

Personality Stability and Change over Time

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Freud believed that personality is largely formed by the age of 5 years, and William James said that personality sets like plaster by age 30. More recently, personality psychologists estimated that personality becomes stable by about age 50, although it may undergo further changes later in life. Indeed, instead of trying to identify when personality stops changing and achieves stability, the pendulum has swung in the direction of understanding the more complex idea of the interplay between personality stability and change across the entire lifespan.

Empirical studies of personality stability and change typically investigate personality traits, defined as relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To measure these patterns reliably and to use them to predict future outcomes depends on their being somewhat stable. Without some degree of stability, neither scientists nor laypersons would find traits useful for describing people or understanding their behavior. However, just as height increases until young adulthood, then remains stable until a decline in old age, psychological capacities, including personality traits, may also follow a trajectory of development, stability, and change.

Personality psychologists have examined such a maturational model of stability and change for the Big Five personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect/openness). They have confirmed that, just like our physical development, personality traits undergo marked changes in childhood and youth, then stabilize in adulthood before changing again in old age (Specht et al., 2014). Broadly speaking, there is a general trend for personality traits to mature in a more socially desirable direction. In a landmark study, Roberts, Walton, and Viechtbauer (2006) compared mean levels of Big Five traits in samples that differed by age. Comparing samples across different ages, they found that people became less neurotic, and more dominant (a part of extraversion), agreeable, and conscientious, whereas in old age they became less open to experience and less social (another aspect of extraversion). In addition, some studies show that after age 60 people become less conscientious as they leave work responsibilities behind and enjoy “La Dolce Vita” (Marsh, Nagengast, & Morin, 2013).

Another way to study personality stability is by rank-order correlations. These correlations measure the degree of similarity between levels of the same trait across two occasions. They indicate the extent to which individuals maintain their rank-order position across two times of measurements. For example, is the most extraverted adolescent freshman in high school also the most extraverted senior? These correlations range from 0–1.0, where zero indicates the rank order of sample members on the first occasion bears no resemblance at all to the rank order of the sample on the second occasion, and 1.0 indicates the identical rank-ordering of the sample members on both occasions. Not surprisingly, given the findings for substantial maturational changes in childhood and youth, these correlations are lower for children than adults across the same time interval, but are far from negligible. In another landmark report combining results from numerous studies, Roberts & DelVecchio (2000) estimated the rank order stability correlations across the same time interval for samples of different ages. For children aged 6–12 years, this estimate was between .40 and .50, whereas for adults aged 50–59 it was over .70. In sum, when personality is still developing, it is considerably less stable than when it has reached maturity in adulthood, although even then it is not perfectly stable.

The study of rank-order correlations has also established that longer time intervals between the two personality assessments result in lower correlations. This is true when examining time intervals within adulthood, so is likely to be even more marked when correlating an assessment in childhood, when personality is still developing and is therefore unstable, with an assessment in adulthood. In a study of Big Five stability over 40 years from approximately ages 10 to 50, the highest rank-order correlation was only .30 for extraversion, and emotional stability correlated .02, indicating no stability at all (Hampson & Goldberg, 2006). This study underscored the importance of examining differences in trait stability among the Big Five: some personality traits appear to be more stable than others.

Combining the findings from these two ways of studying personality stability, it is apparent that there are maturation trends that result in average trait levels changing over time but within these normative trends, individuals remain at least moderately consistent, and more so in adulthood than in childhood. As insight into this pattern of personality development emerged, it prompted considerable interest in the causes of personality stability and change over time. One view is that personality change over the lifespan is primarily the result of intrinsic maturational changes brought about by genetics (McCrae & Costa, 2003), while another is that it results from encountering and adapting to life experiences (Roberts, Wood, & Smith, 2005). Most recently, the study of genetic and environmental influences on personality traits incorporates the concept of epigenetics, the idea that life experiences cause genes to be activated or suppressed, into socio-genomic personality theory (Roberts, 2018). The discovery of epigenetics tells us that biology is not necessarily destiny, and it becomes even more challenging to unravel the genetic from the environmental components of personality traits.

The life events most commonly thought of as leading to personality change are those social milestones related to love and work. Young adulthood (i.e. before about age 30), is a time of considerable personality change, and also a time when there are cultural pressures to enter into a stable relationship and settle on a vocation. More broadly, across the lifespan, experiences related to love (e.g. marriage, parenthood, divorce, and widowhood) and experiences related to work (e.g. going to college, getting a first job, becoming

unemployed, and retiring) are expected to lead to changes on Big Five traits. It seems reasonable to expect that a person may become more conscientious after joining the workforce, or more agreeable after finding a romantic partner. However, existing studies provide only modest support for these commonsense ideas (Bleidorn, Hopwood, & Lucas, 2018). This may be due to the lack of adequate longitudinal research, which requires assessing personality before and after major life experiences that are beyond the researcher's control.

In addition to personality trait change induced by external events, there is the possibility of intentional change attributable to a person's desire to change themselves. As would be expected, psychotherapy produces changes on Big Five traits such as extraversion and neuroticism (Magidson, Roberts, Collado-Rodriguez, & Lejuez, 2014). Many of us would like to change some aspect of ourselves for the better, and so it is reassuring to know that intentional personality change is achievable although not necessarily easy (Hudson & Fraley, 2015).

Personality demonstrates both stability and change, probably less stability and more change than was hitherto believed. What are the implications of this increasing emphasis on personality change over the lifespan for the usefulness of the concept for understanding ourselves and others? One important yardstick for measuring the utility of personality is the extent to which personality traits predict consequential outcomes such as job performance, marital stability, health, and longevity. There is substantial evidence that personality predicts such outcomes, even when assessed many years prior to the outcome in question, including the case where personality is measured in childhood and the outcome is measured in adulthood (Roberts et al., 2007; Moffitt et al., 2011). Early personality traits can have a long-reaching impact on life outcomes, despite subsequent personality change.

Scientific observations of personality changes over the life course may not sit well with our subjective experience of personal continuity. How do we reconcile our enduring sense of self with demonstrable personality change? McAdams (2013) proposed that we do this by constructing our life story in which we make sense of our experiences and changes to form of a meaningful autobiography. We also may underestimate the amount of personality change that has occurred by recalling our past selves as more similar to our present selves than was actually the case.

To conclude, contrary to Freud and others, findings from personality research do not support the view that personality development stops in childhood or young adulthood. Personality traits, like other psychological and physical attributes continue to develop and change throughout life. Before the age of 30 and after the age of 60 are the periods of greatest personality change. These changes result from a combination of genetic and environmental influences that are still poorly understood.

See Also

Big Five

Dan McAdams

Personality and Aging

Personality Development

Personality Development Across the Lifespan

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Personality Stability Over Time

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Further Reading

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