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# Personality changes throughout life

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People's personalities are not set in stone by the age of 30, contrary to popular and professional beliefs, new research suggests.

In fact, the old adage about people becoming wiser with age may hold some truth, according to the US study, which examined five major personality traits.

Sanjay Srivastava and colleagues surveyed over 130,000 people on key personality traits known as the "Big Five": conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness and extraversion. These traits are not dependent on factors like mood, says Srivastava, now a psychologist at Stanford University, California.

Many psychologists believe these five key characteristics are fundamentally genetic and do not change or change only slowly after 30. But the research suggests that not only do people continue to change after this milestone, but in some ways they change more.

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"We found a mixture of different patterns of how people change," Srivastava told **New Scientist**. "On average people were getting better at dealing with the ups and downs of life. In particular they were more responsive and more caring [with age]."

## Work and family

The team assessed the five key traits in people aged between 21-60 on the Internet using standard psychological tests. These included personality tests such as "Find your Star Wars twin". They compared results to other non-Internet studies in college students to ensure that their results were representative.

The team found that neuroticism decreased with age for women but not men. Openness also declined slightly with age for both sexes.

They also found that people tended to show a spurt in conscientiousness – which involves the ability to deal with tasks and organisation – in their twenties. Agreeability, which encompasses affection and warmth, improved on average in most people's thirties.

Srivastava, who led the study while at the University of California, Berkeley, said the team thought changes in conscientiousness and agreeability might map onto changes in work and family.

"In their twenties people are typically entering into the world and rapidly advancing, also they are making commitments in

their personal life,” he said. “Agreeability coincides with when people are having families.”

## Chicken and egg

However, the way in which this happens presents a chicken and egg scenario, says Srivastava. “There could be socially prompted changes where a person changes to keep up with the world around them. Or you could also imagine people’s personalities developing to allow them to take on those roles.”

For this reason, he says it is difficult to establish the balance between nature and nurture in developing personality.

Srivastava’s team is now planning further work to follow the development of personality in individuals over time.

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