

You're nicer than you used to be

Personality is one of the most interesting ways in which people are different from one another. But where does our personality come from? Are we born with it or does it change as we get older? A great deal of research into personality (notably the studies carried out on twins) indicates that people's personalities are more or less fixed before they are born.

However, not everyone is convinced. Psychologist Sanjay Srivastava and a team of researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, have just completed a large-scale study into personality, via the Internet. Srivastava explains what he and his team were trying to find out: 'One of the major theories of personality asserts that personality traits are largely set by genetics, and, by consequence, changes in personality traits should slow as we get older. We set out to test that theory.' The researchers evaluated data from 132,515 adults aged between 21 and 60. The team focused on five personality traits – what scientists call 'The Big Five'. These are:

- 1 Conscientiousness – how careful, thorough and self-disciplined are you?
- 2 Agreeableness – how considerate and helpful are you?
- 3 Neuroticism – how self-conscious and tense are you?
- 4 Openness – how curious, imaginative and open to new experiences are you?
- 5 Extraversion – how sociable, assertive and energetic are you?

The huge amount of data, collected over the Internet, allowed for the five traits to be studied across many age groups. What they found contradicted long-held assumptions

about when personalities are set. Conscientiousness, a trait marked by organisation and discipline and linked to success at work and in relationships, was found to increase through the age ranges studied, with the most change occurring in a person's twenties. Similarly, agreeableness, a trait associated with being warm, generous and helpful, contradicted the theory that personalities don't change after the age of 30. On the contrary, people in the study showed the most change in agreeableness during their thirties and continued to improve through their sixties. This even happened among men, which debunks the concept of 'irritable old men', Srivastava claims.

The changes in these two traits revealed in the study seem to correspond with the experiences that people tend to have at certain stages of their lives. Common sense tells us that people become more responsible and conscientious as they mature and become better at managing their jobs and relationships. Similarly, agreeableness changes most in people's thirties when many of them are raising a family and take on the role of carers. Openness showed small declines in both men and women over time, a change that indicates less interest in forming new relationships, and reflects the tendency we have as we get older to spend more time with a small group of well-known relatives and friends, and less time going out and meeting new people.

The personality traits were generally consistent between men and women, except for neuroticism and extraversion, with young women scoring higher than young men in both. 'When people talk about The Big Five', Srivastava says, 'neuroticism is probably the one that marks women and men out most clearly from one another – and it's something that's been demonstrated before.' However, the difference in neuroticism is only apparent in youth and young adulthood, and the gap between men and women in both neuroticism and extraversion narrows as people age.

The data collected by Srivastava and his team throws doubt on the conclusion, drawn from studies of twins, that our personalities are largely determined by our genes. The issue is still hotly debated among psychologists, and a great deal more research will be required before the experts are able to agree.



1. Read the text about personality and decide which of sentences a-c is false.
 - a. The research was carried out online.
 - b. The research focused on five personality traits.
 - c. The research only involved women.
2. For questions 1-8, choose the answer (A, B, C or D) which you think is best according to the text.
 1. Research on identical twins shows that

- A personality makes people different from one another.
- B people are interested in personality.
- C our personalities change as we grow older.
- D our personalities do not change through life.

2. Srivastava and his team wanted to

- A test a new theory.
- B test an existing theory.
- C carry out a study larger than previous ones.
- D show that they could do research using the Internet.

3. The study

- A looked at people's lives over many years.
- B looked at people's lives over a short period.
- C looked at adults of many different ages.
- D took many years to complete.

4. The results showed that people who are conscientious generally

- A change a lot during their twenties.
- B become less conscientious as they get older.
- C don't change
- D have unsuccessful relationships.

5. Srivastava thinks that

- A old men are irritable
- B both men and women get nicer as they get older
- C women get nicer but men don't
- D people are generally more agreeable when they are younger

6. The results of the study

- A correspond with people's actual experience.
- B contradict common sense
- C tell us that nobody changes
- D revealed no change in openness

7. What differences between men and women did the study reveal?

- A it didn't reveal any differences.
- B it revealed that men and women differ in all of the "Big Five" traits.
- C it revealed differences in early adulthood which lessen as people get older.
- D it revealed that men score higher in two "Big Five" traits.

8. Srivastava has

- A made further research into personality.
- B convinced other psychologists that he is right.
- C made people question the results of previous research.
- D asked for more research to be done.