Do personality traits remain stable across a lifetime?

Introduction

What are personality traits, and how they come into shape throughout an individual's life? The discussion on finding commonly shared traits across cultures and different societies has been a lasting one within the field of psychological studies, and a solidifying framework has emerged from the rigorous debates among scholars as well as clinical professionals.[1]

As Greenfield pointed out in the omnibus in 2009, many unsolved problems remain within the personality traits framework. The most intriguing question is about personality trait stabilities.[2] To be more precise, scientists debate on whether personality traits shaped during a person's early life remain mostly unchanged throughout the remainder of one's life or are subject to significant shifts and changes.[3] Based on paradigm research frameworks established since over two decades ago and recent frontier studies, this essay argues that indeed personality traits, despite subject to change upon major traumatic experiences, should be considered as generally stable after maturing and stabilizing during the adolescence and early adulthood.

This essay is divided into three parts: the first part introduces a more precise characterization of "personality traits" by examining the research discourses on the topic, the second part presents the main argument and seeks to demonstrate why personality traits could remain stable across an individual's lifespan, and the third part explains the stable nature of personality characteristics through a study of key personality tests, measuring trait reliability, and examining trait variance across various life stages.

Personality Traits

Until the 1980s, there was limited scientific consensus regarding what personality traits are universally shared among human beings, yet for the field to advance toward questions more granular and specific, one unifying theoretical model was necessary, urgently. It was under such context that the Big Five model was introduced and quickly formalized[4]. This essay will now concisely discuss the basics before moving to discuss why most academics have treated such traits as relatively stable once they come into shape.

The "Big Five" traits are: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Openness to Experience, manifests as creativity, curiosity,

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[1] P. M. Greenfield, 'Linking social change and developmental change: Shifting pathways of human development', *Developmental Psychology*, 45.2 (2009), pp. 401–418, doi:10.1037/a0014726.

[2] *Ibid*.
[3] W. Bleidorn *et al.*, 'Personality Stability and Change: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies', *Psychological Bulletin*, 148.7–8 (2022), pp. 588–619, doi:10.1037/bul0000365.

[4] Par O. P. John, L. P. Naumann and C. J. Soto, 'Paradigm shift to the integrative big five trait taxonomy: History, measurement, and conceptual issues' (2008), available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/289963274_Paradigm_shift_to_the_integrative_big_five_trait_taxonomy_History_measurement_and_conceptual_issues (accessed 1 April 2026).

and willingness to try novel or fresh experiences. Conscientiousness refers to individuals' organization, responsibility, and dependability. Extraversion refers to people's social nature, assertiveness, and energy when engaging in social interactions. Agreeableness refers to sympathy, trust, and cooperation. And lastly, neuroticism refers to the emotional sensitivity and people's tendency toward stress and anxiety.[5]

Although far from perfect, the "Big Five" framework has survived repeated and often rigorous field experiments and examinations, is found to exhibit relative stability over time[6], and thus should be considered as a fundamental bedrock, upon which scientists could further the scientific understanding of the details about personality traits.

It is worth pointing out that current research doesn't treat the "Big Five" model as completely stagnant, nor view it as amorphous and constantly shifting. For example, the "Conscientiousness" aspect may also include minor sub-traits, usually referred to as "facets", like orderly behavior, diligence, and control over oneself. [7]Even as conscientiousness as one of the "Big Five" traits experiences no significant changes over time, how these minor facets manifest in real life could still alter as one grows older[8].

This essay seeks not to argue that personality traits are simultaneously rigid and adaptable. Rather, the parts above seeks to present a nuanced research landscape, that although the traditional general traits are shown to demonstrate strong continuity, specialized facets are subject to greater individualization during development.

Personality Stability

Research on personality at present has provided abundant empirical evidence for the argument that individuals personality traits remain relatively constant. A comprehensive meta review of the longitudinal studies approach in 2022 showed that multiple long-term research projects, during which the research teams followed each subject individual for multiple years and tracked their growth and changes over time, all pointed to personality traits stabilizing since adulthood regardless of age groups[9].

This article deserves of our attention for providing a statistically rigorous result after reviewing almost two decades of research data. The authors concluded that rank-order stability of personality traits of all such longitudinal experiments clearly support the traits being stable, and even the cumulative trait changes across the lifetime were smaller than psychologists previously believed. [10]

Based on the cumulative data, this essay argues that across people's lifetime, personality traits become stabilized and remain so with little changes or adjustments. There is an important premise though: before adulthood, an individual would still be maturing and one's

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[5] Brain Works, 'The Big Five Personality Traits: What They Mean and How They Shape You' (2025), available at: https://brainworksbehavioralhealth.com/2025/08/08/the-big-five-personality-traits/ (accessed 1 April 2026).
[6] A. Caspi, B. W. Roberts and R. L. Shiner, 'Personality development: Stability and change', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56.1 (2005), pp. 453–484, doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141913.
[7] M. René and D. Rammstedt, 'Development is in the details: Age differences in the Big Five domains, facets, and nuances' (2021), available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-72124-001 (accessed 1 April 2026).
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] W. Bleidorn *et al.*, 'Personality Stability and Change: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies', *Psychological Bulletin*, 148.7–8 (2022), pp. 588–619, doi:10.1037/bul0000365.
[10] *Ibid.*

personality traits cannot be viewed as fully grown. As a result, the potential changes that occur during this period of pre-adult life should not be considered as proof for "instability".

Biosocial Foundations of Personality Stability

Having defined what personality traits are as agreed upon by most psychology researchers, this essay now moves to discuss the biological and sociological foundations for trait stability.

The first key lies in the genetic makeup of human beings. For biological twins, specifically the fraternal twins that share only fifty percent of genetic makeup, longitudinal studies that track their later livings indicated a consistent similarity in terms of personality traits and characteristics. As genetics decidedly shape one's brain structures of the twins, which in turn affects stress hormones when either of the twins faces challenges in life and can determine if personality traits would be more susceptible to changes[11]. Despite the twins' growing apart and experiencing distinct livings, the similarity remains mostly unchanged, thereby indicating that genetics may be causally associated with trait stability[12].

On the other hand, the impacts of social experiences on rank-order stability of personality traits are limited. Another longitudinal study in Specht et al. (2011) tracked a group of working professionals who face constant pressure and numerous deadlines throughout their careers. Under mounting stress, the tracked subjects' social experiences could theoretically lead to significant personality traits changes. Yet again, researchers found that after each moment of career growth or skill development, they recorded a slight mean-level change while the relative composition of the subject's personality traits stayed unchanged.[13]

Personality Development Across the Lifespan

In the third part, we need to dial back and examine the period of personality formation, specifically the premises of trait stability this essay has shown above. Personality development is best understood as a process of gradual stabilization that begins with the biological and psychological fluctuations of childhood. During this early period, the forming of temperament is where it all begins, serving as the foundation for all following stages of development. Traits then begin to develop as an individual's self-regulation skills mature, and will eventually manifest into different qualities of the "Big Five". And it is precisely at this pre-adolescence stage where social interactions, both within and outside the family, play the most critical roles[14]. With parental influence as the most significant factor, peer relationships and group identification follow and provide the social feedback necessary to refine specific behavioral facets of personality.

As individuals navigate the transitions of adolescence, bodily changes and the increasing demands of socialization continue to drive and accelerate trait evolution. These changes would eventually slow down while the rank-order stability become higher, indicating that an

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[11] D. A. Briley and E. M. Tucker-Drob, 'Genetic and environmental continuity in personality development: A meta-analysis' (2014), available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-25609-001?doi=1 (accessed 2 April 2026).
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] J. Specht, B. Egloff and S. C. Schmukle, 'Stability and change of personality across the life course: The impact of age and major life events on mean-level and rank-order stability of the Big Five' (2011), available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-18537-001?doi=1 (accessed 3 April 2026).
[14] A. Caspi, B. W. Roberts and R. L. Shiner, 'Personality development: Stability and change', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56.1 (2005), pp. 453–484, doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141913.

individual's personality traits have by then full formed and stabilized. Although personality is not entirely immutable, substantial alterations are rarely observed once an individual matures. The stabilized traits are often reinforced further by feedback mechanisms such as cumulative continuity, where individuals actively select work environments, social relationships, and everyday routines that align with their existing traits. Because most significant developmental milestones are now in the past, the pace of personality change greatly slows during the adult years[15].

In the later years of an individual's life, research has associated some more pronounced personality changes with challenges accompanying the one universal problem to all of us: aging. Decreases in openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness during this life period are often linked to health deterioration or cognitive decline. Shifts in physical and mental processing abilities can influence behavior and reduce the degree of independence an individual maintains within society, thus making certain personality traits more susceptible to change.[16]

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay argues that personality traits should be viewed as a stable framework that solidifies after most of such traits and facets mature into shape during adolescence. While the early years of life are marked by significant biological and psychological development, the transition into early adulthood establishes a consistent pattern of behavior and cognition that persists across an individual's lifespan. The stability is premised upon a combination of genetic factors and the social mechanism of cumulative continuity. Although major traumatic experiences or the health declines associated with old age can induce shifts in trait manifestation, the relative composition of personality remains remarkably constant. Ultimately, the "Big Five" model provides a tried-and-true framework, through which scientists have managed to identify these enduring patterns and reach the consensus that the overarching traits define an individual with great reliability.

[15] D. A. Briley and E. M. Tucker-Drob, 'Genetic and environmental continuity in personality development: A meta-analysis' (2014), available at: https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2014-25609-001?doi=1 (accessed 2 April 2026).
[16] J. J. Jackson and A. J. Wright, 'The process and mechanisms of personality change', *Nature Reviews Psychology*, 3 (2024), pp. 1–14, doi:10.1038/s44159-024-00295-z.

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