



Can Personality Change?

Todd F. Heatherton

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"Can personality change?", is a question that has absorbed psychologists since William James first proposed that personality was "set in plaster" by early adulthood. While there is substantial evidence for both personality stability and change, the trick is to understand what changes and what does not, when to expect stability and when to expect change, and why these occur as they do. In this volume, leading figures in the field of personality research examine provocative theories of change and stability, present the results of important new data from longitudinal research, and discuss state-of-the-art measurement issues. In addition to exploring solid traditional approaches to studying personality stability and change, this volume stimulates fresh insights by examining such processes as sudden transformational change, by looking to the addiction and recovery field for clues as to how change occurs or is blocked, and by tracing precursors to change, such as the "crystallisation of discontent." Whether personality can change is, arguably, one of the most important and interesting issues facing psychologists today. This volume asks the right questions and comes to answers that should intrigue all those whose research or practice is involved with how people change. The book is divided into four sections and also includes an integrative introductory and concluding chapter. In the introduction, Heatherton and Nichols outline the issues that each author must explicitly or implicitly address when considering personality stability and change, and they anticipate common themes that are presented in the chapters. In the first section, Agents of Stability, Costa and McCrae present evidence indicating that basic traits (for example, the Big Five) do not change significantly after people reach age 30. They also introduce a model that facilitates a comparison of the different definitions of personality found in this field of research. Brody, using the analogy of intelligence, argues that genetic endowment produces relative stability of personality. Buss argues that evolutionary forces lead individuals to seek out contexts and situations that reinforce dispositional traits. In the next section, Theory and Measurement, Davis and Millon look at whether certain "world theories" might have relevance in classifying the current theories of personality stability and change. They also introduce a new metamodel, developmental contextualism. The chapters by Nesselrode and Boker and by Alder and Scher examine contemporary measurement issues and sophisticated mathematical models of change. DiClemente focuses on addictive behaviour and on applications of the transtheoretical change model to more general personality change. In the section, Change and the Life Cycle, Helson and Stewart present a variety of influential studies demonstrating that personality does appear to change as a consequence of evolving social roles and societal contexts. Franz then examines changes in implicit motives and preoccupations, especially those related to generativity during midlife. In the final section, Conceptions of Change, Miller and C'deBaca present their theory of quantum change - sudden transformation of the entire personality. Baumeister describes how discontent crystallises to motivate major life change, often after a focal event. McAdams's chapter clarifies differences between various definitions and theories of personality and helps explain seemingly divergent data by proposing three independent levels of personality: dispositional traits, personal concerns and life narrative. Pervin examines how the terms that have been used to describe personality stability and change can bias interpretation of results, draws conclusions from the arguments presented in this book, and discusses how studying change in psychotherapy can yield benefits for the personality theorist and researcher. In the conclusion, Weinberger summarises the common themes and important issues that emerged in the volume and concludes by addressing clinical issues in personality change, with a specific emphasis on what is changed by psychotherapy.

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