

McAdams (2015)

Chapter 3 The Problem of Self-Regulation (pp. 73-102)

Actors Observing Actors

- How do people come to know one another?
- How important is it to observe others?
- How do we get ourselves to behave properly?

We begin to recognize ourselves as actors around the age of 2 (i.e., William James' notion that "I" begins to recognize the "Me" who is acting in the social world (p. 77)

Early Emotion Regulation

- Western cultures stress *individualism* and *high-arousal positive emotions* in infants (intense joy, excitement)
- Eastern cultures stress *collectivism* and encourage *low-arousal positive emotions* in infants (mild joy, calm, serenity) (p. 81)
- The attachment bonds of infants and young children with their caregivers provide a secure, safe environment to explore the world and strong bonds foster emotion regulation.

Effortful Control and the Development of Conscience

Walter Mischel (1930-2018; personality & social psychologist at Stanford and Columbia Universities). Experimented using the "Marshmallow Test" with 4-year-olds (late 1960s-early 1970s). What is "effortful control"?



- Persistence
- Inhibitory Control
- Focused Attention
- Delay of Gratification

His work suggested that the ability of younger children to delay their gratification (turn down immediate reward for a greater reward after waiting) may be related to success in later life. Indeed, the blurb for his 2014 book argues

The world's leading expert on self-control, Walter Mischel has proven that the ability to delay gratification is critical for a successful life, predicting higher SAT scores, better social and cognitive functioning, a healthier lifestyle and a greater sense of self-worth. But is willpower prewired, or can it be taught?

In *The Marshmallow Test*, Mischel explains how self-control can be mastered and applied to challenges in everyday life—from weight control to quitting smoking, overcoming heartbreak, making major decisions, and planning for retirement.

<https://www.amazon.com/Marshmallow-Test-Mastering-Self-Control/dp/1469249081>

And the paperback version of his book in 2015 was even subtitled “Why self-control is the engine of success.”

However, more recent research brings into question if “failing” the Marshmallow Test at a young age (between 3 and 5 years old) is predictive of later life behaviors (Gill, 2021, Sperber et al., 2024). It seems that there are various other variables such as family income that affect how well young people can gain self-control. Nonetheless, it is still clear that gaining control over behavior can be very challenging for younger children.

- Development of conscience related to the “moral” emotions of empathy & guilt
- Role of serotonin: low levels associated with aggressive behaviors
- Competing systems to process experience
 - Primitive: mostly unconscious, impulsive, reactive, implicit, associative
 - Developed: cognitively conscious, deliberative, reflective, strategic, logical

Conscientiousness (C) and Agreeableness (A)

- Central to Love, Family, Work, Health, & Mortality
- C = hard-working, self-disciplined, responsible, reliable, well-organized
 - May be the most valuable psychological trait to have as a social actor
 - High C => successful
- A = loving, friendly, empathetic, cooperative, caring

When Regulation Fails: Aggression and the Development of Antisocial Behavior

- Social groups must deal with both individual and group expressions of aggression

- Some aggression comes from the society itself: policing, death penalty (the use of force is a mark of government)
- Deviant aggression => Antisocial behavior by individuals
 - Violence, theft and robbery, cheating, disregard for another's rights, disrespect for another's autonomy

Chapter 4 The Actor Grows Up: How Traits Develop into Adulthood (p. 103-138)

What does the word “character” mean? Here are some definitions from the OED:

1. A distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface; a brand, stamp.
2. A member of a set of symbols used in writing or printing to represent linguistic elements, as individual speech sounds, syllables, or words; any of the simple elements of a written language, as a letter of an alphabet, or an ideogram
3. A feature, trait, characteristic. Each of the distinguishing features of a species or other taxon.
4. The aggregate of the distinctive features of something; essential peculiarity; distinctive nature, style, or quality; sort, kind, description.
5. *The sum of the moral and mental qualities which distinguish an individual or a people, viewed as a homogeneous whole; a person's or group's individuality deriving from environment, culture, experience, etc.; mental or moral constitution, personality.*
6. *A person portrayed in a work of fiction, a drama, a film, a comic strip, etc.; (also) a part played by an actor on the stage, in a film, etc., a role.*

The Big Five: E-N-C-A-O [“Dispositional Traits”]

- **Extraversion** vs. Introversion: Positive Emotion
- **Neuroticism** vs. Stability: Negative Emotion
- **Conscientiousness** vs. Undependable-Negligent
- **Agreeableness** vs. Irritable, Disagreeable, Untrustworthy
- **Openness to New Experience** vs. Conventional, Non-curious
 - Cognitive trait

Rank Order Stability: The Remarkable Continuity of Individual Differences

The Conspiracy of Genes and Environment

- Half of the variation in personality traits (*across populations of people*) is accounted for by genetic differences between people (p. 111)
- The heritability of traits can change over the course of life, e.g., by changes in the environment such as new economic and social factors arising in life
- Note that the study by Caspi et al., 2003 cited by McAdams (p. 112) has been significantly challenged.

Table 4.2 Psychological Mechanisms That Reinforce Preexisting Personality Traits (pp. 115-6)

Mechanism	Definition	Examples
Evocation	Actors evoke responses from their audiences that are consistent with or reinforce preexisting tendencies	Smiley baby stimulates parents positively. Shy teenager evokes negative reactions in peers
Responsivity	Actors respond favorably to features of a social scene consistent with their preexisting tendencies	Younger brother who likes fun responds to older brother who is joyous. Student who is conscientious pays close attention to teacher and gets higher grades.
Attraction	Actors are attracted to scenes that are consistent with their preexisting tendencies	Friendly kids like to play with other friendly kids
Avoidance	Actors avoid scenes that are inconsistent with their preexisting tendencies	Introverts avoid large, loud parties. Low self-control child refuses to do homework
Manipulation	Actors alter scenes so that they better fit preexisting tendencies	Conscientious child cleans room regularly. Neurotic employee creates drama in a quiet workplace
Role Selection	Actors select/selected into social roles consistent with preexisting tendencies	Trusting/caring child chosen by others to be "best friend" Adults with high conscientiousness take on multiple leadership roles.

What Can Parents Do?

Portraits of Maturation: Do people change?

- St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)
- Karen Danielson Horney (1885-1952) [name pronounced “Hor-Nay”]
- **Jane Seymour Fonda (b. 1937)**
- **Shawn Corey Carter (Jay-Z) (b. 1969)**

Developmental Trends in Big Five Traits

- E tends to remain relatively stable. N may become less pronounced with age.
- A & C tend to become more prominent as adult age
- O: Research is mixed about what happens to openness to new experience with age

References

- Gill, D. (2021, Feb. 24). New study disavows Marshmallow Test’s predictive powers. California: UCLA. <https://anderson-review.ucla.edu/new-study-disavows-marshmallow-tests-predictive-powers/>
- Mischel, W. (2015). *The Marshmallow Test: Why self-control is the engine of success*. New York, NY: Little Brown. (hardcover version, 2014)
- Sperber, J. F., Vandell, D. L., Duncan, G. J., & Watts, T. W. (2024). Delay of gratification and adult outcomes: The Marshmallow Test does not reliably predict adult functioning. *Child Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.14129>