

REVIEW ARTICLE

Understanding Personality Stability and Change From McAdams's Perspective: Implications for Research and Practice

Renato Gomes Carvalho^{1,2} | Paulo Cardoso³ | Maria do Céu Taveira⁴

¹Secretaria Regional de Educação, Ciência e Tecnologia, Madeira, Portugal | ²Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal | ³Universidade de Évora, Évora, Portugal | ⁴Universidade do Minho, Braga, Portugal

Correspondence: Renato Gomes Carvalho (renatoggc@gmail.com)

Received: 30 July 2024 | **Revised:** 14 November 2025 | **Accepted:** 9 December 2025

Keywords: characteristic adaptations | counseling | narrative identity | personality stability and change | personality traits

ABSTRACT

Whether personality changes over time has long been a central question in psychology. While most research has approached this issue through the lens of trait stability, such a perspective alone is insufficient to fully capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of personality development. From a constructivist standpoint, personality is not a fixed set of attributes but an evolving process of self-organization, shaped by the continual interaction between individuals and their sociocultural contexts. In this work, we adopt McAdams's integrative three-layer model of personality—encompassing dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and narrative identity—to explore how stability and change coexist across the life span. Drawing on empirical evidence, we argue that although traits tend to relative stability, particularly from early adulthood onward, characteristic adaptations and life narratives are inherently more fluid and responsive to life experience, personal goals, and meaning-making processes. Personality change, therefore, is not merely a quantitative shift in traits but often reflects qualitative transformations in how individuals construct and reconstruct their sense of self. We discuss the implications of this perspective for psychological practice, emphasizing the importance of supporting narrative revision and tailoring interventions to individuals' unique developmental trajectories and personal meanings.

1 | Introduction

The theme of personality stability and change throughout the life cycle continues to generate much debate in psychology (Hampson and Goldberg 2006; McAdams and Olson 2010; Roberts et al. 2006), as well as attracting public attention (e.g., “Are our personalities set in stone, or can we work on—even improve—them?”, Waters 2021). In order to discuss whether personality changes so that implications can be drawn, it is essential to start from a definition of personality.

This work analyses the literature on personality stability and change using McAdams's three-level framework (1994, 1995, 2013) regarding individual personality differences. It assumes

that personality is more than a set of traits evolving along limited maturational trajectories, but rather a lifelong construction co-created through individuals' interaction with sociocultural contexts that confer meaning to experience. Recent findings on trait plasticity (e.g., Roberts et al. 2006) and on the structuring power of life narratives converge toward a constructivist view of development. This vision does not limit change to quantitative trait variations but also studies qualitative transformations in personal narratives (McAdams and McLean 2013), a process shaped by agency, reflection, and ongoing cultural dialog. We explore theoretical, practical, and research implications emerging from this synthesis, emphasizing the need to integrate trait measures, narrative processes, and sociocultural contexts to understand personality change across the life span.