

» Temperament How we grow over time

ILLUSTRATIONS BY NOMA BAR

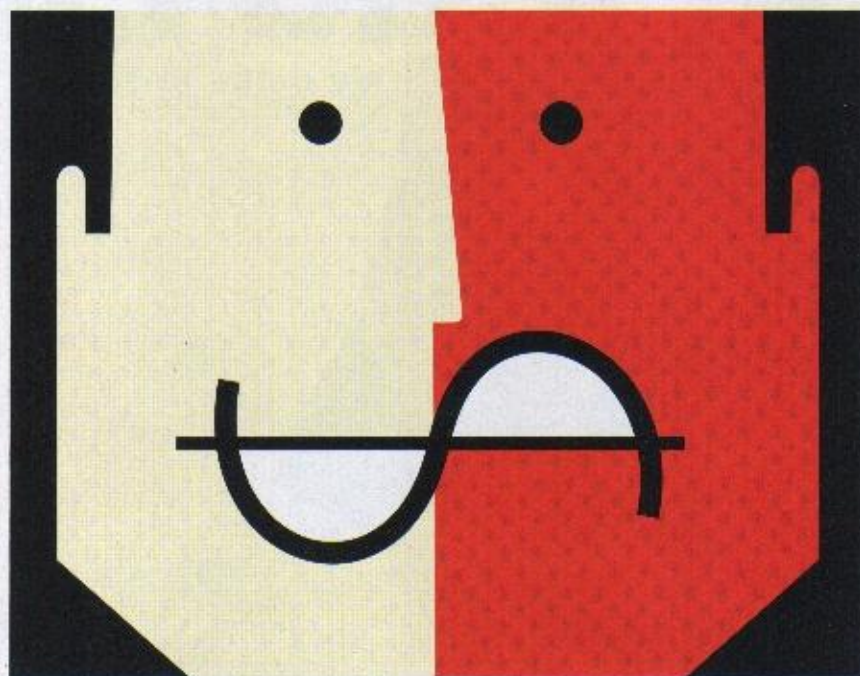
Life Satisfaction Linked to Personality Changes

Character trumps economic concerns to influence our happiness

Despite the long-held belief that personality traits are set in stone, numerous studies have found evidence to the contrary (*timeline below*). Now research reveals that a changing character can influence life satisfaction even more than economic upheaval.

Past studies have revealed that personality is the single biggest factor in how we perceive our own well-being, accounting for 35 percent of individual differences in life satisfaction. Research on well-being, however, has focused on less important factors, such as income and job status, because of the misperception that personality is generally fixed after early adulthood.

The new study, published in March



in *Social Indicators Research*, investigated how evolving character traits relate to life satisfaction. Researchers at the University of Manchester in England assessed 8,625 people aged 15 to 93 at two points, four years apart. They measured the Big Five personality traits (openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) and tracked fluctuations in external aspects of subjects' lives, including marital status, income and employment status.

The data reveal that the participants' character changed during those four years at least as much as demographic factors, such as marital status or employment. And those small personality shifts were more closely tied to life satisfaction than the other indicators were. For instance, people who grew less agreeable reported feeling less fulfilled in life than they had felt four years earlier, whereas those who became more open reported greater contentment.

This study did not attempt to find out

Flexible Facets Some personality traits may be more malleable than others. A study from the March *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* found that 75-year-olds in the 1970s were less extroverted than 75-year-olds in the 2000s, though equally neurotic. The findings suggest that extroversion may be more susceptible to environmental influences than neuroticism is. —T.R.

Our Peripatetic Personality

Decades of studies slowly overturn the belief that our character is stable.

1976

Research confirms the widely held idea that a person's personality remains stable from early adulthood to old age.

1988

Self-reports from men and women aged 21 to 96 and ratings from spouses suggest that adult personality is static after about age 30.

1997

A study suggests personality may still be malleable in adulthood. Women aged 27 to 43 exhibited increases in industriousness, assertiveness and confidence after experiencing success at work.

2003

Further evidence emerges that personality changes over time. Adults aged 21 to 60 reported increases in conscientiousness and agreeableness with age and, in women, decreases in neuroticism.

M

Creativity is often overlooked in schools. Only nine U.S. states include creativity as a criterion for gifted education. | Rats who were tickled once

what caused the subjects' personalities to transform, but other recent work has shown that certain experiences can change specific traits. For instance, psychological trauma—such as that experienced by combat soldiers—has been linked with decreases in agreeableness and conscientiousness (for more examples, see below).

Scientists have also successfully designed programs to increase openness, which tends to predict better health and a longer life. A December 2012 experiment published in *Psychology and*

Aging found that a training program increased openness among older adults. A different study found that openness grew with the enhanced bodily awareness that comes from dancing and possibly other forms of physical activity.

“Not only does personality change occur, but it is an important influence and a possible route to greater well-being,” says research psychologist Christopher Boyce, now at the University of Stirling in Scotland, lead author of the *Social Indicators Research* study.

—Tori Rodriguez

Forces of Personality Change



Greater job satisfaction
Decreases neuroticism and increases extroversion



Stronger relationships
Increase conscientiousness, agreeableness and extroversion and decrease neuroticism



Taking antidepressants
Increases extroversion and decreases neuroticism in depressed individuals; effects on personality were separate from those on depression



Divorce
Increases extroversion and openness in women



Remarriage
Decreases neuroticism in men



Intensive drug counseling
Enhances agreeableness and conscientiousness in addicts

2006

A meta-analysis finds that throughout adulthood, people become more open, extroverted, conscientious and emotionally stable, but some of these traits—openness and extroversion—start to decline in old age.

2011

New work indicates personality changes may follow a bell-curve trajectory, with emotional stability, extroversion, openness and agreeableness increasing until midlife (aged 40 to 60) and decreasing after that; conscientiousness, however, rises with age.

2013

A study reveals that shifts in personality over time predict well-being and life satisfaction: Increases in agreeableness and extroversion, for example, are linked to greater life satisfaction.

a day for two weeks later responded less to stress. | In a major advance, scientists created a see-through