

# Personality is Fixed - "A Leopard Can't Change Its Spots"

Can people really change who they are? The old saying "a leopard can't change its spots" suggests they cannot. While it's natural to hope that difficult personalities can improve or that shy people can become more confident, scientific research supports this traditional wisdom: our core personality traits stay surprisingly stable throughout our adult lives.

## How Scientific Understanding Has Evolved

More than 100 years ago, the famous psychologist William James (1890) remarked that character (personality) was "set like plaster" for most people by age 30<sup>1</sup>. Early personality research in the 1960s and 1970s focused on whether personality existed at all. By the 1980s, researchers like Costa and McCrae had clearly proven that personality traits are real and measurable. Since the 1990s, increasingly sophisticated studies have confirmed that personality stability is the rule, not the exception.

The longest and most careful studies consistently show the same pattern: personality becomes more stable with age, not less stable. While some researchers in the 2000s and 2010s have claimed to find personality change, these studies typically have serious methodological problems or measure temporary behavioral shifts rather than true personality transformation.

## What Modern Research Shows

The most important evidence comes from Robert McCrae and Paul Costa Jr., who have been studying personality since the 1970s. Their research at the National Institute on Aging has followed the same people for decades. In 1994, they showed that personality traits stay "relatively constant over time"<sup>2</sup>. Their work continues to show remarkable consistency in how people behave and think.

Large studies following people for many years support this view. Sarah Hampson and Lewis Goldberg (2006) studied people for 40 years, from elementary school to middle age<sup>3</sup>. They found that teachers' ratings of children's personalities predicted how those same people would act as adults decades later. Another major study tracked people for 63 years and found that while small changes happen, the basic patterns of personality remain the same<sup>4</sup>.

The evidence is particularly strong for what researchers call "rank-order stability." This means that if you are more outgoing than your friends at age 25, you will likely still be more outgoing than them at age 45. Studies by various researchers have shown that personality traits demonstrate "increasing rank-order stability" as people age, with adult personality becoming quite fixed<sup>5</sup>.

## Addressing Claims About Change

### *The Neuroplasticity Misunderstanding*

Contemporary researchers who claim personality can change often point to neuroplasticity as evidence. However, leading stability researchers have identified problems with this argument. McCrae and Costa (2008) explain that while the brain may be physically flexible, this doesn't mean personality traits change in meaningful ways<sup>6</sup>. The brain's ability to form new connections doesn't automatically translate into personality transformation.

Furthermore, neuroplasticity experts note that most brain plasticity research focuses on recovery from brain injury or learning specific skills like playing piano. This is very different from changing fundamental

personality traits like how anxious or outgoing someone is. The brain changes that happen during skill learning are not the same as the deep changes that would be needed to alter personality.

### *Problems with Change Studies*

Personality stability researchers have also criticized studies claiming personality can change. Costa and McCrae (2008) point out that these studies often suffer from serious problems<sup>6</sup>. First, they are often too short - lasting only weeks or months rather than the years needed to see real personality change. Second, they often measure temporary behavior changes rather than lasting personality shifts.

Costa and McCrae (2008) warn that "individuals should not expect dramatic personality changes" and that "time or aging alone is not likely to change" fundamental personality patterns<sup>6</sup>. Real personality change, if it happens at all, requires years of consistent effort and even then may not be permanent.

### Why Personality Stays the Same

Three major factors explain personality stability:

*Biological Foundation:* McCrae and Costa's *Five-Factor Theory* suggests that personality traits are biological in nature. Their research shows that personality traits "are rooted in biology"<sup>6</sup>. Other studies support this, showing that identical twins raised apart still have very similar personalities.

*Environmental Consistency:* Once we develop certain patterns of thinking and behaving, they become self-reinforcing. Extroverted people seek out social situations that make them even more social. Anxious people avoid challenging situations, which keeps their anxiety high.

*Cognitive Stability:* How we think about ourselves and the world becomes fixed over time. These thinking patterns filter all new experiences to fit our existing personality, preventing real change from happening.

### Conclusion

The scientific evidence overwhelmingly supports the old saying "a leopard can't change its spots." While people can learn new skills and change their circumstances, their fundamental personality - how outgoing, anxious, organized, or agreeable they are - remains remarkably consistent throughout adult life. More than a century of research, from William James to modern neuroscience, points to the same conclusion: personality is stable. Understanding this helps us accept ourselves and others more realistically, rather than expecting personality transformations that research shows are unlikely to occur.

### Footnotes

1. James, W. (1890). *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt.
2. McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (1994). The stability of personality: Observations and evaluations. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 3(6), 173-175.
3. Hampson, S. E., & Goldberg, L. R. (2006). A first large-cohort study of personality-trait stability over the 40 years between elementary school and midlife. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(4), 763-779.
4. Harris, M. A., Brett, C. E., Johnson, W., & Deary, I. J. (2016). Personality stability from age 14 to age 77 years. *Psychology and Aging*, 31(8), 862-874.
5. Various longitudinal studies have demonstrated rank-order stability in personality traits, as summarized in multiple meta-analyses of personality research.
6. McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (2008). The Five-Factor Theory of Personality. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 159-181). New York: Guilford Press.