

Trait Stability

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Trait stability is the concept that personality structures largely remain consistent over time. Traits, like many concepts in psychology, tend to be considered one part nature and one part nurture; that is, individuals are born with some qualities and learn to employ others based on their environment. Psychologists have taken the concept of innate traits and made inferences about how they may or may not be related to some psychological disorders, especially personality disorders, and have found mixed results. This has immense developmental implications. For one, despite a child's temperament traits at an early age, the environment can change them. The layperson's belief 30-some years ago was that bad people (e.g., serial killers) are just born that way: born monsters. To date, longitudinal research studies do not strongly support either complete stability (i.e., "essentialist" perspective) or personality fluidity (i.e., radical contextual perspective) and instead point to *moderate* consistency, no effect of measurement style (self-report, observer report, etc.), no effect of gender, and variability decreasing with age (with increased stability at age 30 and then between 50-70) (Hampson and Goldberg, 2006). Although personality in general may become more stable in adulthood, some traits (i.e., extraversion and conscientiousness) may remain more stable than others (i.e., openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism).

The foundations of trait (in)stability lie in the understanding of brain development; namely, the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex houses the centers for judgement, planning, and executive functions, as well as personality expression. This cortex is the last to fully mature under normal development, continuing to grow and form neural connections even into the second and

third decades of life. This phenomenon is intimately related to the relative malleability of personality traits until adulthood and the tendency for traits to remain less coherent in younger ages. Despite this potential for traits to vary as this region of the brain matures, contemporary research points to the relatively high correlation between children and adults on their Big Five personality traits (DeYoung et al., 2010), but a much stronger relationship exists when the traits are considered broadly compared to the more specific traits subsumed within those superfactors. For example, the extraversion trait may remain consistent from childhood through adulthood, but may express itself as impulsivity and youth whereas it may express as social assertiveness, workplace dominance, or, at the extreme, narcissism. Despite this, DeYoung and colleagues (2010) found significant brain-trait relationships, suggesting a biological basis for at least four of the Big Five personality structures.

A few key conclusions can be made regarding trait stability across the lifespan as defined by the Big Five personality traits. For one, stability over short periods of time within childhood and adulthood should be considered more strongly than the stability as measured by one point in childhood and at one point in adulthood. That is, personality traits may slowly change and adjust over time and thus may appear more stable if evaluated with a brief interval than they would appear after a longer interval. Another conclusion is that some traits may be more stable across time than other traits; specifically, extraversion and conscientiousness were found to have much higher stability and neuroticism was found to have almost no consistency in the 40-year interval from childhood to adulthood (Hampson & Goldberg, 2006). Despite this, all traits were found to be stable when briefer intervals were used (~every 3 years).

Some weaknesses to this area of study is the relative small number of studies that have investigated long-term stability of these traits. Another shortcoming is the foundational difficulty

involved with defining personality and personality traits. Most researchers have used the Big Five personality traits, but personality as a structure is defined by different schools of psychology in varying ways, with some even positing that it is an impossible or meaningless task. Regardless, the current state of the literature implicates such important relationships as the conscientiousness trait predicting positive health behaviors that impact longevity. This finding could red-flag low-conscientiousness children who may be at risk for developing poor health habits and behaviors that risk longevity. However, it is important to remember that “traits” as they are defined by modern psychology, are merely a portion of the broad picture that builds an individual’s personality.

Further Reading

DeYoung, C. G., Hirsh, J. B., Shane, M. S., Papademetris, X., Rajeevan, N., & Gray, J. R. (2010).

Testing predictions from personality neuroscience: Brain structure and the Big Five. *Psychological Science, 21*(6), 820-828.

Hampson, S. E., & Goldberg, L. R. (2006). A first large-cohort study on personality-trait stability over the 40 years between elementary school and midlife. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*(4), 763-779. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.91.4.763