Chapter 5

Personality Dispositions Over Time: Stability, Change, and Coherence

Conceptual Issues

- Personality Development
- Stability
- Change
- Coherence
What Is Personality Development?

- Personality development: Continuities, consistencies, stabilities in people over time, and the way in which people change over time

Three Key Forms of Stability

- Rank order stability: Maintenance of an individual position’s within group
- Mean level stability: Constancy of level in population
- Personality coherence: Maintaining rank order relative to others but changing in the manifestations of trait
Personality Change: Two Defining Qualities

- **Internal**: Changes are internal to a person, not changes in the external surrounding
- **Enduring**: Changes are enduring over time, not temporary

Three Levels of Analysis

- **Population level**: Changes or constancies that apply more or less to everyone
- **Group differences level**: Changes or constancies that affect different groups differently
- **Individual difference level**: e.g., Can we predict who is at risk for psychological disturbance later in life based in earlier measures of personality?
Personality Stability Over Time

Stability of Temperaments During Infancy

- Temperament: Individual differences that emerge very early in life, are heritable, and involved behaviors are linked with emotionality
- As assessed by caregivers, temperament factors include activity level, smiling and laughter, fear, distress to limitations, soothability, and the duration of orienting

Personality Stability Over Time

Stability of Temperaments During Infancy

- Research points to the following conclusions
  - Stable individual differences emerge early in life, where they can be assessed by observers
  - For most temperament variables, there are moderate levels of stability over time during the first year of life
Personality Stability Over Time

Stability of Temperaments During Infancy

- Research points to the following conclusions
  - Stability of temperament is higher over short intervals of time than over long intervals of time
  - Level of stability of temperament increases as infants mature

Personality Stability Over Time

Stability During Childhood

- Longitudinal study: Investigation of same group of individuals over time
- Block and Block Longitudinal Study: Study of 100 children assessed at three, four, five, seven, and 11 years
Personality Stability Over Time

Stability During Childhood

- One study using Block and Block Longitudinal Study: Individual differences in activity level
  - Activity level assessed in two ways: Using actometer and independent assessments of behavior and personality provided by teachers
  - Stability coefficients: Correlations between same measures obtained at two different points in time (test-retest reliability)

Personality Stability Over Time

Stability During Childhood

- Validity coefficients: Coefficients between different measures of the same trait at the same time
- Actometer measurements of activity level had positive validity coefficients with teach measurements of activity level: Thus, activity level in childhood can be validly assessed with measures
Personality Stability Over Time

Stability During Childhood

- Activity level measurements are all positively correlated with measures of activity level taken at later ages: Activity level shows moderate stability during childhood
- Size of correlations decreases as the time interval between different testings increases

Personality Stability Over Time

- Stability of childhood aggression
  - Individual differences in aggression emerge early in life, by three years
  - Individuals retain rank order stability on aggression over many years
  - Stability coefficients decline as interval between two times of measurement increases
Personality Stability Over Time

Rank Order Stability in Adulthood

- Across different self-report measures of personality, conducted by different investigators, over differing time intervals (3 to 30 years), broad personality traits show moderate to high levels of stability.
- Average correlations across traits, scales, and time intervals is about +.65

Personality Stability Over Time

Rank Order Stability in Adulthood

- Stability also found using spouse-report and peer-report.
- Personality consistency tends to increase in stepwise fashion with increasing age—personality appears to become more and more “set in plaster” with age.
Personality Stability Over Time

Mean Level Stability in Adulthood

- “Big five” personality factors show a consistent mean level stability over time
- Especially after 50, very little change in the average level

Personality Stability Over Time

Mean Level Stability in Adulthood

- Small but consistent changes, especially the during 20s
  - Openness, extraversion, neuroticism decline with age until 50
  - Conscientiousness and agreeableness show gradual increase with time
Personality Changes Across Cohorts: Women’s Assertiveness in Response to Changes in Social Status and Roles

- Cohort effects: changes (for example, in personality) over time that are attributable to living in different time periods rather than to “true” change
- Research by Jean Twenge

Personality Coherence Over Time

- Marital Stability, Marital Satisfaction, and Divorce (Kelly and Conley, 1987)
  - Longitudinal study of 300 couples from engagements in 1930s to 1980s
  - During first testing session in 1930s, friends rated each participant’s personality on many dimensions
Personality Coherence Over Time

- Marital Stability, Marital Satisfaction, and Divorce (Kelly and Conley, 1987)
  - Three aspects of personality strongly predicted marital dissatisfaction and divorce
    - Husband’s neuroticism
    - Husband’s impulsivity
    - Wife’s Neuroticism

Personality Coherence Over Time

- Alcoholism and Emotional Disturbance
  - In a longitudinal study of men, high neuroticism predicted the later development of alcoholism and emotional disturbance
  - Alcoholic men had lower impulse control scores than men with emotional disturbance
Personality Coherence Over Time

- Adult Outcomes of Children with Temper Tantrums (Caspi, 1987)
  - Longitudinal study spanning 40 years
  - Men who, as children, had frequent and severe temper tantrums achieved lower levels of education, lower occupational status at their first job, changed jobs frequently, and had erratic work patterns

Personality Coherence Over Time

- Adult Outcomes of Children with Temper Tantrums (Caspi, 1987)
  - If in the military, men who had temper tantrums as children achieved lower military rank than peers
Personality Coherence Over Time

- Prediction of Personality Change
  - Can we predict who is likely to change in personality and who is likely to remain the same?

Personality Coherence Over Time

- Prediction of Personality Change
  - Caspi and Herbener (1990) studied middle-aged couples over an 11-year period, in 1970 and again in 1981
  - Researchers asked: Is the choice of marriage partner a cause of personality stability or change?
Personality Coherence Over Time

- Prediction of Personality Change
  - People married to a spouse highly similar to themselves showed most personality stability
  - People married to a spouse least similar to themselves showed most personality change

Summary and Evaluation

- Personality development is the study of both the continuities and changes in personality over time
- Strong evidence for personality rank order stability over time
Summary and Evaluation

- Personality also changes in predictable ways, sometimes in different ways for men and women.
- Personality also shows evidence for coherence over time.