

The Science of Personality:
Examining the Big Five Traits Across Behavior and Development

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Introduction: Trouble Child

I have always been the troublemaker. One of my earliest memories as a child was my dad taking me to the amusement park at the age of two. Most two-year-olds would have a great time, but I guess I wasn't fulfilled with just the amusement park; I wanted more. I walked up to a random toddler and pinched him as hard as I could. He burst into tears, his mom yelled at my dad, and we were back in the car within minutes. That moment pretty much set the tone for my early years. As the firstborn in my family, I spent a good portion of my childhood tormenting my younger twin siblings. I would pull my sister's hair, feed my brother habanero peppers, and invent new ways to bother them simply because I felt like it.

But somewhere along the way, things shifted.

Over Thanksgiving break, my grandma pulled me aside and told me how different I seemed. "You've gotten so mellow," she said, then asked whether I was really like this at school, or if I was just behaving because we were around family. I don't know what happened. I guess I have genuinely changed. I'm not the chaotic little kid I used to be, and that's when it hit me; I started to understand that this wasn't random, it was my personality evolving.

Psychologists define personality as the characteristic patterns in how people think, feel, and behave. Some of it stays consistent across life, and some of it slowly changes as we grow, like my troublemaking. To make sense of these patterns, researchers developed the Big Five personality traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. This framework has become the most widely supported model for explaining why people act the way they do. This paper explores the Big Five as a scientific lens for understanding personality, showing how these traits shape behavior, predict outcomes, and evolve across development, including my own.

What is Personality? A Trait-Based Perspective

When psychologists talk about personality, they aren't just referring to whether or not someone is 'nice' or 'a good time.' Personality is the collection of patterns that describe how we think, feel, and act across different situations. That's why some people wake up ready to conquer the world, and others need three alarms to wake up for an 8 AM Psychology lecture. While our behaviors shift from moment to moment, researchers argue that underneath all of that noise, each of us has a relatively stable psychological baseline that shapes how we respond to life.

For a long time, personality research was lackluster. There were a ton of different theories, each one trying to map out the 'true' structure of the self. As researchers collected data from people across cultures, ages, and languages, one thing kept emerging. Through a method called factor analysis, psychologists noticed that people's traits tended to cluster into the same broad categories over and over again. These categories eventually became known as the Big Five personality traits. The big five are: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Since the 1960s, the Big Five has become the most widely accepted scientific model of personality. Two key factors in its success are how it is stable across cultures and supported by decades of research. Kabigting (2021), for example, emphasizes that the Big Five shows up reliably in studies from countries with completely different social norms. This shows that these traits reflect something fundamental about human nature, not just cultural quirks. That's part of the reason why the model is so powerful; it gives psychologists a common language for describing personality.

Learning about the Big Five made a lot of my own experiences suddenly make sense. The kid who couldn't sit still, who picked fights and pushed boundaries, didn't disappear; he just

grew up, and so did his traits. Understanding personality as a mix of stable traits and gradual changes helped me reflect on myself with more clarity. I'm not a 'different person now.' I am the same person with traits that have evolved.

The Big Five Personality Traits

Openness to Experience

Openness to experience is all about curiosity, flexibility, and the willingness to embrace the unfamiliar. Scoring a 72 on this, when I look at my own behavior in college, that description fits almost exactly. Since coming to USC, I've made a conscious effort to say yes more often. I mean yes to almost everything. If friends invite me somewhere when I should be studying, I almost always choose the memory. I like to think that it's not irresponsibility; it's a genuine openness to experiences that I never want to shut myself off from.

My curiosity pushes me in smaller ways, too, especially with music. Most of my closest friends are musically talented, and instead of brushing that off as 'their thing,' I let myself be curious. I asked questions, watched them practice, let them teach me, and over time picked up skills I never expected to have. According to Kabigting (2021), openness predicts intellectual engagement and the desire to explore new perspectives: traits that show up in both creativity and willingness to learn from other people. When I look at how my social circle has shaped me, that description almost feels too accurate.

Conscientiousness

I'm sure everyone at USC has a friend with a Google Calendar that could go up on a museum wall. That's me. I placed in the 75th percentile when we tested it in class, but what's funny is that I wasn't always like this. In high school, I lived in complete chaos. I barely had homework, so I didn't need structure. My desk was a disaster, I never took notes, and my

calendar was my brain. College flipped that upside down. Now my friends constantly make fun of my Google Calendar. I'm notorious for my seven in the morning to eleven at night schedule. Every single thing is accounted for: cooking with friends, classes, finals, and even "call mom."

This shift lines up with what Roberts et al. (2006) found: conscientiousness tends to increase naturally during emerging adulthood, especially as people face new responsibilities and complex environments. Moving to USC was exactly that for me. I had a tighter schedule, and the structure that once stressed me out became the thing that keeps me sane. Research also shows that conscientiousness is strongly linked to academic and professional success (Poropat, 2009), which makes sense, given that if I ever need something, I can check my calendar. Looking back, it's not that I "became a new person." It's that my context changed, and that brought out a more mature version of a trait that was always waiting to be developed.

Extraversion

The classic personality conversation, "Are you introverted or extraverted?" This is one of the most apparent traits in the Big Five framework. I scored the highest on this trait, with a 78th percentile score. I recharge around people. Whenever I walk through the apartment door and see my roommates studying, I immediately ruin their peace by jumping on the couch, asking about their day, and usually making some bad joke. My roommate Jackson used to look at me dead in the eye and say, "Ben, I need me time right now, please." This probably tells you everything about my social energy. I've always loved meeting new people, whether I'm talking to strangers at a party or trolling someone just to get a reaction.

Psychologists describe extraversion as a mix of social enthusiasm, positive emotion, and assertiveness: traits that tend to stay stable across time, even as people mature (Soto, 2021). For me, that stability shows up in the way I seek connection. I like being around others; it brings me

energy. Even with that stability, there's been some shift. In high school, I needed to be around constant social stimulation. Being at home was a waste of time. Once I graduated from high school and moved to college, I learned to find comfort in being alone. Instead of chaos, it's more like controlled extraversion.

So even if a test labels me at 78% extroverted, the reality is more complicated. The Big Five doesn't split people into boxes; it just maps out tendencies. My tendency has always been toward enthusiasm and social curiosity; as I've grown, it's toned down a bit. That's the real value of personality science to me: it helps you see not only what you are, but how your traits evolve as you do.

Agreeableness

Out of all of my scores, agreeableness was the one that surprised me the most; I landed right in the middle at the 49th percentile. When reflecting on my scores, I was just shocked. I think of myself as a very agreeable person, but after thinking about it more, I started to realize why. When I was younger, I heavily leaned towards people-pleasing. All throughout grade school, I said yes to everything. If a friend needed help with something, I would say yes; if someone disagreed with a rule, I wouldn't mind. Research shows that higher agreeableness in childhood often reflects this kind of compliance and desire to maintain harmony (Soto, 2021). This was exactly me.

College shifted things. Being in leadership positions taught me that saying yes to everything isn't as easy as you think. My agreeableness didn't disappear, but it definitely became more intentional. Roberts et al. (2006) argue that personality traits naturally adjust as people step into new adult roles, and I definitely felt that transition. With friends, I've become more comfortable saying no, but with family, the opposite happened. I've actually become more

agreeable than I used to be. I am more patient, willing to help, and a lot kinder than the kid who used to torment his siblings.

So that score in the middle of the ballpark isn't me being inconsistent; it's evidence that agreeableness depends on the context. I've learned when to be cooperative and when to stand my ground. That balance is exactly what researchers mean when they say personality can evolve over time.

Neuroticism

Neuroticism was the trait I scored lowest on, with a 25th percentile score. This didn't surprise me at all. I've always been super calm; I don't really spiral when things go wrong, and don't get overwhelmed easily. My emotions feel steady most of the time, even when something does annoy me, I try to pause and reflect before reacting. What surprised me was realizing how much this trait has shifted over time. Growing up, everything felt simple. School was easy, responsibilities barely existed, and I never had a reason to worry. College changed that. Suddenly, my life had more stressors: classes, social anxiety, and what I can only describe as 'adult problems.' I don't think of myself as anxious, but I definitely became more reactive and more aware of the pressure around me. This fits with research showing that neuroticism tends to increase slightly during late adolescence and early adulthood as life stressors become more complex (Soto, 2021). At the same time, personality scientists like Caspi et al. (2005) note that low-neuroticism individuals often maintain emotional stability even when the challenges grow. My baseline hasn't changed; I'm still calm, still grounded, just living in a world that naturally demands a bit more out of me.

How My Traits Predict My Behavior

Personality traits aren't just labels; they quietly shape the choices I make every day. One of the clearest examples is how I say yes to almost every spontaneous plan my friends invite me to. It sounds contradictory, but somehow my openness and my hyper-structured Google Calendar coexist. I'll have my entire week blocked out from 7 AM to 11 PM, but as soon as I have a hint of free time, I'm open to anything. Research backs this up: People high in openness tend to seek out new experiences even when their schedules are full. These patterns show up consistently across daily life (Soto, 2021). In my case, that openness sits on top of a strong foundation of conscientiousness. The reason I can be spontaneous in the first place is because I feel secure about everything else: school, work, leadership, it's all accounted for. Roberts et al. (2007) found that conscientiousness predicts important life outcomes over time, including academic achievement and career success. Looking at my past year, that tracks; the same structured approach that fills my calendar is also what helped me balance my coursework, leadership roles, and eventually secure the internship I wanted.

Another trait that consistently shows up in my behavior is my emotional stability. Even during stressful weeks, such as finals week right now, I tend to stay pretty calm and reflective. Caspi et al. (2005) found that people with lower neuroticism handle pressure with more emotional regulation, which predicts better coping skills as they grow older. I see this in how I handle my conflicts now compared to in high school. Back then, a single B on a test could spiral my entire mood, whereas now I have learned to take a deep breath, accept, and move on. Personality research argues that these small, repeated reactions add up to long-term patterns. For me, the pattern is clear: my openness pushes me towards new experiences, my conscientiousness helps me follow through, and my emotional stability keeps everything grounded. Together, they make up who I am, not just on paper but in real life, no matter the situation that approaches me.

Conclusion: Personality as a Moving Target

When I think back to the kid who pinched another toddler at the amusement park, or the older brother who tormented his twins just because he was bored, it's easy to assume he and I share nothing in common anymore. But writing this paper made me realize how complex this all is. That boy inside didn't vanish; he just grew up, and the traits underneath him shifted. Psychologists describe personality as patterns that guide how we think, feel, and act across time. The Big Five model helped me understand that those patterns aren't fixed. They mold to situations and reshape themselves as life demands it.

My most important realization is that personality is not a verdict, but rather a story. Caspi et al. (2005) show that traits predict the paths we tend to follow, but they don't dictate them. Roberts et al. (2007) show that personality continues to mature well into adulthood, which means that I'm still a work in progress. Maybe that's the point. My grandma wasn't wrong when she said I've mellowed out, but she also wasn't fully right. I'm not a filtered version of myself around them; I'm just a new version of myself.

If there's anything the Big Five taught me, it's that personality isn't about choosing who we are; it's about understanding who we are becoming. And if the last few years are any indication, I think I'm becoming someone I'm proud of.

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