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From ugly duckling to swan?
Japanese and American beliefs about
the stability and origins of traits

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Abstract

   Two studies compared the development of beliefs about the stability and origins of physical and psychological traits in Japan and the United States in three age groups: 5–6-year-olds, 8–10-year-olds, and college students. The youngest children in both cultures were the most optimistic about negative traits changing in a positive direction over development and being maintained over the aging period. The belief that individual differences in traits are inborn increased with age, and in all age groups, this belief was related to predictions of greater trait stability. In both cultures, all ages believed positive traits would be maintained over development. In addition to developmental similarities across cultures, cultural variations, consistent with the hypothesis that interdependent cultures have a more incremental view of traits, were present. Japanese participants were more optimistic than American participants about negative traits changing towards the positive and were more likely to attribute differences in trait expression to effort.
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   Traits, or consistent characteristics that distinguish one person from another, are central to how Westerners think about other people and themselves. In the West, traits help guide adults' and children's expectations about other people's behavior and social interactions (Heyman & Gelman, 1999). Even at a young age, Westerners are quite sensitive to differences in trait expression; that is,

that some individuals are smarter, taller, and kinder than others (Butler, 1998). Despite this early interest in trait differences, little attention has been paid to children's beliefs about the origins and stability of traits over development. For example, do children believe a person's present state predicts her mature end state, or do they believe a person's childhood traits can change radically over development, such that the least intelligent, most unattractive child can become the most intelligent, attractive adult?

Since one of the most dramatic constancies of development is change, children might well expect individual characteristics to change. Even preschoolers realize that the development of living things differs from that of artifacts (Rosengren, Gelman, Kalish, & McCormick, 1991). By age 5 children understand that some animals can undergo quite dramatic surface transformations over development, such as changing from a caterpillar to a butterfly, and still maintain identity (Rosengren et al., 1991). Although not as extreme as a caterpillar, humans also change physically over development as well as acquiring more knowledge and skills. Amid the changes that occur in development, however, some things can remain the same, either relatively or absolutely. A person might gain more knowledge with age, but never become really smart; and, try as she might, a person will never be able to fly simply by flapping her arms. Thus, we may view some characteristics as likely to change over development, while perceiving others as essential, that is, as being part of the person's underlying nature and therefore more stable over time.

Common patterns of development for all humans may produce universally shared beliefs about which human traits remain stable or change over development. Above and beyond these shared beliefs, specific cultures may also influence views of origins, constancy, and change. This article explores beliefs about the stability and origins of physical and psychological traits across two cultures that repeatedly have been shown to differ in their views of self and others: Japan and the United States. We suggest that there are both common developmental patterns in beliefs about the stability and origins of traits as well as different ways in which these patterns become instantiated in each culture.

Although scholars continue to debate whether traits actually do change over development (Caspi & Roberts, 2001; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003), the focus of this paper is on *beliefs* about trait origins and stability. Beliefs about trait stability are not necessarily the same as beliefs about trait malleability. Intelligence might be seen as changeable in principle, but as normally tending to remain constant over development and hence stable. We might believe that an obese teenager is likely to become an obese adult, not because it is impossible to lose weight, but because it is so difficult to sustain the effort needed to keep weight off over time. The issue, then, is not whether traits actually do change or if children believe a change is possible, but rather, if children believe characteristics are likely to change over development.

Beliefs about trait stability are important because of their links to motivation and social behavior. A person who endorses trait stability, that is, an entity view of traits, is more likely to give up in the face of failure, succumb to feelings of helplessness, and to make negative self-attributions than someone who has an incremental perspective of traits and believes they can change (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Heyman & Dweck, 1998). Even as early as pre-school, 3- and 4-year-olds who endorse beliefs of socio-moral stability are less likely to engage in pro-social behavior and are more accepting of aggressive behavior in peer interactions (Giles & Heyman, 2003). An entity view of traits may arise from essentialist reasoning. In searching for causal mechanisms to explain similarities within categorical groups, young children have a bias to attribute stable surface properties to fixed, underlying essences (Gelman, 2003). Although children exhibit essentialist reasoning about kinds, such as race and gender, questions remain about the extent to which they essentialize individual traits, such as shyness and coordination.