

# Long term study suggests personality changes dramatically as people age

21 February 2017, by Bob Yirka



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(Medical Xpress)—A team of researchers with the University of Edinburgh in the U.K. has conducted the longest study of its kind on human personality traits and how they might change as people age. In their paper published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*, the researchers describe how they conducted their study and what they found regarding personality changes over time.

Most people believe themselves to be the same person all of their lives, but thus far, no one has been able to prove it. In this new effort, the [researchers](#) were looking to test one aspect of self—an individual's [personality](#), which is the persona they share with the rest of the world; they wanted to know if it changes over time.

To learn more about [personality change](#) over the course of a lifetime, the researchers accessed data from a study done back in 1950 in Scotland, where a team had asked a group of teachers to fill out [personality assessments](#) of 1,208 of their 14-year-old students (the assessments asked questions about basic traits such as stability of moods, self-confidence, conscientiousness, perseverance,

desire to excel and originality). The researchers then went looking for those same students and found 635 of them, 174 of whom agreed to take a test similar to the one given to them by their teacher 63 years before. Each of the volunteers also brought along someone that knew them well, and that person also filled out an assessment of the volunteer.

Next, the researchers explored whether they could find any connection between the teacher assessments and those that were made later in life, when the volunteers were 77 years old. They report that they could not find any correlation at all—it was as if the second tests had been given to different people.

The researchers also report that they were surprised with their results, because other studies had shown some degree of correlation. Their results suggest that personality really does change, which may not come as a surprise to some people who have come across someone they knew many years before and found them to be very different [people](#).

**More information:** Mathew A. Harris et al. Personality stability from age 14 to age 77 years., *Psychology and Aging* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000133](#)

## Abstract

There is evidence for differential stability in personality trait differences, even over decades. The authors used data from a sample of the Scottish Mental Survey, 1947 to study personality stability from childhood to older age. The 6-Day Sample (N = 1,208) were rated on six personality characteristics by their teachers at around age 14. In 2012, the authors traced as many of these participants as possible and invited them to take part in a follow-up study. Those who agreed (N = 174) completed a questionnaire booklet at age 77 years, which included rating themselves and asking

someone who knew them well to rate them on the same 6 characteristics on which they were rated in adolescence. Each set of 6 ratings was reduced to the same single underlying factor, denoted dependability, a trait comparable to conscientiousness. Participants' and others' older-age personality characteristic ratings were moderately correlated with each other, and with other measures of personality and wellbeing, but correlations suggested no significant stability of any of the 6 characteristics or their underlying factor, dependability, over the 63-year interval. However, a more complex model, controlling rater effects, indicated significant 63-year stability of 1 personality characteristic, Stability of Moods, and near-significant stability of another, Conscientiousness. Results suggest that lifelong differential stability of personality is generally quite low, but that some aspects of personality in older age may relate to personality in childhood. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2016 APA, all rights reserved)

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