



Personality stability from childhood to midlife: Relating teachers' assessments in elementary school to observer- and self-ratings 40 years later



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ABSTRACT

We report on the longitudinal stability of personality traits across an average 40 years in the Hawaii Personality and Health Cohort relating childhood teacher assessments of personality to adult self- and observer-reports. Stabilities based on self-ratings in adulthood were compared to those measured by the Structured Interview for the Five-Factor Model (SIFFM; Trull & Widiger, 1997), and trait ratings completed by interviewers. Although convergence between self-reports and observer-ratings was modest, childhood traits demonstrated similar levels of stability across methods in adulthood. Extraversion and Conscientiousness generally showed higher stabilities, whereas Neuroticism showed none. For Agreeableness and Intellect/Openness, stability was highest when assessed with observer-ratings. These findings are discussed in terms of differences in trait evaluativeness and observability across measurement methods.

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1. Introduction

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man. – Heraclitus of Ephesus

The famous quotation from Heraclitus draws attention to the complexities of studying personality stability from childhood to adulthood. Just as Heraclitus questioned the possibility of traversing the same river twice, it is impossible to repeat teacher assessments of children's personality traits in adulthood. However it is possible to assess adult personality using a variety of other informant-based methods in addition to self-reports, and to evaluate the degree to which such methodological differences affect long-term stability coefficients. In the current study, we evaluated the degree of convergence between teacher assessments in childhood and observer-ratings in adulthood for participants in the Hawaii Longitudinal Study of Personality and Health. We compared these findings to stability coefficients based on self-reports in adulthood, and we related self- and observer-reports in adulthood. Observer-ratings were derived from a clinical interview that was conducted an average of 40 years after the childhood teacher-assessments. Recent work on rank-order trait stability and accuracy of obser-

ver-ratings of personality informed our theoretical perspective on how these different sources of personality information may affect long-term stability coefficients.

1.1. Rank-order stability

Rank-order stability is the test-retest correlation of a trait within the same sample over time, and represents the degree to which individuals retain their relative position with respect to each other. Rank-order stability operates independently from mean-level changes. Previously, Hampson and Goldberg (2006) obtained rank-order stability coefficients for the Big Five traits for participants in the Hawaii study based on teachers' assessments in childhood and self-reports in adulthood. Stabilities were highest for Extraversion (.30), followed by Conscientiousness (.25), Intellect/Openness (.17), and Agreeableness (.09), and were zero for Neuroticism. In this article, we evaluate the degree to which differences in measurement method in adulthood influence estimates of personality stability from childhood. To the degree that each trait may have been affected equally by a difference in measurement method across time, all of our stability estimates may have been underestimated. Alternatively, we may find that a change in method has little effect on some traits, while attenuating others more. Correcting a measurement confound could result in a reduction in the degree to which stabilities vary across traits.

How much improvement in stability estimates can be expected? Meta-analytic results suggest that the average 40-year

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rank-order stability correlation for personality traits should be approximately .25 (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Roberts and DelVecchio arrived at this estimate by regressing stability coefficients taken from 152 longitudinal studies onto the time interval for each study while controlling for age. The results of this regression were then used to estimate the predicted stability over a variety of time intervals starting at age 20. While their 40-year estimate does not correspond to the same age range in our data, it represents the best empirically derived estimate of the average stability resulting from accumulated trait change over 40 years. The level of stability we observed previously for Extraversion and Conscientiousness already exceeds this figure, suggesting it is unlikely that a methodological change will produce an increase in stability for these domains. However, there is considerable room for improvement for the other Big Five domains, particularly for Neuroticism. According to Fraley and Roberts' (2005) model of asymptotic decline, trait stability declines in a non-linear fashion approaching a non-zero asymptote, which results from a persistent constant that maintains stability in the face of forces that would otherwise lead to the accumulation of changes over time. Asymptotic decline of this nature is consistent with a model where trait stability is intermediate between a model based on a fixed set-point (i.e., high stability), and one where trait levels are entirely experience dependent (i.e., zero stability), (Ormel, Riese, & Rosmalen, 2012). By mid-life, trait stability will have reached this asymptote suggesting that the zero-level of stability observed previously for Neuroticism was an underestimate and indicating that greater stability estimates could be achieved for this domain with methodological improvements.

1.2. Accuracy: the self versus knowledgeable informants

We take as a premise that anything that is likely to affect the accuracy of personality assessments cross-sectionally must also be considered in longitudinal research. In the Hawaii cohort, where the child assessments are based on a method that cannot be perfectly reproduced in adulthood, these considerations are especially important and are likely to affect any study that spans child and adult phases of life.

The Brunswik lens model represents one of the first formal models applied to understanding accuracy in personality judgments (Brunswik, 1956). In its most basic formulation as a model for accurate assessments of personality, the lens model specifies that judgment accuracy depends on the presence of valid cues (availability) and also on judges' use of these cues (cue utilization). The model allows for researchers to characterize conditions where accuracy is less than optimal. This may result from a lack of available cues, from raters failing to use valid cues, or from the presence and utilization of non-valid cues. Building on the lens model, Funder's (1995, 1999) Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM) gives a more detailed account of the conditions that must be met for accurate personality judgments to occur: (1) relevant trait information must exist; (2) it must be available to raters; (3) raters must notice available cues; and (4) cues must be correctly interpreted and used to form judgments.

The Brunswik lens and Funder's RAM models lay out conditions for accurate assessments of personality based on observer-reports. Evaluating accuracy formally requires the specification of an accuracy criterion and, in the case of personality judgments, this is often based on self-reports. Vazire's (2010) Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry (SOKA) model specifically addresses sources of asymmetry in self- and observer-reports. This model posits two premises based on trait observability and evaluativeness. Principle 1 states that others will know more about highly observable traits while the self has more knowledge of less visible traits. Thus, trait observability leads to asymmetries across self- and observer-rat-

ings. Principle 2 states that because of self-serving perceptual biases (i.e., self-enhancement) others will know more than the self when viewing highly evaluative traits, which also leads to asymmetries in self- and observer-ratings. These principles of self-other asymmetry follow the general consensus that observability and evaluativeness are essential elements that affect accurate personality judgments (John & Robins, 1993; Tetlock, 1984).

Much of the work on judgeable traits has focused on observability in the context of social interactions, where Extraversion is highly judgeable in comparison to other Big Five factors. This remains true even in studies where judges have very limited exposure to the target (e.g., Borkenau, Brecke, Möttig, & Paelecke, 2009; Norman & Goldberg, 1966). Because the Big Five factors vary in the degree to which they are observable and subject to biases resulting from evaluativeness, these properties may explain the degree to which traits vary in rater agreement. A typical pattern of the rank-order of inter-rater agreement has emerged across the literature. Extraversion tends to have the highest agreement, while Agreeableness and Neuroticism tend to show the lowest levels, with Conscientiousness and Intellect/Openness falling in the middle (Norman & Goldberg, 1966). When comparing self-other agreement to observer-observer agreement, the same general pattern emerges (Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; Funder & Colvin, 1988; Watson, 1989). However, while the rank-order of convergence across traits remains the same, observer-observer agreement tends to be monotonically higher than self-observer agreement (John & Robins, 1993). While differences in observability and evaluativeness are useful for characterizing some of these differences, chiefly high agreement for Extraversion and low agreement for Neuroticism, Agreeableness stands out as a trait that shows low levels of agreement across a variety of methods. This is puzzling given that Agreeableness displays similar levels of observability and evaluativeness when compared to Conscientiousness, a trait that tends to consistently show moderate levels of convergence across many different measurement scenarios (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

1.3. The current study

Testing the degree to which different methods of assessment in adulthood affect levels of trait stability in the Hawaii cohort should provide valuable information about patterns of personality stability and change across the life course. The Hawaii cohort data are unique in that they include a remarkably well-collected set of elementary-school teacher assessments in childhood, measures of the same traits in adulthood by the self and observers, a long interval between child and adult measures, and a large ethnically diverse sample. In this report, we estimated child-adult stability coefficients using interviewer/observer-ratings based on the Structured Interview for the Five Factor Model (SIFFM; Trull & Widiger, 1997), plus interviewer/observer-ratings following the interview using three different personality measures. By comparing stability obtained from self- versus observer-reports at midlife, we can examine the influence of trait observability and evaluativeness on these estimates. To the extent that differences in rater perspective and measurement instruments result in a methodological confound, we expect to find the highest stability estimates using measures and measurement methods that vary the least across measurement occasions. Following this reasoning, we treat the childhood assessments as a kind of accuracy criteria, and assume that higher stability coefficients result from greater accuracy in measurement, while recognizing that stability estimates are also limited by the amount of true change occurring over time. Extraversion and Conscientiousness already displayed stabilities that exceeded the best meta-analytic estimate of the average stability of personality traits over a 40-year interval, so substantial in-

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