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Personality and Coping

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Celebrating her 70th birthday has gotten Phyllis thinking about her life and reviewing the choices she made that determined what path it would take. Even as a teenager, she was more interested in fashion than she was in book learning. At a very young age, she married a man with strong business skills and, for many years, the two of them operated a highly successful women's clothing store. She handled the customers, helping them select outfits that would be flattering, and her husband kept the books. Even though she and her husband sold their store 10 years ago, her friends and neighbors constantly seek out her fashion advice. Phyllis still does her best to keep abreast of clothing styles, and she maintains an interest in her own fashion, although modified to fit her age and stage of life. She realizes some changes that come with age are inevitable and her appearance is not the same as it was 25 years ago. Overall, however, she thinks she is faring better than most women her age. Recently, Phyllis got a call from the owner of a new clothing boutique that caters to mature women. This owner heard about Phyllis' knack for fashion and asked if she would be interested in working several afternoons a week as a fashion consultant. Phyllis jumped at the opportunity. She hopes that in her new part-time position she can help other women do as she has done, which is to wear tasteful clothing and jewelry that will enhance their best features and minimize any faults. She is convinced that older women who are confident about how they look tend to create a favorable impression on others.

Studying Personality in Aging and Older Adulthood

Most of us make judgments about what other people are like by how they behave. For example, a person who is friendly and approachable would be viewed as outgoing, or extraverted, whereas a person who is quiet and shy would not. Ideally, our inferences about someone's personality are based on observations of that person's behavior on a number of occasions and not behavior that occurs only once.

Another aspect of personality is how we view ourselves. What is important to us? What is distasteful? What opinions do we have about various issues? In short, what is our own theory about who we are? In some instances, the way others view us corresponds with how we view our inner self. However, there are exceptions. For example, a person who is viewed as hard-nosed by others because of his or her behavior as a manager at work may perceive him- or herself as tenderhearted and showing concern for employees by being strict.

In sum, personality is a complex construct (Hall, Lindzey, & Campbell, 1998). It has to do with how we view others, how they view us, and how we view ourselves. The way people act conveys information about what they are like. However, personality also has an inner aspect because it relates to how we see ourselves, and our inner thoughts and feelings are not always reflected in our immediate behavior.

Approaches to Investigating Personality

What approaches are used to investigate personality development in the field of adult development and aging? As discussed in Chapter 2, the developmental aspects of personality can be studied using a cross-sectional research design, comparing the personality characteristics of individuals in two or more age groups. To illustrate, if we compare 20-year-olds with 70-year-olds at the same point in time, we may find that these two age groups differ in some aspects of personality. This difference could be associated with differing chronological ages, but it could also be a function of the fact that the two age groups come from different cohorts.

Another way to study the developmental aspects of personality is to follow the same individuals over time. This longitudinal design can detect changes within each person. However, there may be selective attrition – participants who drop out of the study may have different personality characteristics compared with those who remain. For example, those who drop out may not be as dependable or as well adjusted as those willing to be retested.

Personality Over the Adult Years

Does personality undergo change with increasing age, and are some aspects of personality more dominant at one stage of life than at another? Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) contend that early adulthood is a time of exploration, striving for growth, self-actualization, and mastery of new roles. Middle adulthood is a time of productivity and gains in the ability to deal competently and confidently with the world through experience. In older adulthood, there is less striving for competency and a greater tendency to reflect, hopefully with satisfaction and contentment, on what has been accomplished in life.

Some personality characteristics may be more common in a particular age group, but no two people are exactly alike. Within any age group, there are individual differences. For example, some people are more contemplative and thoughtful while others are more impatient, daring, and willing to take risks. However, a fundamental question is: "What personality characteristics are typical of individuals who age successfully?" How individuals cope with challenges encountered over the course of adulthood, and individual differences in the ability to maintain a positive outlook and achieve happiness, are of great interest to aging researchers.

How Is Personality Measured?

How do we measure personality? One way would be to ask individuals to describe themselves. A less direct approach would be to ask them to respond to ambiguous visual or verbal stimuli in the hope that what they say will tell us something about what they are like. Yet another approach would be to observe how individuals behave either in completely naturalistic settings or under more carefully controlled conditions. Regardless, personality

measures should be both reliable and valid (see Chapter 2 for detailed explanation of these concepts). Now let's take a closer look at these three ways of measuring personality.

Self-Report Questionnaires

Personality inventories are self-report measures consisting of questions test takers answer about themselves. On some questionnaires, test takers are instructed to agree or disagree with a series of statements. For example, "I always want to be with other people and I never want to be alone" would be a statement with which an outgoing person would agree but a shy person may not. On some self-report questionnaires, test takers are given a list of traits (for example, "talkative" or "quiet") and told to check the ones that describe them or rate how much each trait describes them (such as "not at all," "a little," or "very much"). Some personality inventories have norms based on the responses of a large sample of individuals who completed the inventory previously. Responses of an individual test taker can be compared with those of the larger standardization sample.

Self-report questionnaires can be written or oral, but an advantage of written inventories is that they can be given to large numbers of people. However, self-disclosure is required even on a written questionnaire, so a test taker's responses may not be totally candid. Unbeknown to test takers, some personality inventories include "lie scales" and "social desirability scales." If a test taker receives a high score on a lie scale (giving responses that are untrue for most people) or on a social desirability scale (giving responses he or she thinks are expected or that appear socially acceptable), a red flag is raised indicating that the test may not be a valid measure for that individual.

Self-report information can also be gathered using open-ended interviews. With this technique, information may come to light that would not be revealed by a person's answers to a predetermined set of questions. However, responses to open-ended interviews can be difficult to quantify, and they must be interpreted by more than one objective rater.

Projective Techniques

With projective techniques, inferences are made about personality based on a test taker's responses to ambiguous stimuli. The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projective measure used in some studies on aging and personality, consists of pictures of characters that appear to be involved in ambiguous social interactions. Test takers tell a brief story about what has gone on and what will happen to these characters. Other examples of projective techniques are word association tests and sentence completion tests. Asking a test taker to say the first word that comes to mind in response to another word or to complete the last few words of a phrase may uncover something about his or her personality. Responses to ambiguous stimuli may reveal feelings and thoughts that test takers might be unwilling or unable to express directly on personality inventories or in open-ended interviews. Again, however, these responses may be difficult to interpret.

Behavioral Observation

Another way to evaluate personality is to observe how people behave. We can rate the behavior of others on various scales or use behavior checklists to record how many times specific behaviors actually occur. For example, if we want to determine whether residents of an assisted-living facility are friendly (see Chapter 10 for a discussion of assisted-living facilities), we could arrange for observers to visit them several times during the day for a week. Residents who smile, make eye contact, and talk to others would probably be considered friendlier than those who do not display these behaviors. These observations are made in a real-life naturalistic setting, but a disadvantage is that we cannot hold all aspects of the environment constant so that we can observe every resident under the same conditions. Also, there is no guarantee that residents will exhibit the behaviors of interest at the times they are observed.

Behavior can also be observed under more controlled conditions. For example, after signing a consent form (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of ethics), individuals can sit in a room equipped with a one-way mirror so that they can be observed, though they cannot see who is watching them. A stooge (that is, a person trained by a researcher to follow a specific script) could enter the room and ask these individuals a series of questions in a set tone of voice. The verbal responses and body language of each individual can be recorded on videotape and

later evaluated by raters, who must agree on what they observe. A possible drawback is that individuals' behavior may be affected by the knowledge that they are being observed.

In sum, we can measure personality in a number of different ways, each having advantages and disadvantages. Those who study personality over the adult life span must take into consideration which approach is best suited to their goals.

Normative Models of Personality

Are there universal (called *normative*) changes in personality as we progress through adulthood, or do personalities remain stable over time? There is more than one school of thought on this issue. Initially, we will focus on stage theories of personality, which emphasize changes that occur over the course of adulthood. Then we will turn to theories that emphasize that personality traits are stable over the adult life span. Finally, we will look at how personality development is viewed by nonprofessional (lay) people who do not conduct scientific studies but are natural observers of others as well as of themselves.

Stage Models

Stage models view personality as something that unfolds over time and takes on different forms as people progress through their adult years. Stages of personality development are linked to a chronological age range, with each one qualitatively different from the others. At each stage, certain qualities, or traits, are thought to predominate, or there may be a focus on coping with specific personal concerns.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was a prominent stage theorist who lived most of his life in Vienna, where he attended medical school and specialized in neurology and nervous disorders (Hall et al., 1998). Based chiefly on case histories, Freud's psychoanalytic theory emphasized the role of unconscious biological instincts in motivating behavior. According to Freud's theory, personality development proceeds in a series of psychosexual stages that begin in infancy and extend through adolescence. However, Freud emphasized the importance of early childhood experiences in the formation of the basic personality structure. Carl Jung and Erik Erikson were both trained in the Freudian tradition and, like Freud, both are stage theorists. But later, each one developed his own theory which extended beyond adolescence and throughout the adult years. Jung and Erikson acknowledged the importance of biological factors, but both placed more emphasis than Freud did on the influences of the environment and society.

Carl Jung

Carl Jung (1875–1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist who studied with Freud, but by 1916 Jung developed his own theory of personality. Jung believed that, throughout adulthood, we continue to grow toward the realization of our potential by balancing various aspects of our personality in response to both our inner needs and the demands of society (Hall et al., 1998). At different points in the adult life span, the balance can shift, with some aspects receding into the background and others coming to the forefront. Jung believed that biological and social needs are primary in the first half of life, but cultural and spiritual needs become more important in the second half (Stevens, 1994).

Among other concepts, Jung described personality development in terms of two personality dimensions: introversion/extraversion and masculinity/femininity. He believed that a person's position on each of these dimensions could shift at different stages of development. With regard to introversion/extraversion, the emphasis in young adulthood is on meeting the demands of the external world and expanding the social environment. Important tasks at this stage of life include finding a mate and a vocation, both of which are more attainable if the outgoing (extravertive) aspects of personality predominate and the inner (introverted) aspects are suppressed. By middle adulthood, there is less pressure to meet the demands of the external world and more time to devote to the inner self. Accordingly, there is a greater balance between the external and internal aspects of the personality. In older adulthood, the demands of the external social world are reduced further, leaving more time for reflection on the inner self, so the balance shifts further

toward the introversion pole of the dimension.

Jung also contended that every individual's personality has both masculine and feminine aspects. These can coexist and even complement one another. However, in young adulthood, same-sex tendencies predominate – that is, the masculine aspects predominate in young men and the feminine aspects predominate in young women. Beginning in middle age and more so in older adulthood, there is less pressure to fulfill culturally prescribed sex roles, so opposite-sex tendencies are no longer suppressed. Accordingly, older men become more accepting of their feminine side and thus are more receptive to their nurturing and sensual feelings, whereas older women are more accepting of their aggressive and self-centered impulses. This pattern has been found in various geographical areas and subcultures within the United States (in the Midwest and in rural Florida among both European American and African American ethnic groups) as well as in Israel, Asia, and Africa. Regardless of ethnic background, older men seem to be more tolerant than younger men of their domestic interests and focus less on competitiveness. In contrast, older women are more domineering and less submissive compared to their younger counterparts (Gutmann, 1977). The fact that these sex differences are similar cross-culturally suggests that they may be truly developmental.

Photo 8.1 In older adulthood, men are freer to express their nurturingside than they were when they were younger. Photo © bowden images/iStockphoto



Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson (1902–1994) is the most prominent stage theorist in the field of adult development and aging. He acknowledged the contribution of biological factors and inner psychological processes to personality development, but he also emphasized cultural and social forces. He thought that society had an expansive influence on development and that social institutions such as school and marriage play a positive role in psychosocial development.

According to Erikson's theory, development unfolds in a sequence of eight psychosocial stages that span from infancy to old age. Each stage revolves around a different crisis, or challenge, that represents the central concern for that developmental period. The challenge of each developmental stage can be resolved positively or negatively. If it is resolved positively, the self is strengthened, the social world expands, and the individual has a good chance of resolving the next stage positively. If the challenge is resolved negatively, the individual's development suffers because it will be more difficult to achieve a positive resolution in the stages that follow. Thus, there is sequential interdependence of the stages – how the challenge of an earlier stage is resolved will affect how positively or negatively subsequent stages are resolved.

Erikson's last three stages cover young, middle, and older adulthood, respectively. In the sixth stage, the main challenge is **intimacy versus isolation**. Young adults who resolve this challenge positively are successful in developing close give-and-take relationships with others. Intimate relationships are important well into older adulthood, but the ability to form a close relationship with another person may develop in young adulthood. Young adults who resolve this challenge positively are graced with the *virtue of love*.

Table 8.1 Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development

Source: Erikson (1950).

	Stage (age range)	Psychosocial challenge
I.	Infancy (birth to age 1)	Trust versus mistrust
II.	Early childhood (ages 1–3)	Autonomy versus shame and doubt
III.	Childhood (ages 3–6)	Initiative versus guilt

IV.	School age (ages 6–12)	Industry versus inferiority
V.	Adolescence (teens)	Identity versus role confusion
VI.	Young adulthood (20–40)	Intimacy versus isolation
VII.	Middle adulthood (40–65)	Generativity versus stagnation
VIII.	Late adulthood (65+)	Ego integrity versus despair

In the seventh stage, the main challenge is **generativity versus stagnation**. Middle-aged adults who resolve this challenge positively are able to take responsibility for others and feel they are making a contribution to the next generation. They are graced with the *virtue of care*. In middle age, many adults lose their parents and in some sense become the barrier to death for the next generation. They become protectors rather than protectees. Those who fail to resolve this challenge positively feel that life has little meaning, which can lead to a sense of boredom and a tendency toward self-indulgence. Stagnated middle-aged adults often take on youthful habits to defend against thoughts of aging and death. This behavior fits what has been popularly referred to as the *mid-life crisis* (Levinson, 1978), which we often identify with middle-aged men who are dissatisfied, feel they are running out of time to accomplish anything worthwhile, and yearn to return to the freedom of their adolescent years and start over again making different choices.

In the eighth and final stage, the main challenge is **ego integrity versus despair**. Older adults who resolve this challenge positively feel their lives have consistency, coherence, and purpose. Ego integrity is associated with contentment and satisfaction with the life one has led despite its imperfections. Older adults with ego integrity are graced with the *virtue of wisdom*. If this challenge is not resolved positively, older individuals will feel despair and disappointment with their lives. They may dwell on all the roads not taken.

Erikson's theory was not based on empirical data from large numbers of individuals and for this reason there has been criticism of it. In recent years, however, several researchers have tested Erikson's assumptions. For example, Hannah, Domino, Figueredo, and Hendrickson (1996) interviewed 520 healthy, relatively well-educated men and women between the ages of 55 and 84. For these individuals, a positive resolution in the final stage (ego integrity) was tied to a positive resolution in the preceding stage (generativity), which supports Erikson's assumption of sequential interdependence of the stages.

Erikson also proposed that each stage is characterized by a unique, central challenge. If so, concern with a particular challenge should reach a peak in the designated stage. In keeping with this assumption, McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) found that middle-aged adults had more generative concerns than young adults, as indicated by middle-aged individuals' frequently expressed desire to be a positive role model for younger people, to help their children work through difficult situations, and to provide for others to the best of their ability.

Peck's necessary adjustments in old age

Robert Peck (1968) described three adjustments that must occur in older adulthood. Success in each will result in positive growth, leading to what Erikson called ego integrity. In contrast, failure to make these adjustments could result in what Erikson called despair.

The first of Peck's necessary adjustments is **ego differentiation versus work-role preoccupation**. In late adulthood, retirement from work is approaching or has already occurred, so older individuals must learn to define their self-worth outside the workplace. They must ask themselves, "Am I a worthwhile person only if I can perform a full-time job, or can I be worthwhile in other ways?" A well-adjusted older adult (one with ego differentiation) will have a varied set of roles and a complex sense of identity and self-worth that does not depend completely upon work.

The second of Peck's necessary adjustments is **body transcendence versus body preoccupation**. Late adulthood often brings some physical decline, and aches and pains may prevent older adults from engaging in the same activities they did in their younger years. In addition, there may be cosmetic changes such as wrinkles. To adjust positively, older adults must rise above physical discomfort and avoid placing too much importance on appearance. They must find ways to enjoy life with reduced physical capabilities and less physical perfection.

Peck's third necessary adjustment, **ego transcendence versus ego preoccupation**, has to do with adapting to the prospect that life is finite and that the focus must be on future generations and not on one's own needs. The older adult who makes this adjustment feels

that he or she has achieved something of lasting meaning. This meaning could come from the knowledge that children have been raised, strong personal relationships have been formed, and meaningful contributions have been made to society. This adjustment bears some similarity to Erikson's idea of generativity, although Peck emphasizes achievements that have already been attained rather than achievements that are occurring on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, the individual with ego transcendence is likely to have what Erikson called ego integrity.

Life review

Many people believe that older adults "live in the past" (Cohen & Taylor, 1998). Indeed, older adults often claim they remember things that happened a long time ago with a clarity that eludes them when they try to remember what happened a day or week ago (Erber, 2006). Reminiscence involves evoking personal memories from the past, possibly in a somewhat reconstructed form that is not completely objective. Reminiscence is not necessarily confined to the older adult age group, but older adults seem to engage in it more than younger age groups. Young adults may be less concerned with life review because they do not feel they have a limited time left to live.

Some years ago such reminiscence, or **life review**, was considered an idle pursuit, best discouraged in the elderly. However, Butler (1963) was one of the first to contend that life review is an active and important part of the aging process, and older adults (like Phyllis, who was described at the beginning of this chapter) use it to integrate who they are now (present) and who they were before (past). If older adults' life review is positive, they come to accept their lives as meaningful. Thus, life review enables older adults to achieve what Erikson called ego integrity. However, if life review does not result in an adequate integration of the present and past, older adults may wish they could do things over again. This could lead to feelings of despair because older adults realize time is running out.

That life review can play a significant role in successful aging has been acknowledged by professionals who work with older adults. Life story discussion groups are popular with community-living older adults, and reminiscence therapy is often recommended for nursing home residents. In one study (Haight, Michel, & Hendrix, 1998), older adults who had been recently admitted to nursing homes were randomly assigned to one of two different interventions. Half of the nursing home residents met individually for six weeks with a trained therapeutic listener who encouraged them to reminisce about various facets of their lives. The other half received friendly visits from the same listeners. However, residents assigned to this friendly visit group were discouraged from reminiscing, and the topics of conversation during the visits focused on health, weather, television shows, and current events. Compared with residents who got friendly visits, residents who were encouraged to reminisce derived greater benefit both immediately and one year later, as indicated by their lower degree of depression, hopelessness, and despair, and their higher degree of life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Life review, or reminiscence therapy, may be an effective preventive intervention for elderly individuals who are at risk for depression.

However, reminiscence can take different forms, some more beneficial than others. Wong and Watt (1991) interviewed older adults who lived in the community and in retirement and nursing homes. Through careful screening, these older adults were categorized as either "successful agers" (meaning they were superior in physical and mental well-being) or "unsuccessful agers" (meaning they were less healthy and had a low sense of well-being). The successful and unsuccessful agers were asked to review their past and identify one or two events that had shaped their lives significantly. When the content of these reviews was analyzed, the reviews of the successful agers had more integrative and instrumental themes. Integrative reminiscences indicate that the individual feels at peace about the way past conflicts were resolved. For example, "I resented my parents' divorce when I was a young adult but in time I came to understand why they did not get along and I was able to maintain a relationship with both of them." Instrumental reminiscences show that the individual has drawn on past experience to reach a positive resolution of more recent problems. For example, "During the Great Depression, life was very hard and we had very little money. We learned to survive by budgeting and doing without many things. That experience helped me when I retired and had to adapt to living on a pension." In contrast, reviews of the unsuccessful agers had more obsessive themes that indicated persistent unresolved feelings such as guilt. For example, "My husband died while I was out shopping. He fell and I was not there to help him and I still cannot forgive myself." The fact that certain types of reminiscence seem to be associated more with successful aging suggests it may be best to

encourage integrative and instrumental reminiscences but discourage those that stir up feelings of guilt.

McAdams's life story model

According to McAdams (1996), individuals construct a personal myth to make sense of their lives. This myth is a **life story** that integrates a reconstructed past with a perceived present and an anticipated future. As such, it allows people to feel that their lives have unity and purpose. The stories people construct are actually ongoing narratives that shape their behavior and establish their identity (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Life stories reflect the values of the culture in which individuals live. In Western cultures, young adults enter the workplace, begin raising families, establish themselves in the community, and commit themselves to roles such as worker, spouse, parent, and so on. Over time, they refine the plot of their life story, and by middle adulthood they become concerned with integrating and balancing its various themes. Middle-aged individuals are often considered to be in the prime of their lives, but the themes of their life stories indicate increasing concern with mortality and what will survive them after death. Thus, middle-aged individuals start to fashion a generativity script, which guides what gifts they want to leave for the generations that follow. In the decades of the 40s, 50s, and 60s, individuals concentrate on integrating the beginning and middle of the life story narrative, but also on creating an appropriate and satisfying ending. Ideally, this ending will have continuity and purpose and will tie together the various threads of the story. A “good” ending makes it possible for individuals to attain a kind of symbolic immortality, or legacy of the self, which will live on after their death (McAdams, 1996). McAdams's idea of a good ending bears some similarity to Erikson's conception of ego integrity.

Personality Dimensions and Traits

Rather than emphasizing that personality evolves in stages over the adult life span, some theorists focus on whether personality is consistent over time (Berry & Jobe, 2002). For example, Phyllis (who was described earlier) has had a lifelong interest in fashion. Personality dimensions can be broad categories of personality such as neuroticism and extraversion, each consisting of a constellation of personality traits. For example, someone high on a neuroticism dimension would probably be anxious and hostile, while someone high on an extraversion dimension would probably be warm and sociable. Are personality dimensions stable across adulthood, and do personality traits stay the same?

The Baltimore Longitudinal Study

An ideal way to examine personality over the adult life span would be to follow the same individuals over time. Researchers Costa and McCrae did just that as part of the Baltimore Longitudinal Study (BLS), in which a large initial sample of individuals ranging from their 20s to their 80s completed two well-established self-report personality inventories, the Cattell 16PF and the Guilford–Zimmerman Temperament Survey.

Table 8.2 *The big five personality factors and six specific traits within each factor*

Source: Adapted from McCrae and Costa (1997).

Personality factor	Traits
Neuroticism (N)	Anxiety, angry hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, vulnerability
Extraversion (E)	Warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, positive emotions
Openness to experience (O)	Fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas, values
Agreeableness (A)	Trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, tender-mindedness
Conscientiousness (C)	Competence, order, dutifulness, achievement-striving, self-discipline, deliberation

By analyzing study participants' responses, these researchers proposed a personality structure consisting of five dimensions, or factors: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to

experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (NEO-AC). Based on this **Five-Factor Model (FFM) of Personality**, Costa and McCrae (1991, 1992) developed a self-report questionnaire, the Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R), which consists of 240 items, or statements that are intended to measure six traits that make up each of the five factors. (An abbreviated version, the NEO-FFI, has only 60 items.) Test takers rate each statement on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” High agreement with the statements results in a high score on that personality factor. The factors, as well as the six traits within each one, are listed in [Table 8.2](#).

As BLS participants were followed longitudinally, the same five personality factors continued to emerge in their self-report responses, indicating a consistency over time in the personality factors. Furthermore, when BLS participants were tested repeatedly, they retained their approximate rank order on the factors compared to others their age. In other words, individuals who scored high on the neuroticism, extraversion, or other factors at one point in time compared to others of the same age tended to score high on these factors at subsequent points in time compared to others of the same age. In addition, evidence from numerous longitudinal studies also found a high level of consistency as to which traits are associated with each factor, particularly when late middle-aged and older adults were followed over 6-year periods (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000).

What does being high on the various personality factors mean? High scores on some are associated with positive affect and feelings of well-being, while high scores on others are not (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Most notably, being high on the extraversion factor is associated with positive affect and feelings of well-being, while being high on the neuroticism factor is associated with negative affect and a lower degree of well-being. Being high on the openness to experience factor is associated with both positive and negative affect, with no overall effect on level of well-being. Being high on the agreeableness and conscientiousness factors is associated more with positive than with negative affect but there is only a weak positive association with feelings of well-being.

McCrae and Costa (1982) contend that the choices we make at various transition points are influenced by where we fall on the five personality factors, and that personality functions jointly with age to influence whether outcomes are positive at various stages of development. They pose the following questions, which are quite different from the questions that stage model theorists might ask:

- How do lives of those high in extraversion differ from the lives of those low in extraversion?
- What aspects of life are influenced by openness to experience?
- What role does personality play in adapting to stressful life events?

Theorists working within this continuity framework are not likely to use the term *mid-life crisis*. Rather, they would consider some individuals, notably those high in neuroticism, to be crisis-prone. Moreover, they might speculate that an individual who experiences a crisis in middle adulthood most likely experienced crises earlier in life as well, although the exact nature of a particular crisis might depend upon the individual’s age and stage of life.

Understanding Aging Box 8.1

Personality Traits and Survival

Can personality influence mortality and longevity, especially in older adulthood? According to Mroczek, Spiro, and Griffin (2006), being low in conscientiousness is associated with earlier mortality, possibly because such individuals are less likely to adhere to healthy behaviors and more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Being high on neuroticism has also been associated with poor health and earlier mortality. Silver, Bubrick, Jilinskaia, and Perls (1998) studied 23 New England centenarians aged 100 to 110, mostly females. When these centenarians completed the 60-item Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI), they were relatively low on the neuroticism factor. Neuroticism is associated with sensitivity to stress, so being low on this factor suggests better ability to manage stress. Givens et al. (2009) located 246 unrelated men and women (average age of 75), all of whom were offspring of centenarians. When these offspring completed the NEO-FFI, both the men and the women were lower than average in neuroticism and higher than average in extraversion, but both were average in conscientiousness and openness. The only gender difference in the

pattern of findings for these offspring was that the females, but not the males, were higher than average in agreeableness. Caution should be exercised in drawing premature conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships between personality factors and either mortality or longevity. However, the findings thus far for both centenarians and their offspring suggests the importance of including personality measures when studying what might underlie the key to a long life.

Cross-cultural comparisons

McCrae and Costa (1991) acknowledge the importance of biological, historical, and cultural influences on personality, so it is particularly noteworthy that the five-factor model seems to generalize across cultures (McCrae, 2002). When translated versions of the NEO-PI-R questionnaire were administered to over 7,000 individuals from diverse cultures, the five-factor structure already demonstrated in English-speaking samples was also found in Germany, Portugal, Israel, China, and Japan (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Furthermore, the traits that made up each of the five personality factors were very much the same in American, German, Italian, Portuguese, Croatian, and Korean study samples (McCrae et al., 1999). Thus, not only is there a common overall personality structure across cultures in terms of factors, but there is also cross-cultural similarity in the specific traits that define the factors.

Cross-sectional studies

The dimensional continuity model just described emphasizes stability in personality factors over time. But does this mean that personality is written in stone and people do not change at all throughout adulthood? Much of our information on personality is based on cross-sectional studies, with people of various ages all tested at the same time. McCrae et al. (1999) found that between young and middle adulthood, there is a decrease in the neuroticism, extraversion, and openness-to-experience factors but an increase in the agreeableness and conscientiousness factors. Similar decreases and increases have been reported when translated versions of the NEO-PI-R questionnaire are given to German, Italian, Portuguese, Croatian, and Korean samples. Also, in cross-sectional studies conducted not only in the United States but also in countries such as Turkey, South Korea, and Poland, older adults have higher scores than younger adults on traits related to conscientiousness and agreeableness, whereas older adults have lower scores than younger adults on traits related to neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience (Helson, Kwan, John, & Jones, 2002). Such cross-cultural similarity is interpreted as evidence for universal maturational differences in personality.

Age and cohort cannot be separated in cross-sectional studies, so it will be important to conduct further longitudinal studies following the same individuals over time and plotting small changes in personality traits. As described earlier, a person who falls on the high end of the extraversion factor at one age will likely fall at the high end later on. However, average scores on the extraversion factor may decline with age. Thus, an individual could decline in extraversion with increasing age but still remain high on this factor compared to others of the same age. To illustrate, a young adult high in extraversion may feel the need to socialize with other people on a daily basis, but an older adult high in extraversion may feel the need to socialize with other people a few times a week. In terms of absolute need to socialize, the older adult is lower than the young adult, but the older adult may still retain a high need to socialize compared to his or her age peers. In sum, a person's absolute score on the extraversion factor may decline over time, but that person could still remain high in extraversion compared to others the same age.

Questions of stability and change in personality will probably continue to be prominent on the agendas of developmental researchers (Ryff, Kwan, & Singer, 2001). A recent perspective emphasizes individual differences in change (Mroczek et al., 2006). That is, do some people remain stable and others change? The issue of individual differences in intraindividual change is studied using sophisticated statistical techniques whereby day-to-day variation within the individual can be tracked. Over long periods of time, some people may change more than others. The rate and extent of change within the individual most likely depends on the environment, genetic makeup, and health, as well as on his or her motivation to change (McAdams & Pals, 2006).

Lay Views of Personality

How do ordinary individuals who are not research scientists conceptualize personality? Do

these lay individuals view themselves as having stayed the same or having changed over time? In their opinion, do the personalities of other people stay the same or do they change with age?

People's views of their own personality

Many older adults feel a strong sense of continuity. For example, when Troll and Skaff (1997) interviewed 150 individuals aged 85 and older, the majority felt that they were basically the same as they had always been.

Most of us have perceptions about what we were like in the past and what we are like at the present time, but what do we think we will be like in the future? Fleeson and Heckhausen (1997) tested adults ranging from 26 to 64 years of age using a short self-report inventory that measured Costa and McCrae's five dimensions of personality (NEO-AC). Participants rated how much they thought each item on the inventory would describe what they were like when they were aged 20–25 (past), what they are like now (present), and what they anticipate they will be like when they reach the age of 65–70 (future). There was a moderate degree of stability across the three time periods regarding how participants viewed themselves – those who rated themselves high in present level of extraversion and agreeableness tended to rate themselves high on these dimensions both retrospectively (in the past) and prospectively (in the future).

Perceptions of the personality traits of others

Despite evidence for stability in self-reported personality dimensions and traits over the adult life span (McCrae & Costa, 1982), do lay individuals associate certain personality traits with older adulthood? Are some traits viewed as either increasing with age or decreasing with age?

Heckhausen et al. (1989) asked young, middle-aged, and older adult residents of Berlin, Germany to rate the desirability of 358 traits and to estimate the rise and fall of each trait over the adult years. Participants from all three age groups showed considerable agreement in their beliefs. In general, they viewed development as multidirectional, with both gains and losses over the adult life span. Gains were defined as an increase over the adult life span in desirable traits such as wise, responsible, and level-headed. Losses were defined as an increase in undesirable traits such as weak, dependent, and stubborn. Overall, expected gains outnumbered expected losses. However, the proportion of expected gains decreased somewhat with increasing age.

Heckhausen and Krueger (1993) asked young, middle-aged, and older adults (also residents of Berlin, Germany) to rate desirable traits (for example, assertive, affectionate, dependable, self-controlled, knowledgeable) and undesirable traits (for example, inhibited, quarrelsome, irresponsible, nervous, naive) as to whether each one (a) increases over the seven decades of adulthood (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s), (b) decreases over the seven decades of adulthood, and (c) can be modified, or controlled. In one session participants rated themselves, and in another they rated what they thought was true for most other people. Heckhausen and Krueger's study participants were optimistic about adult development – they expected that gains (increases in desirable traits and decreases in undesirable traits) would outnumber losses (decreases in desirable traits and increases in undesirable traits). However, the predominance of expected gains was greater for early adulthood than it was for late adulthood. Even so, most participants thought that it would be possible to control, or modify, undesirable traits.

There was considerable agreement between what individuals thought would be true for themselves and what would be true for other people. For instance, if they thought they themselves would become more dependable with increasing age, they believed the same would be true for other people. Even so, there was some evidence for self-enhancement among the middle-aged and older adults – they expected that increases in desirable attributes would be greater for themselves than for other people, and they anticipated that increases in undesirable attributes would be smaller for themselves than for others. In short, individuals are even more optimistic about their own future personality traits than they are about how their age peers will fare.

Hummert et al. (1994) asked young, middle-aged, and older adults about traits they would consider typical of older adults. [Table 8.3](#) lists 20 traits that were named by at least 20% of the adults in at least one age group or at least 10% of the adults in all three age groups. There was considerable overlap in the traits generated by the three age groups. Some were positive

(for example, trustworthy), while others were negative (for example, depressed).

Slotterback (1996) posed an important question: Are the perceptions young adults have about older adults' personality traits related to older adults' chronological age or are they related to older adults' generation, or cohort? Young adult college students rated a hypothetical individual (target) on scales that were based on Costa and McCrae's five personality dimensions. They were told the target was 21, 41, or 69 years old and also that the target lived in the past, present, or future. The students thought that openness to experience would decrease with increasing age. However, they thought the present generation of older adults had always been less open to experience even when they were young adults. Also, they believed that conscientiousness decreases with age, but they thought that the present generation of older adults is more conscientious compared to the present generation of young adults. Slotterback's findings serve to remind us that our perceptions of personality characteristics can be influenced not only by people's chronological age but also by their cohort.

Table 8.3 Traits descriptive of a typical elderly adult named most frequently by young, middle-aged, and elderly adults

Source: Hummert et al. (1994).

Age group trait	Young (n=40)	Middle-aged (n=40)	Elderly (n=40)	Trait valence
Conservative	7.5	20.0	2.5	Positive
Depressed	12.5	20.0	7.5	Negative
Determined	2.5	20.0	17.5	Positive
Eager to learn and experience	0.0	17.5	25.0	Positive
Sense of humor	12.5	15.0	12.5	Positive
Health-conscious	15.0	45.0	30.0	Positive
Independent	5.0	25.0	22.5	Positive
Likes social activities	25.0	20.0	17.5	Positive
Move after retirement	22.5	10.0	2.5	Positive
Politically aware and active	22.5	17.5	17.5	Positive
Pursues a hobby	30.0	30.0	27.5	Positive
Religious	12.5	32.5	20.0	Positive
Scared of becoming sick and incompetent	0.0	35.0	52.5	Negative
Successful	12.5	25.0	5.0	Positive
Timid	5.0	27.5	7.5	Negative
Tired	25.0	17.5	2.5	Negative
Travels often	10.0	20.0	32.5	Positive
Trustworthy	2.5	20.0	5.0	Positive
Well-groomed	5.0	17.5	20.0	Positive
Worried about finances	7.5	5.0	35.0	Negative

Stereotypes about older adults

Stereotypes are ideas we hold in our heads about categories of people. With age stereotypes, we make assumptions about people based on their chronological age. Using age stereotypes can lighten the load of processing a great deal of complex information about older adults. However, a potentially negative consequence is that age stereotypes interfere with our ability to make judgments about a specific older adult as a unique individual (Hummert, 1999).

Sometimes age stereotypes are not in our conscious awareness. However, when unconscious stereotypes are activated, or primed, they can influence our behavior even without our realizing it. Perdue and Gurtman (1990) demonstrated that young adult college students were more efficient at remembering the trait "forgetful" after it was presented along with the word "old" rather than along with the word "young." Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) asked young adult college students to unscramble five-word sets by constructing grammatically correct sentences using four of the words. The sets unscrambled by half the students were intended to prime age stereotypes and contained words stereotypically associated with older adults (for example, forgetful, conservative, withdrawn, dependent). The sets unscrambled by the other half of the students (control group) contained neutral words that were unrelated to an elderly stereotype (for example, thirsty, clean, private). After they completed the unscrambling task, Bargh et al. timed how long it took the students to walk down a corridor from the laboratory to the elevator. Students in the elderly-prime condition walked more slowly than students in the neutral-prime condition did. As is typical with implicit priming, the students were unaware that the prime words had affected them in any way, or even that the words they had unscrambled were related to an elderly stereotype. Yet, the slower walking of the students exposed to elderly-stereotypic words indicated that they had an unconscious age stereotype, which when primed without their awareness influenced their behavior.

Stereotypes about older adults are often negative. Traits such as absentminded, forgetful,

obstinate, and depressed are thought to have their onset in late middle age (Heckhausen & Baltes, 1991). Furthermore, older adults are often viewed as overcautious and dependent (Heckhausen et al., 1989). Such negative views are even harbored by older adults themselves, which could explain why many older adults insist that they feel younger than they are and think they compare favorably with others the same age. Surprisingly, evidence for negative age stereotypes has even been found among young adults in Thailand, a country known for its tradition of respect for the elderly (Sharps, Price-Sharps, & Hanson, 1998).

However, the idea that stereotypes of older adults are uniformly negative may be overly simplistic. When Lichtenstein et al. (2005) asked middle-school children to draw a picture of a “typical” older person and then describe it in a few words, no cohesive stereotypes of elders emerged from their diverse images. This suggests that young adolescents do not have a built-in bias toward older adults or uniformly negative views of age-associated changes. As mentioned earlier, Heckhausen et al. (1989) asked young, middle-aged, and older adults to estimate the expected age of onset for 358 traits. Of the traits thought to have a late onset (age 55 or later) and believed to remain stable into very late old age, some were undesirable (bitter, forgetful), but others were desirable (dignified, wise). Hummert (1990) found that young adult college students hold multiple stereotypes about older adults. The students did not view negative stereotypes such as “inflexible senior citizen” (including traits such as “set in ways” and “old-fashioned”) as any more typical of the elderly than they did positive stereotypes such as “perfect grandparent” (including traits such as “generous” and “loving”). Cuddy, Norton, and Fiske (2005) found that college students express an evaluatively mixed stereotype – they judge older adults with cognitive difficulties as being low in competence but high in warmth. In short, stereotypes about older adults are not all negative. Furthermore, stereotypes may be applied to older adults as an abstract group, but they are less likely to be assumed in the case of individual older adults, especially when detailed information about them is available (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005).

In sum, the stereotypes people have about older adults as a group are not uniformly negative. Even so, not all older adults are the same, so let’s now turn our attention to individual differences among older adults rather than what they have in common.

Individual Differences in Coping and Adjustment

Rather than trying to determine what might be typical of older adults in general, some investigators focus on how they differ. The study of individual differences in personality is often coupled with an interest in which older adults experience high levels of life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Ryff et al., 2001). Life satisfaction and well-being are usually associated with self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, and feelings of environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989). How can we distinguish between these older adults and those who are unhappy and dissatisfied?

Closely tied to the idea of well-being is the concept of coping. How do individuals handle events and challenges that take place over the life course? Effective coping strategies become increasingly important in dealing with changes and losses that occur in late adulthood. Are some coping strategies more likely than others to maximize the chance of successful aging? We will approach these questions first by introducing the idea of self-concept. Then we will proceed to a discussion about feelings of personal control.

Self-Concept

All of us have ideas about who we are, and researchers often refer to these ideas as *schemas*. Our schemas play a part in how we define ourselves. They also determine what information we attend to most and also how we process that information (Hooker, 1992). **Self-concept** is the image we have of ourselves (McCrae, 2006). Rather than being one general image, however, our self-concept consists of a collection of schemas that are related to different domains. For example, an individual might have a schema about his or her physical appearance (physical domain), intellectual capability (intellectual domain), or social skills (social domain). The domains most important for a particular individual’s self-concept dictate what he or she considers meaningful (Markus & Herzog, 1991). As described at the beginning of this chapter, Phyllis’s interest in the physical domain, particularly in fashion,

has been a theme throughout her adult years. Recent views of the self are that it is not just a passive reactive agent, but rather it is active and creative and can undergo change and revision (Ruth, 2007).

Understanding Aging Box 8.2

Age and Emotional Well-being

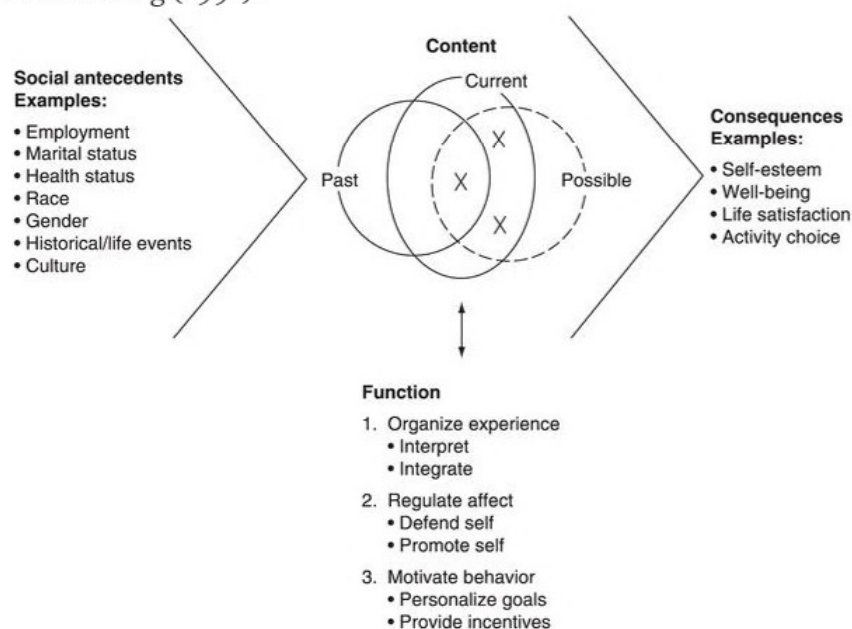
Some investigators have found evidence for age-related increases in reactivity to stressors, whereas others have found age-related decreases in reactivity to stressors. To explain this discrepancy, the theory of **strength and vulnerability integration (SAVI)** proposes there are both age-related gains (strengths) and age-related losses (vulnerabilities) when it comes to dealing with stress (Almeida, Piazza, Stawski, & Klein, 2011; Charles, 2011). Among the strengths is older adults' lifetime of experience in dealing with difficult situations, which allows them to regulate their emotions by controlling their exposure to, or their appraisal of, stressful situations. This would account for reports of older adults having similar if not higher levels of emotional well-being compared to younger adults. On the other hand, vulnerabilities include age-related decline in the physiological flexibility that is necessary to recover from exposure to stress and return to a normal level of physiological arousal. When stressors create only a moderate level of physiological arousal, older adults can use their strengths in emotional regulation to control the negative impact. However, when stressors create a high level of negative arousal, the physiological cues may be too strong for emotional regulation strategies to overcome. Even so, once exposure to the stressful situation ceases and physiological arousal level returns to normal, older adults may be able to use the experience they have gleaned in regulating their emotions to modify their appraisal of the event that occurred and thus maintain a high level of emotional well-being. However, some stressors are so severe and/or so chronic that the motivation to maintain a high level of well-being is not sufficient to override the negative influence on affect.

Self-esteem is the affective, or evaluative, aspect of the self-concept. A person with high self-esteem perceives himself or herself as having worth, whereas a person with low self-esteem does not. As with self-concept, self-esteem can occur in different domains. A person (such as Phyllis) may have high self-esteem in one domain ("I feel good about my appearance") but low self-esteem in another ("I feel bad that I cannot understand computers"). In light of some of the negative age stereotypes that exist, it is surprising that self-esteem does not decline significantly in late life (George, 2006). However, people often evaluate themselves in comparison with others, so self-esteem can be high or low depending upon the group with which one compares oneself (Baron & Byrne, 2000).

Theorists have emphasized the importance of self-concept for the aging process because the schemas that make up our self-concept are important in regulating our behavior and guiding the decisions we make (see [Figure 8.1](#)). The content, organization, and functioning of these schemas may hold the key to how we negotiate life events and successfully navigate changes that occur as we move from young to middle to older adulthood (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Herzog, 1991).

Figure 8.1 *The dynamic self-concept.*

Source: Markus & Herzog (1991).



As individuals grow older, some aspects of their past self-concept continue to define who they are. For example, retired teachers may continue to identify with their profession even after they formally retire from the classroom. Seventy-year-old Phyllis, who was described earlier, no longer owns a retail clothing store but she is still interested in fashion and it is an important part of her self-concept. In fact, she is about to act on her long-time interest in fashion by working part time as a fashion consultant for a clothing boutique that caters to mature women.

Possible selves

Not only do we have schemas about our past and present (current) selves, but also we have schemas about what we may be like in the future. **Possible selves** include schemas about what we would like to become (hoped-for selves) as well as what we are afraid of becoming (feared selves) (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Herzog, 1991). Examples of hoped-for possible selves might be the rich self, the attractive self, the independent self, or the healthy self. Examples of feared possible selves might be the poor self, the unattractive self, the dependent self, or the unhealthy self.

Possible selves of adults over age 60 often have less to do with occupation and career and more to do with establishing leisure pursuits and physical functioning (Cross & Markus, 1991). In comparison with hoped-for selves of young adult college students, hoped-for selves of older adults are more invested in health (Hooker, 1992). Concern with attaining healthy selves actually begins to gain importance in mid-life, with middle-aged adults reporting more feared selves than hoped-for selves regarding health (Hooker & Kaus, 1994).

Possible selves, both hoped for and feared, continue into very old age. Smith and Freund (2002) studied transcripts of interviews conducted over 4 years in which individuals aged 70 to 103 years expressed their personal hopes and fears for the future. Even the oldest members in their sample showed evidence of dynamic possible selves, with images added and deleted over time.

Photo 8.2 *Even after they officially retire, some teachers continue to identify with their profession, which is an important part of their self-concept.* [Photo © CandyBox images/Photos.com](https://www.candybox.com/images/photos.com)



The assimilation, accommodation, and immunization (AAI) model

The AAI model (Brandtstädter, 1999; Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994) outlines three self-protective coping strategies, or processes, that individuals use to maintain personal continuity and integrity of the self. These are not unique to older adulthood, but they are useful for understanding how older adults cope with age-related discrepancies between actual and desired selves.

Assimilation, often termed *tenacious goal pursuit* (Brandtstädter, 1999; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990), is usually the first process activated when individuals detect a gap between hoped-for goals and actual circumstances. Assimilative processes typically involve intentional actions or efforts. In early adulthood, assimilative efforts focus on goals that extend well into the future. For example, many young adults work at a succession of jobs with a long-term goal of establishing their identity in a career. Assimilative efforts can also be preventive, corrective, or compensatory. In late adulthood, such efforts are often directed toward maintaining resources and avoiding mismatches between skills and demands. An

especially important goal in later life is minimizing health risks (Hooker, 1992), and assimilative efforts could include modification of eating and exercise habits. Another goal for older adults is maintaining a competent and independent level of functioning. Many cope with changes in physical capabilities by assimilative actions such as installing grab bars in the bathroom, strobe lights on telephones, and emergency call buttons in each room.

Brandtstädter (1999) argues that continued use of assimilative strategies when goals are clearly unattainable can lead to frustration and negative emotions. At this point, accommodative processes may be activated.

Applying Research Box 8.1: Possible Selves and Daily Activities

Possible selves are not just idle fantasies. They motivate us to set and achieve goals and they can regulate our behavior. As part of the Berlin Aging Study, Hoppmann, Gerstorf, Smith, and Klumb (2007) investigated the association between possible selves in three domains (health, cognition, and social relations) and the daily activities related to each one (for example, taking a walk, doing a crossword puzzle, and having a phone conversation, respectively) in 83 older men and women (mean age 81 years). Those with hoped-for selves in two of the domains (health and social relations but not cognition) tended to perform more daily activities in those domains, and this linkage between the hoped-for possible self and activity was associated with feelings of well-being and also with a higher probability of survival over a 10-year period. There was no linkage between feared possible selves and activities in any of the domains, which suggests that hopes are more likely than fears to translate into engaging in domain-specific activities.

Accommodation, often characterized as *flexible goal adjustment* (Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990), is usually unintentional. Accommodative processes entail reevaluating, adjusting, or even redefining personal goals and preferences in accordance with situational and personal limitations. In late adulthood this may become necessary when ambitions and preferences must be adjusted in accordance with situational constraints (Brandtstädter, 1999; Brandtstädter, Wentura, & Greve, 1993; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). Accommodative processes include revising one's goals and aspirations and changing one's standards of self-evaluation. For example, Phyllis (described earlier) thinks she has fared well compared to others her age. Accommodative processes can buffer older adults against losses, allowing them to maintain the integrity of their self-concepts and thus their feelings of life satisfaction (Brandtstädter & Greve, 1994; Brandtstädter & Renner, 1990).

Immunization shields individuals against threats to aspects of the self-concept that are central to their identity (Brandtstädter, 1999). Like accommodative processes, immunizing processes are usually unintentional and they protect people from information that conflicts with the definitions they have of themselves. To illustrate, Peter prides himself on being an excellent golfer and this plays an important role in his self-concept. Until recently, he has won almost every golf tournament he enters and these successes are easily assimilated into his identity as an excellent golfer. Lately, however, Peter's scores have been disappointing and this season he has not won any tournaments. Immunizing processes offer a line of defense against information that conflicts with this crucial aspect of Peter's self-concept. Peter could attribute his poor scores to substandard maintenance of the golf course, to his recent sleeping problems, or to the loud conversations of the other members of the foursome that distract him from his game. In some sense, immunizing processes are rationalizations, but they help Peter preserve the continuity of his self-concept and prevent his self-esteem from plummeting. Immunizing processes cannot serve a protective purpose forever, but they allow Peter some time to take stock of the situation. He may decide to engage in further assimilative actions to improve his golf game (for example, taking lessons from a new golf pro). If these do not help, Peter may eventually lower his standards or possibly focus on other aspects of his self-concept.

Personal Control

Feelings of personal control relate to the perception that one governs what happens in one's own life. Personal control can be considered on a general level or within more specific domains. For example, one can feel a sense of personal control physically, socially, cognitively, and so on. Lachman, Neupert, and Agrigoroaei (2011) contend that a high sense

of personal control has important implications for health. When older adults believe they have some control over health outcomes they are more likely to make efforts to modify their diet, engage in exercise, and stick closely to medication regimens that have been prescribed. For health problems such as diabetes (described in Chapter 3), such behaviors are crucial. In addition, a strong sense of personal control may be a protective factor, lowering emotional/physiological reactivity and thus moderating stress-related neuroendocrine responses. The theory of strength and vulnerability integration (SAVI), described earlier, speaks to this idea.

Internal versus external control

Rotter (1966) defined personal control along an internal–external dimension. Individuals with an **internal locus of control** feel they have a great deal of personal control over what happens to them. They believe that experiencing positive outcomes and avoiding negative outcomes are contingent upon their own efforts, actions, and behavior. In contrast, individuals with an **external locus of control** feel that their own efforts, actions, and behavior have little to do with what happens to them. They believe positive and negative outcomes are determined by chance or other outside forces.

Rotter devised an internal–external locus of control scale consisting of pairs of statements. One statement in each pair indicates feelings of internal control (“When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work”), while the other statement in the pair indicates feelings of external control (“It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow”). Individuals select the statement from each pair that best describes their personality.

A central question in the study of aging and older adulthood is whether the sense of personal control changes over the adult life span. A common belief is that as individuals move from young to older adulthood, they become less internal and more external in their locus of control (Pratt & Norris, 1994). This assumption is based on the fact that many events that occur in older adulthood (for example, loss of loved ones, loss of the work role, illness) do not seem to be within the realm of personal control. However, the idea that older adults have decreased feelings of control compared to young adults has been called into question.

Gatz and Karel (1993) analyzed the responses of individuals from four generations (grandchildren, children, parents, grandparents) who participated in a study on locus of control that was conducted over 20 years, from 1971 to 1991. Participants were given several pairs of statements from Rotter’s locus of control scale and asked to select the statement that would best describe them. Of the 1,267 participants, 560 participated at all four times of measurement, so the study yielded both cross-sectional and longitudinal information.

In the cross-sectional analysis of the responses of the 1,267 individuals tested only once, those from all four generations were similar in their feelings of internal control. In the longitudinal analysis on the responses of the 560 individuals tested at four different times, there was a small but significant trend toward increased internal control over the 20-year period. However, Gatz and Karel speculate that increased feelings of internal control in individuals followed longitudinally could represent a time-of-measurement effect – sociocultural changes over 20 years might have encouraged autonomy and fostered a spirit of self-improvement, resulting in greater feelings of internal control. In any case, there was no evidence that internal control declines with age either in the cross-sectional or longitudinal part of the study.

Rhee and Gatz (1993) asked young adult college students and older adult university alumni to rate themselves on an adapted version of Rotter’s locus of control scale. Compared to the young students, the older alumni expressed a higher degree of internal control, so again, the assumption that older adults have a lower sense of personal control was not borne out. Even so, the young students perceived the older alumni as being more external than older adults’ self-ratings actually reflected. Likewise, the older alumni perceived the young students as more internal than the young students’ self-ratings actually reflected. In sum, the beliefs individuals held about their own personal control did not agree with how they were viewed by those from a different age group. Young adults may assume older adults are externally controlled, but older adults do not actually feel this way.

Ultimately, however, older adults’ feelings of internal control could be influenced by how others view them (Rodin & Langer, 1980). Labeling older adults as “helpless” could have a negative effect on their feelings of personal control. This can be a vicious circle – if older adults feel that they have little or no control, they may lose their motivation to engage in behaviors that could actually affect what happens to them.

It is generally believed that older adults who live in nursing homes have little control over their environment. If so, then what would happen if nursing home residents were given an opportunity to exert some control? In a classic study (Schulz, 1976), older adult nursing home residents were visited by college students. Half of the residents were allowed to control the frequency and duration of the visits. The other half received visits from the same college students but they had no choice about the frequency or duration of the visits. Even when Schulz controlled for the number, duration, and quality of the visits received by the nursing home residents in the two groups, he found that the positive impact of the visits on the residents' well-being was greater when the residents were allowed to control them.

In another classic study (Langer & Rodin, 1976), one group of nursing home residents received a communication that emphasized they were responsible for themselves. In addition, they were given a plant and told they were in charge of its care. A second group of nursing home residents received a communication that emphasized the staff was responsible for them. They too were given a plant, but they were told the staff would care for it. Compared to the nursing home residents in the cared-for group, residents in the responsible group were more alert, participated more in activities, and had a higher general sense of well-being. In sum, even when individuals have little control over their environment, allowing them to determine even a small aspect of it can benefit their psychological well-being.

Compared to older adults who reside in nursing homes, older adults who live in the community probably have more control over their environment. Nonetheless, even community-living older adults can experience some decrease in feelings of control over what happens to them, especially with health-related life events and losses. Thus, it is reasonable to speculate that with increasing age, individuals will experience some drop in their level of life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Yet, studies with large international samples have found little evidence for any overall decline in life satisfaction with increasing age (Diener & Suh, 1997). Level of life satisfaction seems to be stable across the adult years and well into older adulthood.

If life events that older adults confront – for example, illness, widowhood and loss of other close relationships, or loss of income through retirement – permit little personal control, how do older adults manage to maintain their level of life satisfaction? Feelings of personal control are probably more complex than was previously thought. They may be derived not only from how much objective control individuals can actually exert but also from their expectations about personal control. Schulz and Hanusa (1980) argue that feelings of well-being decline only when actual level of control differs drastically from the level of control that is expected. A large discrepancy between actual and expected levels of control is most likely to occur when a change in actual amount of control is sudden and individuals do not have time to adjust their expectations.

Primary and secondary control

In addition to the concepts of internal and external locus of control, a related model refers to primary control and secondary control. **Primary control processes** are actions and behaviors that influence, shape, or change the environment (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). Individuals use these processes to influence, shape, and change the environment to fit their needs and desires (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). As such, primary control processes are similar to the assimilative processes discussed earlier.

Behaviors and actions aimed at primary control may be applied to specific areas of functioning. For example, people may make efforts to exert primary control in the area of cognitive competence, social competence, or physical competence. One person might concentrate on mastering cognitive skills, while another might devote efforts to mastering social skills, and yet another to maintaining physical functioning. Phyllis, described at the beginning of the chapter, plans to maintain a physical aspect – her stylish appearance.

If too many attempts to achieve primary control meet with limited success or outright failure, the individual may become frustrated and discouraged and could begin to feel helpless and depressed. At this point, **secondary control processes** come into play. Unlike primary control processes, which are characterized by actions and behaviors directed at the external world, secondary control processes are related to internal resources (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993). They are similar to accommodative processes in that they involve altering goals and expectations and accepting existing realities that cannot be changed. For example, a person who tries to become an expert in computer skills on his or her own may become frustrated if these attempts fail. A form of secondary control would be

for this individual to lower the expectation of being able to learn these skills without help. Phyllis realizes that her appearance is not the same as it was 25 years ago, but she modifies her style so that it is in line with her age and stage of life. Secondary control processes buffer the individual against the negative effects of failure at achieving primary control. This buffering protects emotional well-being and self-esteem and enables the individual to remain motivated, perhaps making further attempts at primary control in areas where efforts have a good chance of being successful (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

According to the **optimization of primary and secondary control (OPS)** model (Heckhausen, 1997), physical and cognitive losses may reduce the likelihood of achieving primary control in advanced old age, so older adults must become increasingly selective about where they place their efforts. Being selective is adaptive because efforts at primary control can be directed toward areas where success is most attainable. In late adulthood, primary control may include compensatory strategies that require technical aids such as hearing aids and assistance from other people (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1993).

Over the life span, primary and secondary control processes operate jointly. But with the approach of middle age and especially older adulthood, biological and social challenges may limit the broad use of primary control, and secondary control may take on greater importance. “As the ratio of gains to losses in primary control becomes less and less favorable, the individual increasingly resorts to secondary control processes” (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996, p. 709). Lachman (2006) contends that the older adults who maintain a strong sense of control may be those who are most adept at using secondary control strategies to cope with events that are uncontrollable and goals that are unattainable.

In sum, life satisfaction does not significantly decline in older adulthood and this may well reflect older adults’ success in achieving a balance between primary and secondary control processes. Perhaps older adults cannot or do not wish to pursue the same goals, or as many goals, as they did in their younger years. Accordingly, they adjust their expectations and concentrate their primary control efforts on goals that are age-appropriate and attainable.

Revisiting the Selective Optimization with Compensation and Ecological Models

The Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) and Ecological (Lawton, 1989; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973) Models are readily applied to personality and coping over the adult life span.

According to the SOC model, selection, optimization, and compensation are necessary processes for realizing developmental goals. Stage theories imply that certain aspects of personality and personal issues are more dominant at some ages and stages of adulthood than at others. Individuals function optimally when they meet challenges that are most compelling at their particular stage of life rather than facing too many challenges at the same time. With regard to the view that personality dimensions and traits are stable over time, it is possible that some individuals are better equipped to meet challenges than others, but those who struggle at one age and stage of life may have an easier time at other stages. Even so, it may be possible to compensate for being low on some dimensions of personality by being high on others. Further research is needed to identify older adults who are best able to profit from using SOC strategies to achieve subjective well-being (Jopp & Smith, 2006).

Also in keeping with the SOC Model, when irreversible and uncontrollable losses occur, older adults may find it necessary to concentrate their efforts on the goals most important to them. They may give up some aspects of their self-concept and focus on a more select set of possible selves. Compared with young adults, older adults report having fewer possible selves, but they remain highly directed toward achieving the goals of their hoped-for possible selves and preventing their feared possible selves (Markus & Herzog, 1991).

With regard to the Ecological Model, older adults adapt best in environments that permit them to realize their ideals of who they are and wish to become and also allow them sufficient

opportunities to exert some level of personal control. Older adults may engage in assimilative actions to reduce the challenge of the environment so that it matches their level of competence more closely. The closer the match is between their coping abilities and the demands of the environment, the more likely older adults are to enjoy a maximum level of adaptation.



Questions to Consider

1. Where do you think you would fall on the dimensions of the FFM (NEO-AC)?
2. What would you do if you experienced a disappointment in attaining a goal that was very important to you?
3. Over which aspects of your own life do you feel you have the most control and over which aspects of your life do you feel you have the least control?

Key Points

- Cross-sectional and longitudinal research can be used to study the developmental aspects of personality.
- Personality can be measured using self-reports, projective techniques, or behavioral observation.
- According to stage theorists such as Erikson, personality unfolds over time, taking on different forms or revolving around different challenges as people progress through the adult years.
- Some theorists focus on whether the dimensions of personality remain stable or change over time. Longitudinal studies indicate relative continuity over time in personality dimensions, but cross-sectional studies find some age-related differences in the absolute level of personality dimensions and traits.
- People associate various personality characteristics, or traits, with older adulthood. Some of these traits are negative, but some are positive.
- Self-concept is the image we have about ourselves and consists of multiple schemas in any number of domains. Self-concept has past, present, and future aspects. Much of our behavior is influenced by our future hoped-for and feared possible selves.
- Self-esteem is the affective, or evaluative, aspect of the self-concept.
- Assimilation, accommodation, and immunization are three coping processes individuals use to maintain personal continuity and integrity of the self.
- Feelings of personal control are related to the perception that one governs what happens in one's own life. There are mixed findings as to whether internal control declines and external

control increases in older adulthood.

- If efforts at primary control are not successful, secondary control processes come into play. Secondary control processes involve alterations in goals and expectations about things that cannot be changed by using primary control processes.
- Maintaining life satisfaction in older adulthood may reflect older adults' achieving a balance between primary and secondary control processes.

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assimilation 256

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