Personality in Adulthood
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The longitudinal studies of personality on which this book is chiefly based have resulted from the collaborative efforts of a number of distinguished researchers and thousands of dedicated volunteers. This book has benefited most directly from the generosity and commitment of the men and women participants in the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging. We dedicate it to them, and to Bill and Karol.
During the 1970s several major longitudinal studies of personality were completed and published, providing for the first time a solid scientific basis for evaluating theories of personality and aging. To almost everyone's surprise, all these studies pointed to an extraordinary degree of stability: Personality apparently changes little after age 30 in most people. After several years of testing our interpretation of the data and working out some of its implications for personality psychology and for an understanding of adult life, we published a small book on the topic (McCrae & Costa, 1984).

In the next few years several additional longitudinal studies were reported that generally confirmed early findings. But the major development of the 1980s was the rediscovery of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) and the demonstration that it was indeed a comprehensive model of personality trait structure, including virtually all the traits identified in common language and in scientific theories. This was arguably the most important advance in modern personality psychology, because it put to rest the unfruitful competition between rival trait models that had gone on for decades, and it allowed a systematic approach to the study of personality. We brought out a new version of our book in 1990 that described the FFM and its implications for the study of aging.

The current revision of our book *Personality in Adulthood* reports progress over the past decade. There are three notable changes since the last edition.

First, detailed research in large samples has made it possible (and necessary) to qualify our original claims about stability. Although it re-
mains the case that stability is a very good first approximation to the truth in describing the course of personality traits in adults over age 30, it is also clear that there are exceptions and qualifications: small but replicable declines in some traits, major changes in some individuals (such as those suffering from Alzheimer’s disease), and a decay of the stability of individual differences over long periods of time.

The second major change, reflected in a new chapter (5), was made possible by the worldwide acceptance of the FFM. Translations of the Revised NEO Personality Inventory into over 40 languages have been used to address questions of the cross-cultural generalizability of developmental trends. Although only cross-sectional studies have so far been reported, they do much to further our understanding of personality stability and change.

Finally, another new chapter (10) reports a conceptual advance. Five-Factor Theory (FFT) is a description of the personality system, positioning traits in the broader context of the person and the world. Initially developed to explain how traits could remain stable as individuals continued to adapt to a changing world, FFT is supported by cross-cultural, comparative, and behavior genetic evidence. Concepts from the theory are used in the last chapter to structure a discussion of the effects of personality on the life course and self-concept. The subtitle of this edition of the book reflects the importance we assign to this theoretical perspective.

Although the main message in our book has endured, a wealth of new findings and new interpretations have emerged since it was first published. We hope this revised edition gives a sense of the progress the field has made.
## Contents

**CHAPTER 1**  Facts and Theories of Adult Development  1
   - The Pendulum of Opinion on Personality Stability  3
   - In Search of a Phenomenon  6
   - A Note on Psychotherapy  9
   - When Does Adulthood Begin?  10
   - Other Views: Theories of Change  11

**CHAPTER 2**  A Trait Approach to Personality  20
   - Perspectives on Human Nature  21
   - Basic Principles of Trait Psychology  24
   - How Many Traits? Which Ones?  29
   - The Quest for a Unified System  32
   - Natural Languages and the Five-Factor Model  34

**CHAPTER 3**  Measuring Personality  37
   - From Concepts to Data  37
   - Self-Reports and Observer Ratings  40
   - A Questionnaire Measure:
     - The NEO Personality Inventory  45
     - Facets of N, E, and O  47
     - Facets of A and C  50
     - Making Distinctions  51
   - The Comprehensiveness of the Five-Factor Model  52
CHAPTER 4  The Search for Growth or Decline in Personality

Cross-Sectional Studies of Personality Differences  59
Sampling Bias  62
Cohort Effects  64
Longitudinal Designs: Tracking Changes over Time  66
Stability in the 16PF  67
Sequential Strategies: Avoiding Practice
and Time Effects  70
An Integrated Approach  74
Recent Developments  78
Small, Slow Changes  78
Another Mystery  80
A Different Analysis  80
Implications: Debunking Some Myths of Aging  81

CHAPTER 5  Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Personality
and Aging

A Universal Structure  86
Adult Development across Cultures  90
History, Culture, and Cross-Sectional Comparisons  92
Some Possible Interpretations  94
Cross-Cultural Evidence on Stability  96

CHAPTER 6  The Course of Personality Development
in the Individual

Two Different Questions: Stability and Change in Groups
and in Individuals  98
Developmental Patterns in Individuals  101
Investigating the Course of Personality Traits  106
Longitudinal Evidence  108
The Time Course of Stability  112

CHAPTER 7  Stability Reconsidered:
Qualifications and Rival Hypotheses

Methodological Issues in the Assessment
of Stability  116
The Self-Concept and Stability  119
Accounting for Variance and Correcting
for Unreliability  122
Retrospection and Self-Perceived Change  124
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>A Different View: Ego Psychologies and Projective Methods</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynamic or Ego Psychologies</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental Sequences</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dynamic Dispositions</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contrasting Traits with Ego Processes</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict and Its Resolution</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Temporal Organization</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Differences in Ego Processes</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traits and Metatraits?</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developmental Changes in Ego Processes</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Projective Assessments of Personality</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problems in Projective Methods</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conscious versus Unconscious Elements</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Projective Testing and the Stability of Personality</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inkblot Tests</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TAT Studies</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age and the Spontaneous Self-Concept</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Adult Development as Seen through the Personal Interview</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Form and Content in Psychological Interviews</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview-Based Theories of Adult Development</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Levinson's Seasons</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gould's Transformations</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In Search of the Midlife Crisis</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>A Five-Factor Theory of Personality</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Birth of a Theory</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Five-Factor Theory</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Components of the Personality System</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postulates of FFT: How the System Works</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 11 The Influences of Personality on the Life Course

What Changes? 207
The Objective Biography 208
Characteristic Adaptations 209
The Self-Concept 214

Studying Life Structure and Life Course 216
Psychological Adjustment across the Lifespan 218
Personal Projects, Social Clocks, and Psychobiography 220
Marriage and Divorce 224
Careers 225

Trait Influences on the Self-Concept 227
Identity 228
The Life Narrative 231
Suppose for a moment that people consulted lifespan developmental psychologists as they do fortune tellers—to get a glimpse of their own future. What would we tell them to expect as they grow older? Are there predictable crises ahead? Are they likely to continue to mature and grow, or is it all downhill from here? Will their basic natures and temperaments remain essentially as they are, or will internal unfolding or changing circumstances (such as wars, illness, or technological innovations) reshape existing personalities? Do married couples grow apart with the years, or do they come to resemble each other in personality as they sometimes seem to do in appearance?

If asked to make these kinds of predictions for individuals, we would hedge—and properly so. We would point out that the scientific study of adulthood is young and little is known with certainty. Only in the past three decades have a substantial number of investigators been active in the field, and these have succeeded mainly in framing useful questions, not in providing definitive answers to them. We would also emphasize that science is concerned with generalizations, not specifics. Epidemiologists, for example, can tell us the life expectancy of the average man or the average woman and some of the factors (such as smoking and exercise) that influence longevity, but they certainly cannot predict the exact age of death for any particular individual. Too many people smoke and drink and live to 90 and too many athletes die young to allow anything more than statements of probability.
But individuals inevitably apply these statements to themselves. When Gail Sheehy published *Passages* (1976)—and later *New Passages* (1996)—millions read the book, not because of a disinterested curiosity about human development, nor because they admired her prose style (engaging as it was). People read *Passages* because they wanted to make sense of their own past, present, or future lives. In short, the topic of this book is likely to be of personal as well as academic interest to most readers, and our approach must take that fact into consideration. We will argue for a particular position fully aware that many people find it unappealing. We will therefore try to anticipate objections, and in general we will adopt an approach that Salvatore Maddi (1976) characterized as “partisan zealotry” rather than “benevolent eclecticism” in order to “provide the reader with a vivid account” (p. 2) of our views. We believe that we can accomplish that goal without sacrificing scientific objectivity, and we hope our presentation will stimulate lively discussion and further research.

The first version of this book (McCrae & Costa, 1984) took a simple but radical position: We argued that personality was stable in adulthood—that the traits one showed at age 30 would remain essentially unchanged into old age. Much more information from longitudinal, cross-sectional, and cross-cultural studies is now available, and argument has become more nuanced. Newer studies confirm that stability is the predominant feature of personality in adulthood, but they also document predictable changes at certain ages and in certain individuals. The story has become a bit more interesting.

Some readers are likely to have a strong background in personality psychology but less knowledge of gerontology; some the reverse. We will try to accommodate both groups by reviewing some fundamentals in each discipline. Although our conclusions are driven by data and our research has been squarely in the tradition of quantitative empiricism, we will not burden the reader with much technical detail about the studies we discuss—the cited literature can be consulted for that. We will, however, spend considerable time on the logic of research, specifically how scientific questions should be formulated and how particular measures, samples, or analyses can be used to answer them. Because aging is a relatively new field and personality psychology a contentious one, there are a large number of issues to address. We will consider the problems of distinguishing aging from generational and time-of-measurement effects, the validity of self-report methods of assessment,
the adequacy of a trait theory of personality, and the advantages and dangers of interviews as a source of data on personality. At each step we will try to weigh the evidence carefully, taking into account both strengths and limitations. We can state our point of view in a few paragraphs, but a critical examination of it will require the whole book.

Over the past 20 years there have been remarkable changes in the science of personality. Trait psychology, often considered passé in the 1970s, has come back with a vengeance and is now the dominant paradigm in personality psychology. We know much more about the origins and influences of traits than we did—a new understanding that has been deeply intertwined with our discoveries about lifespan development. Perhaps most crucially, we now know the scope of personality traits. The Five-Factor Model (FFM; Digman, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992) has been widely accepted as an adequate taxonomy of personality traits, and literature reviews are now routinely organized by classifying measures along the lines of these five factors. These factors—Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness—recur throughout this book; they are the basic dispositions that, as we will see, endure through adulthood and help to shape emerging lives. The factors and some representative traits that define them are listed in Table 1.

The Pendulum of Opinion on Personality Stability

When psychologists first asked themselves what happens to personality across the lifespan, they found a great deal to say about infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Most assumed, however, that adulthood was the endpoint of personality development (an adult, the dictionary tells us, is a fully developed individual). William James (1890), in a now famous dictum, claimed that by age 30 character was “set like plaster.” Sigmund Freud wrote volumes on the first few years of life but almost nothing on the later years; certainly they held no major role in his theory of personality. The parallel to other forms of development seemed obvious: By age 20 the vast majority of men and women have reached their full height, and—although they may settle a bit over the years—the tall remain tall, the short, short. The same seems to be true for certain kinds of intelligence. Why should we expect anything different in the case of emotionality or warmth or modesty?

It was therefore a feat of great intellectual daring to propose that
Psychological development might continue throughout life, and one of history’s boldest thinkers, Carl G. Jung, was among the earliest to take this step. His chapter on “The Stages of Life” in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (Jung, 1933) foreshadowed many of the central ideas in gerontological thinking, including the curve of life (Bühler, 1935), the rise of the repressed (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), the feminization of men and masculinization of women (Gutmann, 1970), disengagement theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), and the midlife crisis (Jacques, 1965).

A more elaborated and systematic position was offered by Erik Erikson (1950), who postulated stages of psychosocial development to parallel Freud’s stages of psychosexual development, then extended them beyond adolescence and across the remaining years of life.

The next few decades saw the beginnings of empirical research on personality and aging, some of it guided by the theories of Erikson or Jung, much of it in search of new theoretical perspectives (J. Block,
In the late 1970s, a new generation of theories of adult development emerged (Gould, 1978; Levinson et al., 1978; Vaillant, 1977), Sheehy's *Passages* (1976) became a major best-seller, and the popular press began to feature stories on crises in adulthood, particularly the midlife crisis. During the 1970s there was also a proliferation of undergraduate and graduate programs in human development and gerontology. Most of these programs were explicitly interdisciplinary, examining the sociology, biology, and economy of aging as well as its psychology. Stage theories of adult development had a powerful appeal as a way of integrating such diverse material: Predictable changes in personality might prepare the individual for the social transitions and economic changes of adult life.

All these intellectual developments were consistent with the *zeitgeist*. The 1950s had focused on children; the 1960s, on youth. As the baby boomers passed 30, their lives still seemed to form the center of the culture’s interest. Personal growth and development were promised by humanistic psychology, and theories of life stages seemed to fill a particular need. Personal problems could be attributed to universal developmental changes; predictable crises offered both security and spice to adult life.

The same period also saw the “graying of America,” a dramatic increase in the proportion of men and women living beyond age 65, and a concomitant increase in their awareness of their economic and political power. Older people began to demand attention, and academics took up the challenge. Personality development offered an attractive alternative to studies of cognition, where decline, if not inevitable, was the general rule (Arenberg & Robertson-Tchabo, 1977; Salthouse, 1989).

But it is the nature of science to be self-correcting. Not only did scientific ideas generate theories of adult development; they also led to research. Instead of talking about what might be or about what we want to be, we can use the research efforts of the past 40 years to see what is really going on. More and more, we believe, the findings are coalescing into a pattern, and the pattern is one of predominant stability (Costa & McCrae, 1980c). Maddox (1968) showed that well-adjusted elderly people remained active. Havighurst, McDonald, Maculen, and Mazel (1979), who studied professional careers, were led to formulate what they called “continuity theory.” Neugarten (1982) propounded the no-
tion of age irrelevance to account for the fact that age is not a very useful predictor of social functioning. As we shall see later, within the field of personality research this emphasis on stability has been strongly seconded by the work of investigators like Jack Block (1981) and Ilene C. Siegler and colleagues (see Costa, Herbst, McCrae, & Siegler, 2000). It is beginning to appear as if James and Freud were right.

But if nothing happens with age, why write a book?

This reaction is shared by some of our colleagues in the field, and it is one with which we have often confronted ourselves. One answer would be to persuade people about stability, to disillusion those who are looking for some magic transformation with age or to reassure those who fear that they face periods of developmental crisis and turmoil and would much prefer to continue the business of their lives.

There is also another, better answer. We have not said, nor will we say, that nothing of psychological importance occurs in adulthood. People live most of their lives in this period; they begin careers, raise children, fight wars, and make peace; they experience triumph and despair, boredom and love. Old age, too, has its share of new experience and new perspectives on old experience. All of this makes a fascinating story (Gullette, 1989). From our point of view, it is all the more fascinating since one of the keys to the story is the individual’s personality. People stay much the same in their basic dispositions, but these enduring traits lead them to particular and ever-changing lives.

In Search of a Phenomenon

Most sciences start with a phenomenon and try to explain it. Astronomy arose from attempts to account for the regular changes observed in the moon and stars. Biology tries to explain how different species have come to exist and adapt so differently to their environments. Cultural anthropology began in efforts to explain the puzzling customs of preliterate societies, just as abnormal psychology developed from observation of the bizarre behavior of the mentally ill. But if we ask what students of aging and personality are trying to explain, we are likely to draw a blank. The field of adult personality development seems to have emerged as an afterthought, a logical extension of other branches of study.

Some researchers came to it by way of gerontology, the study of aging. We know that there are major changes in physiology with age, and the popular belief that old people begin to lose their memory has been
confirmed by controlled longitudinal studies that demonstrate declines in certain, though not all, cognitive abilities (Salthouse, 1989). By analogy, some investigators began to wonder about personality. Does it too change with age? Is there a gradual decline in emotional or social functioning? Do older people become increasingly susceptible to mental illness, as they do to physical illness?

Researchers who began as students of personality had a somewhat different basis for their questions. We know (or think we know) that there are changes in personality in childhood and adolescence. Infants become emotionally responsive to familiar faces only around 30 days; at 8 months they are likely to develop separation anxiety when taken away from their parents. Middle childhood is a period of compliance for most children; adolescence is generally conceded to be a period of rebellion and turmoil (Arnett, 1999). Data show that self-esteem is usually low in this period and rises as people reach young adulthood (Bachman, O’Malley, & Johnston, 1978). Recklessness and sensation seeking also seem to decline after adolescence (Zuckerman, 1979).

These observable changes led to theories of child personality development, of which Freud’s is historically the most influential. Psychologists trained in this tradition began to ask if the same kinds of developmental changes could be taking place in adulthood. If there were oral, anal, and phallic stages in childhood, might there not be later psychosexual stages for adults?

This investigation by analogy or extension is in the highest tradition of science. Physicists look for (and find) subatomic particles that in some respects parallel known particles. Cognitive psychology has benefited from computer models. Often this procedure can serve to refocus our perspective and allow us to “see” phenomena we have never noticed before but that are obvious once our attention is called to them. The discoveries of lifespan development may be equally convincing once they are made (indeed, we think they are).

The fact that aging and personality constitute a field in search of a phenomenon is itself an interesting phenomenon. What it seems to mean is that the changes in personality that occur in adulthood—if indeed there are any—are less dramatic than those of childhood. There are some stereotypes of old and young people, but these are notably inconsistent. Romantic idealism is thought to be characteristic of the young, but what about Don Quixote? Age purportedly brings a mellowing of the spirit—except to cranky old men.

We can agree that old people are less healthy than young ones and