and they were all included at the same time as predictor variables, together with gender and the linear and quadratic effects of age. These study-specific estimates were then pooled together using random-effect meta-analysis. Statistical analysis was carried out with Stata 15.1 software.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the four samples.

Fig. 1 shows the proportions of different reasons to move among those who had moved; for this analysis each reason for a move was recorded as a separate observation, and the percentages were calculated over these observations. Housing and family were the most commonly cited reasons for moving in all the cohort studies.

Fig. 2 shows the associations between personality traits and residential mobility by reason of the move, pooled across the four cohort studies. The strongest associations were observed with openness to experience, which was associated with residential mobility due to all the included reasons but particularly due to education and employment. Extraversion was also associated with higher probability of residential mobility, except due to reasons related to education and employment. Higher emotional stability was associated with lower residential mobility related to neighborhood, housing, and family. Higher agreeableness was related to lower residential mobility due to neighborhood and education. Conscientiousness was not associated with residential mobility.

Supplementary Figs. 1–7 show the cohort-specific associations of the pooled results of Fig. 2. The overall level of heterogeneity between studies was fairly low, and many of the associations were very similar in magnitude across the different cohort studies. Table 2 shows the correlations between personality traits and covariates. Adjusting for these covariates attenuated many of the associations between personality and residential mobility but did not substantially change most of the associations (Fig. 3).

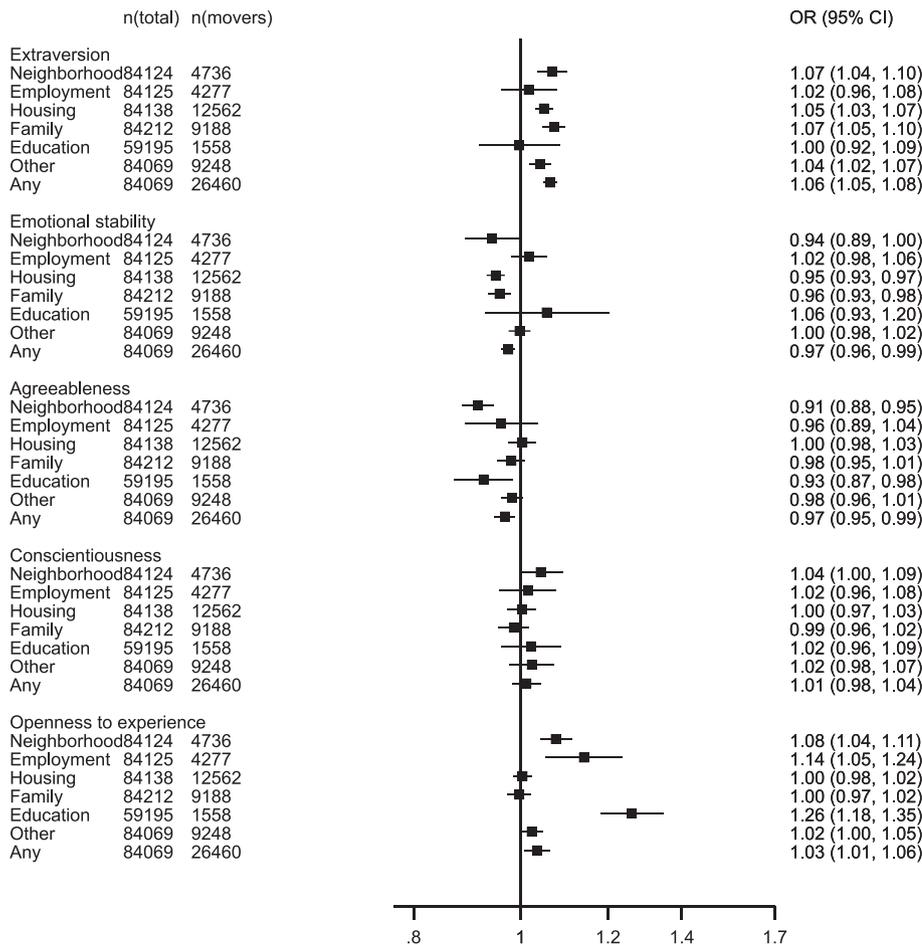


Fig. 3. Associations between personality traits and residential mobility by reason for the residential move, adjusted for number of children, employment status, marital status, household income, education, housing tenure, age, and gender. Values are odds ratios of standardized personality scores (SD = 1) predicting subsequent moves, pooled across four prospective cohort studies using random-effect meta-analysis. n(total) = number of participants, n (movers) = number of participants who moved at least once during the follow-up time.

4. Discussion

The current results from four prospective cohort studies suggest that personality differences are related to people's motivations to move. Openness to experience was associated with higher overall mobility but especially with mobility due to education and employment. Extraversion was also related to higher overall mobility, except moves driven by employment or education. Higher emotional stability and higher agreeableness were associated with lower residential mobility: emotional stability due to neighborhood, housing, and family, and agreeableness due to neighborhood and education. Conscientiousness was not related to residential mobility.

In Western developed countries, between 10% and 25% of households change residence every two years (Sánchez & Andrews, 2011). Economic and demographic perspectives emphasize the practical determinants of residential mobility: people move after jobs, they move to larger or smaller homes as family size changes, or they try to move away from neighborhoods they dislike (Findlay et al., 2015; Kley, 2011). The present results demonstrate that personality is not competing with sociodemographic factors as an explanation for residential mobility. Instead, people's personality traits determine, in part, how strongly their residential mobility is determined by different mobility motivations. The role of personality is thus not restricted to only predicting moves that are unrelated to sociodemographic drivers of mobility (e.g., employment or housing) but can be observed across multiple reasons for moving.

Openness to experience and extraversion are the two personality traits that have been most consistently associated with residential mobility in previous studies (Campbell, 2019; Ciani & Capiluppi, 2011; Jokela, 2009, 2020), and the current findings provide further support for their role in residential mobility. Openness to experience was a particularly strong predictor of moves related to employment and education. Openness to experience was related to educational achievement, and sociodemographic covariates accounted for about half of its associations with mobility related to employment and education. Beyond the socio-economic correlates, individuals with high openness to experience may be more curious and willing to explore new places (Silvia & Christensen, 2020), which increases the likelihood of moving after opportunities of higher education and employment, and moving for other reasons as well. Extraversion was also related to higher overall mobility rates. Individuals with high extraversion are energetic, active, assertive, and sensitive to rewarding experiences (Smillie, 2013). These characteristics may increase the probability of planning to move and taking action to move, and also to perceive the move to a new location as an opportunity rather than a risk.

Lower emotional stability was associated with higher mobility rates, mainly due to neighborhood, housing, and family. Individuals with low emotional stability are sensitive to negative emotions and distress (Jeronimus et al., 2016). It is therefore plausible that any dissatisfaction with the neighborhood or housing conditions is experienced more strongly by individuals with low compared to high emotional stability (Jokela, 2009), and the heightened dissatisfaction with neighborhoods or housing conditions may explain the association between low emotional stability and mobility. Higher agreeableness, in turn, was related to lower mobility due to neighborhood and education. This may be related to highly agreeable people's stronger commitment and integration with their local communities (Lounsbury et al., 2003), which could help to explain why they are less eager to move.

Conscientiousness was not related to residential mobility. Studies from the United States (Jokela, 2009) and Australia (with the same HILDA data as used here; Campbell, 2019) have also reported no significant associations with conscientiousness. However, conscientiousness may influence more specific forms of residential mobility. In HILDA, higher conscientiousness predicted higher probability of rural-to-urban migration but was not associated with urban-to-rural migration (Jokela, 2020), suggesting that conscientiousness may be associated

with selective residential mobility to specific locations. And in a previous study with the BHPS, higher conscientiousness predicted higher migration probability among those participants who intended or desired to move but lower migration probability among those who did not intend or desire to move (Jokela, 2014). This suggests that the influence of conscientiousness on residential mobility depends on the person's mobility intentions, so that highly conscientious individuals are more likely to stick to their plans of either moving or not moving. A previous analysis with HILDA (Campbell, 2019) also observed that conscientiousness was related to how migration intentions aligned with migration outcomes among those who migrated. The current study did not assess mobility intentions, so such associations could not be assessed here.

The findings indicate that sociodemographic and personality explanations for residential mobility are not competing or mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that moves related to employment and education were predicted only by one personality trait (openness to experience) whereas neighborhood-related moves were predicted by four personality traits (all traits except conscientiousness). Housing-related moves were also predicted by only one personality trait (emotional stability) and family-related moves by two traits (extraversion and emotional stability). Together these patterns suggest that personality may have the broadest influence on residential mobility via neighborhood preferences. Except for the two strongest associations of openness to experience, the magnitudes of the personality associations were mostly modest, so the role of personality in determining residential mobility patterns should not be overemphasized. However, even modest associations may accumulate into important population-level differences over 20–30 years (Jokela, 2020).

The study has some limitations that could be addressed in future studies. First, the study focused on reason-specific moves but did not consider moving distances that can be related to reasons to move (Thomas, 2019). Some of the personality associations with reason-specific moves may thus overlap with willingness to move over longer distances. Second, the current analysis considered only personality of individuals but did not consider possible family dynamics in which the personality associations depend on the personality traits, or other characteristics, of the spouse, because the decision to move concerns the whole family. Third, the analysis did not consider other contextualized associations that may arise over the life course (Findlay et al., 2015; Kley, 2011). For example, some personality traits may become particularly important for work-related mobility for individuals who become unemployed, or for family-related and housing-related mobility when individuals become parents. Fourth, it must be emphasized that the present results are based on meta-analytic results across three countries. The study-specific associations suggested considerable similarities between countries (see supplementary material), but it is also possible that some of the associations between personality and residential mobility vary by country or region, because different locations are characterized by different residential mobility patterns. Fifth, it would also be informative to study people's self-reported reasons for staying in their current neighborhood instead of moving away.

In sum, the present findings provide contextualized data on how different personality traits predict residential mobility due to different reasons to move. Neighborhood characteristics and sociodemographic factors associated with different life stages are important drivers of residential mobility. However, personality does not need to be considered as competing with sociodemographic explanations of residential mobility. Rather, personality traits appear to influence the relative weight of different motivating factors in guiding people's mobility decisions.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Markus Jokela: Sole author.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110978>.

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