Trait Stability as a Noncontingent Truth
A Pre-empirical Critique of McCrae and Costa’s Stability Thesis

Steven W. Quackenbush
CENTRAL METHODIST COLLEGE, MO

ABSTRACT. Numerous studies have yielded data consistent with the hypothesis that the ‘Big Five’ personality traits are highly stable in adulthood. For McCrae and Costa, such findings suggest a need to significantly revise our understanding of adult personality development: stability, rather than change, appears to be the rule. The central purpose of the present essay is to demonstrate that McCrae and Costa’s strong claims in favor of personality stability are not contingent upon any set of empirical observations. Rather, they necessarily follow from the acceptance of two related pre-empirical assumptions: (a) personality traits are transcontextual; and (b) revelations of the ‘true’ personality structure must be reliable. If these propositions are accepted without qualification, then evidence inconsistent with the stability thesis can simply be attributed to the ‘inadequate’ conceptualization or measurement of traits. Thus, McCrae and Costa’s arguments in favor of personality stability are insensitive to falsification. Implications for researchers interested in the study of life-span personality development are discussed.

KEY WORDS: adult development, epistemology, personality traits, reliability

There is considerable consensus among research psychologists that the scientific value of a theory depends (at least in part) on the extent to which it is able to generate testable predictions. In practice, this implies that researchers are obliged to specify the empirical conditions that would allow for the rejection of any given theoretical proposition. A hypothesis that fails to meet this falsifiability criterion is not necessarily ‘incorrect’. However, such a hypothesis makes no real claim about states of affairs in the empirical world and, as such, is devoid of scientific meaning (Popper, 1959).

In light of the critical role played by falsifiable propositions in scientific thought, it is noteworthy that formal attempts to demonstrate falsifiability are rarely encountered in psychology journals. Smedslund (1994) attributes

this paucity to a relative distaste on the part of research psychologists for the conceptual and linguistic analyses that such demonstrations would entail. Indeed, many researchers are satisfied with the scientific status of a theory if they are simply able to collect relevant data, as if the mere act of conducting a study were sufficient to guarantee falsifiability. Of course, any study can potentially ‘confirm’ a research hypothesis. However, Smedslund submits that many of the propositions presumably ‘confirmed’ by empirical research could never really have been wrong in the first place. That is, many hypotheses are necessarily true given the formal definitions of the theoretical constructs under investigation.

According to Smedslund (1994), scientific hypotheses can be ordered along a continuum from the ‘contingent’ (possibly true and possibly false) to the ‘noncontingent’ (necessarily true or necessarily false). A contingent proposition is, in principle, open to the possibility of falsification and is thus scientifically meaningful. For example, the thesis that ‘bilingual persons are more likely to have a sense of humor than are monolingual persons’ (p. 281) is a data-sensitive, contingent proposition insofar as ‘humor’ is not logically implied in the definition of a ‘bilingual’ person.

Noncontingent propositions, in contrast, are insensitive to falsification—‘they reflect how we must talk in order to make sense’ (Smedslund, 1994, p. 281). A simple example of this is the proposition that adolescents with low levels of self-esteem are more likely to be depressed than are adolescents with high levels of self-esteem (Brage & Meredith, 1994). Although this appears to be a meaningful assertion, a conceptual analysis of ‘self-esteem’ and ‘depression’ may reveal that these two terms are semantically related (such that depression is implied in the definition of low self-esteem). If this is the case, then an empirical failure to establish a negative relationship between these two variables would simply suggest a methodological flaw in the study itself (e.g. the inadequate measurement of ‘self-esteem’ or ‘depression’). On a purely theoretical plane, the hypothesis cannot be logically disconfirmed.

Although it is easy enough to generate simple examples of tautologies in psychological research, the distinction between contingent and noncontingent propositions is often quite difficult to make in practice. Yet, if we are to direct our attention to meaningful research questions, it is imperative that we supplement our empirical research with rigorous analyses of the concepts and methodologies we employ in our investigations. It may turn out that many of the statements widely believed to be empirical are necessarily true (and thus scientifically meaningless) given the pre-empirical assumptions implicit in the very questions we ask.

The central purpose of the present essay is to examine the problem of falsifiability in relation to an issue that has been the focus of considerable debate among personality and developmental psychologists: the question of
personality stability in adulthood. Traditional accounts of life-span personality development (e.g. Erikson, 1963; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978) offer a vision of adulthood as a time of significant growth and change. In the last two decades, however, research guided by the five-factor model of the personality appears to have placed the basic tenets of these traditional accounts into question. As McCrae and Costa (1994) have pointed out, ‘stability appears to characterize all five of the major domains of personality [i.e. the ‘Big Five’]—neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. This finding suggests that an adult’s personality profile as a whole will change little over time’ (p. 173).

McCrae and Costa (1984, 1990, 1994, 1996) have presented an enormous body of cross-sectional and longitudinal data to support their claim, and, indeed, the stability thesis has achieved the status of received wisdom among many personality psychologists. In a recent issue of the American Psychologist, the Basic Behavioral Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council (1996) has noted the consensus that ‘research on personality shows that a given individual’s overall profile on the Big Five traits is relatively stable, consistent, and predictable over many years’ (p. 23). Perhaps these results should not surprise us. As McCrae and Costa (1990) comment:

... once we begin to think in terms of stability, it becomes increasingly intuitive.... History tells us that Beethoven was a rebel at age 20 and at age 50, that Chairman Mao did not grow conservative with age. Hospital and prison records show that tendencies towards mental illness and antisocial behavior are dishearteningly stable. One begins to wonder how the idea of adult development ever arose to begin with. (p. 107)

There is little reason to doubt that scores on measures of the Big Five tend to remain stable over an extended period. However, Whitbourne, Zuschlag, Elliot and Waterman (1992) have noted that ‘researchers arguing for stability in adulthood have typically focused on personality traits that are, by definition, inherently stable dispositions’ (p. 260). This astute pre-empirical insight has yet to receive the attention it deserves. If the Big Five personality traits are stable by definition, then questions regarding personality development cannot be meaningfully posed within the context of the five-factor model. The extravagant claims made by the stability theorists are reducible to meaningless tautologies.

Yet, how is it possible to claim that trait stability is true by definition when it appears obvious that longitudinal change in scores on measures of personality traits is an empirical possibility? Indeed, McCrae and Costa (1990) have noted that although traits must, by definition, persist across situations and over short periods (days or weeks), it is not necessary that they remain stable over an extended period: ‘Short-term consistency does not preclude long-term change’ (p. 24). Thus, the fact that such traits do
display remarkably high levels of stability over a period of many years appears to be an impressive example of a replicable empirical phenomenon.

Nevertheless, McCrae and Costa’s (1990) assertion that trait stability is an empirically contingent truth should not be mistaken for an argument. What if long-term trait stability is implicit in the thesis that traits must persist over short periods and across situations? What if this very demand for behavioral consistency represents an a priori purge of every aspect of the personality that might be influenced by an individual’s social, historical and developmental context?

As an exercise in pre-empirical criticism, I shall argue that McCrae and Costa’s stability thesis is not contingent upon any set of empirical observations. Rather, it necessarily follows from the acceptance of two related pre-empirical propositions: (a) personality traits are transcontextual; and (b) revelations of the ‘true’ personality structure must be reliable. If these two propositions are accepted without qualification, then evidence inconsistent with the stability thesis can simply be attributed to the ‘inadequate’ conceptualization or measurement of traits. For this reason, McCrae and Costa’s strong claims in favor of personality stability are insensitive to falsification.

The present demonstration that personality stability is a necessary corollary of McCrae and Costa’s theoretical and epistemological assumptions will proceed in two steps. First, I will engage in a conceptual analysis of McCrae and Costa’s (1990, 1996) definition of a personality trait. It will be argued that a transcendence of situations is presumed by their definition and this very transcendence implies long-term stability. If this conceptual analysis is valid, then any failure to observe high levels of trait stability in empirical research must be viewed by McCrae and Costa as an artifact of the use of ‘impure’ (i.e. not perfectly reliable) measures of traits.

In the second section of the paper, the theoretical implications of the methodological demand for reliability will be made explicit. Although any comprehensive account of the adult personality must include a consideration of reliable personality traits, an epistemology that equates truth with consistency necessarily endows such traits with a privileged ontological status. Given this epistemological bias, the dynamic and changing qualities of a person are likely to be viewed as relatively unimportant, unless they can be re-interpreted (at some level of analysis) in terms of consistent traits. Thus, McCrae and Costa’s stability thesis reflects a vision of a ‘true self’ already deprived of any real power to change.

Although I am primarily concerned in this essay with McCrae and Costa’s ideas regarding adult personality development, facets of my critique can be applied to a broad range of trait positions (e.g. Cattell, 1965; Eysenck, 1952). It is a mark of the rigor and consistency of McCrae and Costa’s work that they have fully drawn out the developmental implications of the
theoretical and epistemological assumptions made by numerous other trait psychologists.

**A Conceptual Analysis of the Personality Trait**

McCrae and Costa (1990) define ‘traits’ as ‘dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions’ (p. 23). Although as many as 4,000 personality traits can be found in an English dictionary, these authors note that all such traits can be ‘organized hierarchically from narrow and specific to broad and general dispositions’ (McCrae & Costa, 1996, p. 72). The Big Five (i.e. neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness) ‘constitute the highest level of the hierarchy’ (McCrae & Costa, 1996, p. 74).

Factor analyses performed on self- and peer-reported personality characteristics (in both English- and non-English-speaking cultures) have consistently yielded a five-factor solution comprised of traits representing each of these five dimensions. Although some researchers continue to dispute the exact number of general personality dispositions (see Pervin, 1994), McCrae and Costa (1997) note that ‘many psychologists are now convinced that the best representation of trait structure is provided by the five-factor model’ (p. 509).

Researchers examining age differences in scores on measures of the Big Five have found evidence for both change and stability in the adult personality. Data collected in several cultures suggest decreases with age in neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience, as well as increases with age in conscientiousness and agreeableness (see McCrae et al., 1999). However, after about the age of 30, changes in the adult personality structure appear to be rather modest. As McCrae and Costa (1990) point out, ‘somewhere in the decade between 20 and 30, individuals attain a configuration of traits that will characterize them for the years to come. From the perspective of the trait psychologist, adulthood begins at that point’ (p. 10).

The stability of personality traits in adulthood is supported by studies employing a variety of research designs and thus cannot be easily dismissed as the artifact of a single methodology. For instance, the robust long-term stability coefficients observed in longitudinal studies (typically ranging from .60 to .80) suggest that individual differences in scores on measures of personality traits remain remarkably stable over a period of many years (McCrae and Costa, 1994). Considered alone, these data cannot rule out the possibility that every member of a given cohort changed *in the same way* over time (thereby preserving the relative positions of each cohort member: see Caspi & Bem, 1990). However, longitudinal studies of numerous
individual cases suggest that the *absolute* levels of scores on measures of the Big Five also tend to remain stable (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Further, cross-sectional age group comparisons fail to yield substantial differences among adult cohorts with respect to the average scores on measures of the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Considered together, the results of the relevant research appear to justify the claim that ‘few findings in psychology are more robust than the stability of personality’ (McCrae & Costa, 1994, p. 175).

To be sure, McCrae and Costa (1996) readily admit that the five-factor model ‘does not and cannot provide a complete model of the personality’ (p. 65). Clearly, a complete understanding of the dynamics of adult personality functioning must take into account the many values, attitudes and myths that ‘flesh out’ human existence and endow it with meaning. Nevertheless, McCrae and Costa (1996) remain committed to the thesis that the personality is a system consisting of ‘personality traits and the dynamic processes by which they affect the individual’s psychological functioning’ (p. 76, emphasis added). Thus, although the personality encompasses a broad range of motivational and social-cognitive processes, these authors are willing to consider ‘as a fundamental postulate’ the thesis that ‘a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by his or her standing on the five factors of personality’ (p. 76).

According to McCrae and Costa (1984), research guided by the five-factor model represents a direct challenge to the common belief that the personality is ‘a plastic system, responsive to a variety of different contexts’ (p. 176). Although they ‘do not wish to minimize the obvious important influences of social, developmental, and historical contexts on the shape of each individual’s life’ (p. 178), they also find reason to proclaim that the ‘personality is transcontextual’ (p. 175). Indeed, McCrae and Costa believe that a comprehensive review of the relevant research supports a view of the personality ‘as a set of characteristics of the individual that transcend time, place, and context, and so help give coherence to life, and a sense of identity to the individual’ (p. 178). In a word, ‘our traits characterize us; they are our very selves’ (McCrae & Costa, 1994, p. 175).

We need not concern ourselves here with the question as to whether empirical research actually yields data consistent with all of McCrae and Costa’s assertions. The central task of pre-empirical criticism is to determine the *meaning*, not the *validity*, of specific theoretical propositions. Thus, our first real challenge is to make conceptual sense of McCrae and Costa’s proclamations concerning transcontextual personality dispositions. Such dispositions cannot be directly observed (for they are not simply behaviors). Where, then, can we find the unifying force that *holds together* the ‘consistent patterns’ in an individual’s ‘thoughts, feelings, and actions’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23)?
Unfortunately, critical thought in this domain is all too often clouded by prejudices inspired by the structure of everyday discourse (McAdams, 1992a; Pervin, 1994). For the ordinary language user, traits clearly refer to entities (or potentialities) residing within individuals (e.g. ‘Stuart is an extravert’). However, this uncritical ascription of traits to persons risks obscuring the extent to which the conceptual meaning of any given trait is conditioned by the notion of an ‘other’. If I am an introvert, it is because I am not comfortable with (or interested in) interacting with a particular (or generalized) other. If I am disagreeable, it is because I make an other angry. Thus, if there is a unifying force that underlies the ‘consistent patterns’ in my ‘thoughts, feelings, and actions’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23), this force need not simply be within me.

Rather than viewing traits as characteristics of individuals, it is possible to view them as characteristics of a person’s relationship with a particular or generalized ‘other’. This is not to say that other people influence the expression of a trait (as if the trait pre-existed the relationship). Rather, other people participate in defining the trait. If my peers cease to view the behaviors I frequently engage in as ‘disagreeable’, then I have been transformed into a more ‘agreeable’ person. In a word, the ‘other’ is as responsible for ‘my’ traits as ‘I’ am.

Although trait psychologists do not always think this way, it is interesting that Cattell (1944) drew attention long ago to ‘the oft-forgotten fact that a trait is never resident only in the organism but is a relation between the organism and the environment’ (p. 293). Similarly, Sartre (1963) notes that personality traits reflect not ‘our inner depths’, but rather ‘our external relations to others’ (p. 43). From this point of view, traits are wholly contextualized—not because the context somehow influences the personality, but rather because ‘person’ and ‘context’ can never be sharply distinguished in the first place.

One implication of this relational approach to personality traits is the possibility that we may quite literally ‘become different people’ in the context of different social relationships (e.g. with family, friends and coworkers). Drawing upon one of Nietzsche’s (1968) insights, we might even say that there are no (transcontextual) facts of the personality, only (relational) interpretations.

Insofar as multiple interpretations are not necessarily compatible with each other, this relational perspective leaves open the possibility that the human personality is riddled to the core with ambiguities and contradictions. Although we need not rule out the possibility of a holistic experience of selfhood, Gergen (1991) has aptly illuminated the challenges faced by those who seek to find their ‘very selves’ in an increasingly complex social world:

For everything we ‘know to be true’ about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision. This fragmentation of self-conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected
relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an ‘authentic self’ with knowable characteristics recedes from view. . . . The center fails to hold. (p. 7)

What, then, has become of the ‘unifying force’ that presumably holds together the consistent patterns in our thoughts, feelings and behaviors? Where can we find the transcontextual traits that somehow ‘transcend time, place, and context, and so help give coherence to life and a sense of identity to the individual’ (McCrae & Costa, 1984, p. 178)?

For their part, McCrae and Costa (1996) are willing to side with the ordinary language user: the center does hold. Transcontextual traits define the person and are not thereby relativized by an individual’s life context. In language that could not be more clear, these authors confess that

. . . trait psychology makes [a] basic statement about human nature by seeking the origins of behavior in the individual, implicitly attributing proactiveness to the person. Personality traits may have genetic or environmental origins . . . but whatever their source, once established they characterize the individual, not the situation. (McCrae & Costa, 1996, p. 57, emphasis added)

But why, we might ask, is it necessary to distinguish between the ‘individual’ and the ‘situation’ in the first place? By presuming a conceptual distinction between ‘traits’ and ‘situations’, these authors have effectively sidestepped the real challenge posed by the contextualists. Few would deny that there are elements of both consistency and inconsistency in the course of any person’s life. However, if ‘consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors’ are baptized as ‘person’ variables (indeed, as ‘our very selves’), then every ambiguity and contradiction manifest in the course of an individual’s life can be written off as an artifact of the social context. Shifting roles and changing life-situations need not ever compromise the integrity of the personality. Thus, McCrae and Costa (1990) are able to make the remarkable claim that ‘lives surely change, perhaps in stages; personality, we maintain, does not’ (p. 150).

It appears, then, that we have discovered a fundamental principle of McCrae and Costa’s trait psychology: it is the very being of the transcontextual trait to transcend the ambiguities implicit in the myriad of social relationships in which we participate. Whereas life may be little more than a bundle of contradictions, a trait exists (in some mysterious noumenal realm) as an individual’s transcontextual ‘essence’. By a pre-empirical leap of the imagination, these authors have postulated an (unobservable) entity uncontaminated by the contingent and relational aspects of human existence.

However, if this conceptual game is going to work, the transcendence of the trait must be absolute. A truly transcontextual trait must somehow transcend (i.e. be clearly distinguished from) every conceivable situation. If the transcendence of a trait were limited to a specific subset of situations, the
trait would be qualified by this very subset (as when someone claims to be shy, ‘but only when I have to interact with strangers’). Clearly, such qualified traits are not simply ‘person’ variables (insofar as they reflect something about the situation). Rather, they are necessarily manifestations of a person’s relationship with his/her context.

If we wish to escape the contextual relativism implicit in the relational perspective discussed above, we must focus our attention on those ‘pure’ traits that remain uncontaminated by the empirical contingencies associated with various life-situations. Further, insofar as life-situations are spread out over time, intuitions regarding these pure traits must transcend temporality itself. As I reflect upon my transcontextual personality dispositions, I necessarily come face to face with (what is presumed to be) my eternal essence (i.e. the part of myself that is not contaminated by my situational/temporal context).

If this does not seem plausible (because, after all, traits can change), we should consider once again the profound ambiguity that lies at the very core of the ‘trait’ construct. Often, traits are used to describe patterns of behavior manifest across relatively limited time intervals (as when someone says, ‘Ever since she lost that promotion, Ellen has been rather rude to everyone’). Clearly, these (relatively ‘impure’) traits can change. However, if such traits remain stable, we need not conclude that this reflects anything important about the person (conceived as distinct from the ‘situation’). A far more parsimonious explanation is that certain aspects of the individual’s social world (e.g. employment situation) have tended to remain stable.

Clearly, this is not what McCrae and Costa (1984, 1990) have in mind when they speak of trait stability. Traits, we recall, ‘characterize the individual, not the situation’ (McCrae & Costa, 1996, p. 57, emphasis added). However, if traits reflect our transcontextual essence—if they represent ‘our very selves’ (McCrae & Costa, 1994, p. 175)—then real personality change is inconceivable. The truly transcontextual trait, like the Platonic form, lies beyond every empirical contingency. It is what it is for all eternity.

By surreptitiously sliding back and forth between two mutually exclusive versions of trait psychology (i.e. traits as transcontextual and traits as relational), it is possible to create the illusion that transcontextual traits can indeed change. But we cannot have it both ways. Meaningful discourse regarding transcontextual personality dispositions requires that we reject as senseless all talk of personality ‘development’.

It seems, then, that the present conceptual analysis has yielded the following result: only the ‘purest’ transcontextual traits can be clearly distinguished from the ‘situation’ (and thereby freed of the threat posed by contextual relativism), but this very purity guarantees eternal stability. Certainly, it always remains an empirical possibility that researchers will observe longitudinal changes in various personality traits. However, this
possibility is simply an artifact of the necessity of relying upon ‘impure’ estimates of traits. The closer we get to a ‘pure’ estimate of a personality trait, the more likely we are to observe stability. It is precisely McCrae and Costa’s rigorous demand for purity that is responsible for their conclusion that the personality tends to remain stable in adulthood. For these authors, the demand for purity takes the form of a concern about reliability. Thus, an adequate pre-empirical critique of the stability thesis should include a consideration of McCrae and Costa’s views regarding the importance of reliable observations in personality research.

Reliability and the Assessment of Personality Traits

It is well known that the central tenets of many influential theories of adult personality development are conceptually ambiguous and thus very difficult to test. Further, even when influential theorists do make relatively unambiguous claims about adult development, they seldom agree about precisely what happens as we grow older. For instance, ‘Buhler sees the last phase of life as one of decline; Erikson sees it as the time for the development of wisdom. Levinson puts age limits on his stages of adult change; Neugarten hypothesizes a steady increase in interiority’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 17).

Such interpretive multiplicity is of significant concern to any researcher who values reliability in the accumulation of scientific knowledge. As McCrae and Costa (1990) note:

... when observers from a dozen different perspectives see the same phenomenon, we begin to believe it is really there. When everyone reports something different, it is hard to know how to interpret it. And that is the time to turn away from personal impressions and look to the facts. (p. 17)

However, for McCrae & Costa (1990), only reliable observations acquire the status of ‘fact’. As these authors note, ‘the fundamental principle of science is reproducibility: A phenomenon must be dependable, regardless of how and by whom it is observed’ (p. 63). In practice, this demand for reliability can take a number of forms. For instance, McCrae and Costa (1984, 1990) argue that the phenomena studied by personality psychologists should be consistent across situations, across raters, and over short periods.

If accepted without qualification, this methodological demand for reliability virtually guarantees that personality psychologists will view consistent traits as the ‘real’ core of the personality. As Lamiell (1987) has pointed out, a personality attribute that is not manifest consistently ‘would not qualify as a personality variable and therefore would not be included in any model of “the” personality’s generic structure’ (p. 17).
Yet, truly consistent personality characteristics are easier to conceive than to measure. A central problem in personality assessment is the fact that researchers are unable directly to observe participants across the broad range of contexts in which their lives unfold. Thus, if traits are defined as ‘tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23), investigators must place considerable trust in self- and peer-reports. Not surprisingly, McCrae and Costa (1996) believe that ‘individuals know themselves and the people around them well enough to serve as sources of scientific data’ (p. 60). Indeed, these authors highlight human rationality as one of their central methodological premises: ‘The use of personality questionnaires in research on the FFM [five-factor model] carries with it the implication that people are rational’ (McCrae & Costa, 1996, p. 59).

Such faith in human rationality comes as good news to those of us who might have been dismayed by McCrae and Costa’s findings of long-term personality stability. Testimonies of personal growth and change can, it seems, be legitimately cited as evidence that many personalities do change over time.

But then again, maybe some people are more rational than others. Participants in a longitudinal study reported by McCrae and Costa (1990) were asked to indicate the extent to which they had changed over the previous six years. Although a slight majority (51%) of the participants reported that they had not changed at all, a substantial minority (14%) indicated that they had changed a ‘good deal’. Are members of this minority ‘rational’ interpreters of their own personal development? Apparently not. Although they think they have changed, their scores on a ‘valid’ measure of the Big Five (the NEO-PI) showed very little change over this same six-year period. Thus, McCrae and Costa (1990) conclude that ‘most people think they are stable, and those who think they have changed are probably wrong’ (p. 101, emphasis added).

These authors, it seems, are rather selective with respect to the self-interpretations they consider to be ‘rational’. Which interpretations, then, should be accepted as ‘valid’ revelations of the ‘true’ personality structure? What are we to make of those ‘confused’, ‘troubled’ souls who are unable to escape the feeling that the human personality is riddled to the core with ambiguities and contradictions?

The methodological principles adopted by advocates of the five-factor model rule out a priori the possibility that the personality is an ambiguous entity that can be validly interpreted from a variety of (divergent) perspectives. Indeed, the very assessment tools employed by advocates of the five-factor model tacitly demand that participants interpret themselves (or their peers) in a manner consistent with the ‘rationality’ of trait psychologists. For instance, respondents completing the NEO-PI are asked to report the extent to which they agree with such a statement as ‘I am not a cheerful
optimist’. Clearly, a transcendence of context is implicit in the very structure of the sentence (and this is true regardless of how the participant chooses to respond). As McAdams (1992a) has commented:

Subjects and their testers play an oversimplifying and economizing game in which the ground rules are quite clear from the outset: We are here to get a general, superficial, and virtually nonconditional picture of your personality. Therefore, answers like ‘it depends’ are not meaningful, or they are to be incorporated into middle ratings of ‘neutral’. (p. 351)

In principle, the transcontextualism implicit in this ‘oversimplifying and economizing game’ should be sufficient to direct the subject’s attention to the ‘eternal’, ‘unchanging’ qualities of a person. Nevertheless, judgements concerning such qualities may be clouded by various interpretive idiosyncrasies and cognitive biases. Thus, a reasoned argument can be made that the self-interpretations elicited by self-report personality inventories represent little more than individual (or collective) fictions (e.g. Shwedler, 1975).

McCrae and Costa (1990, 1996), of course, are not among those willing to dismiss as ‘merely subjective’ the data collected in studies utilizing self-report (and peer-report) questionnaires. On the contrary, a high level of agreement among raters observed in research employing diverse samples and a variety of instruments ‘firmly establishes the utility of both self-reports and ratings as methods of assessing the personality’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, pp. 38–39).

Such reliable methods are certainly assessing something. However, it might be helpful at this point to offer a distinction between (a) reliability conceived as an empirical discovery and (b) reliability conceived as an epistemological demand (cf. Lamiell, 1987; Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). Few personality psychologists would deny that various aspects of the personality are manifest consistently (across raters, situations, etc.). Such consistency, when observed, is an interesting empirical phenomenon that warrants interpretation. However, inconsistencies are also potentially interesting and may well illuminate significant truths about the structure of an individual’s personality. For instance, Mischel (1969) describes a woman who is a ‘hostile, fiercely independent, passive, dependent, feminine, aggressive, warm, castrating person all-in-one’ (p. 1015). It is not essential that we identify a consistent ‘core’ personality structure that would somehow explain these diverse (even contradictory) qualities. On the contrary, ‘each of these aspects of her self may be a quite genuine and real aspect of her total being’ (p. 1015).

Considered simply as an empirical phenomenon, the fact that measures of the Big Five yield high levels of interrater reliability clearly demonstrates that certain aspects of a person’s manner of relating to others are interpreted in roughly the same way by multiple observers. Far from implying the
revelation of a ‘true self’, this empirical observation might actually help buttress an argument that the five-factor model provides a relatively superficial glimpse of the human personality. Precisely because the Big Five are reliable, they can be recognized by virtually anyone. The nature of the relationship between the evaluator and the target is largely irrelevant.

McAdams (1992a) has characterized the five-factor model as a ‘psychology of the stranger.’ The model delineates ‘those most general and encompassing attributions—simple, comparative, and virtually non-conditional—that we might wish to make when we know virtually nothing else about a person’ (p. 353). From this point of view, the fact that the Big Five tend to remain stable in adulthood might be considered as an interesting empirical phenomenon. However, it hardly represents a serious threat to alternative accounts of adult personality development.

If, on the other hand, we consider reliability as an epistemological demand—if ‘a phenomenon must be dependable, regardless of how and by whom it is observed’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 63)—then the five-factor model seems to acquire a deeper significiance. Far from representing a mere ‘psychology of the stranger’, neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness appear to be the most real elements of the personality. Indeed, ‘very little else in our world is so dependable’ (McCrae and Costa, 1990, p. 155).

However, McCrae and Costa’s unqualified demand for reliability situates us more clearly on the plane of morality than of science (cf. Gergen, 1968). Certainly, many aspects of the personality do manifest themselves consistently. However, if we side with the reliable against the unreliable a priori, then it is no longer possible to assess the extent to which the personality is consistent. The real and the reliable are equated by definition. Relatively dynamic processes (e.g. mood fluctuations) must thereby be re-interpreted in terms of consistent personality dispositions (e.g. trait neuroticism) or dismissed as artifacts of the situation. From the start, the deck is stacked in favor of stability.

Admittedly, the demand for reliability across situations and raters does not guarantee that perfect trait stability will be observed in empirical research. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that personality traits can change over time (McCrae & Costa, 1990, 1994; McCrae et al., 1999). As previously noted, the longitudinal studies cited by McCrae and Costa (1990, 1994) typically yield stability coefficients within the range of .60 to .80. Although these coefficients appear to be quite robust, we must remind ourselves that the proportion of variance explained is the square of the stability coefficient (e.g. if the stability coefficient is .71, then the proportion of explained variance is .71² = .50). This means that only about half of the variation in personality traits assessed at one point in time can be accounted for by variation in the same traits assessed at another point in time. Thus, the longitudinal research that is cited in support of the stability thesis could just
as well be cited to support the claim that personality traits do change over an extended period.

Before we conclude that McCrae and Costa’s stability thesis is empirically contingent after all, we should briefly consider their approach to this problem. If the observed stability coefficients are not quite as strong as advocates of the stability thesis would predict, this is attributable to the fact that ‘retest reliability puts an upper limit on stability’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 63).

As is well known, personality questionnaires are not perfect measures of personality traits. Individuals’ scores reflect, at least in part, various sources of ‘error’. For example, ‘respondents may be living through a difficult period, perhaps looking for work or adjusting to divorce; their temporary mood may color their perceptions of themselves. Problems with physical health may also affect responses’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 97).

Insofar as these sources of ‘error’ influence how people respond to items on personality inventories, we can expect some variation in scores over short periods (a few days or a few weeks). Fortunately, the inventories employed by trait psychologists generally yield fairly robust short-term retest coefficients (typically ranging from .70 to .90: McCrae & Costa, 1990). Nevertheless, the fact that these coefficients are less than 1.00 makes the interpretation of the absolute levels of the long-term stability coefficients highly problematic. As McCrae and Costa (1990) note, ‘we cannot expect to find high correlations over a period of years if we do not observe them over a period of days’ (p. 97).

The procedure McCrae and Costa (1990) employ to ‘correct’ for this reliability problem represents their final rite of purification: ‘Dividing stability coefficients by short-term retest reliabilities gives an estimate of the stability of the true score’ (p. 97). This procedure generates stability coefficients that are strikingly robust. For instance, McCrae and Costa report that the corrected six-year stability estimates for the NEO-PI measures of neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience are .95, .90 and .97, respectively. ‘Such analyses suggest that if we had perfect measures we would find near-perfect stability of personality traits’ (p. 98). In other words, if we could purge our measures of every source of unreliability, we would discover a perfectly reliable personality.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Numerous studies have yielded data consistent with the hypothesis that the ‘Big Five’ personality traits are highly stable in adulthood. For McCrae and Costa (1994), the implications of these stability findings are profound:

Our traits characterize us; they are our very selves; we act most freely when we express our enduring dispositions. . . . A person’s recognition of
the inevitability of his or her one and only personality is a large part of what Erik Erikson called ego integrity, the culminating wisdom of a lifetime. (p. 175)

But this ‘wisdom’ may well be a refuge for the world-weary soul (cf. Nietzsche, 1968, section 585). Insofar as our culture ‘furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self’ (Gergen, 1991, p. 6), it is understandable that many people long to find their ‘very selves’. However, McCrae and Costa have not discovered a stable ‘core’ personality structure. Rather, personality stability is a necessary corollary of a pre-empirical faith in transcontextual personality dispositions and the corresponding demand that ‘real’ attributes of the personality behave themselves consistently. In short, transcontextual trait stability is a noncontingent (and therefore scientifically meaningless) truth.

Admittedly, McCrae and Costa’s stability thesis retains a certain intuitive appeal regardless of its scientific status. Indeed, ‘imagine the chaos that would result if the personality were not stable!’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 106). Nevertheless, investigators interested in the holistic study of lives need not consider transcontextual personality dispositions as the only alternative to psychosocial ‘chaos’. As McAdams (1992a) has commented, ‘we are trait theorists when we have nothing else to fall back on’ (p. 353). As the focus of our inquiry becomes more familiar, ‘we naturally move beyond traits to more personally meaningful constructs such as goals, strivings, schemata, strategies, and the integrative narratives that provide coherence to the private personality’ (p. 354).

Sartre (1963) has commented that a trait ‘is a feature which characterizes me not insofar as I am I to myself, but insofar as I am Another to Others’ (p. 43). In recent years, numerous authors have speculated that the ‘I’ that I am to myself is most adequately understood as a story unfolding over time (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Hermans, 1992; McAdams, 1992b, 1993). Giddens (1991), for instance, notes that ‘self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood in terms of her or his biography’ (p. 53). McAdams (1992b) has similarly pointed out that ‘a person defines him- or herself by constructing an autobiographical story of the self, complete with setting, scene, character, plot and theme’ (p. 325). This personal narrative provides an individual ‘with a sense of meaning and purpose in life—a sense that one is a whole being moving forward in a particular direction’ (p. 325).

Theoretical speculations regarding the narrative structure of personal identity have been supplemented by numerous studies examining various aspects of the stories that people tell about important experiences in their lives (e.g. Brown, Debold, Tappan, & Gilligan, 1991; Hermans, 1992; McAdams, de St Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Nouri & Helterline, 1998; Pratt, Norris, Arnold, & Filyer, 1999; Singer & Salovey, 1993; Tappan, 1989). Can such research illuminate anything important about the process of
personality development? For their part, McCrae and Costa (1990) are willing to acknowledge that the analysis of personal narratives represents a viable approach to the holistic study of lives, as long as the interpretations of narrative data are consistent with the stability thesis. Indeed, ‘life narrative data might be analyzed in terms of enduring dispositions, for surely the individual’s perception of his or her life as revealed in a life story will be colored by prevailing emotions or experiential styles’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 169).

This is certainly one way to interpret a personal narrative. However, the fact that the story of the self can be told in terms of transcontextual traits does not mean that a trait hermeneutic should thereby trump alternative accounts of the life story. On the contrary, if ‘human beings think, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures’ (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8), then the story of the self can be legitimately analyzed as a story (see Charme, 1984)—perhaps even as a story about real personality change (see Nouri & Helterline, 1998)—not simply as one more manifestation of some hidden transcontextual ‘essence’.

If the stability of transcontextual personality dispositions is not clearly contingent upon any set of empirical observations, then an interpretation of the human life-cycle in terms of stable traits need not be viewed as more ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ than alternative accounts of life-span personality development (e.g. Erikson, 1963; Levinson et al., 1978). Of course, this does not mean that a comprehensive theory of the human personality can or should ignore traits. A central tenet of Buss and Craik’s (1983) ‘act frequency’ approach to personality assessment is the notion that dispositional constructs are ‘natural cognitive categories’ that allow for the classification of ‘topographically dissimilar acts’ (p. 122). So conceived, the analysis of personality traits will probably always have a place in the study of human meaning systems. However, if such traits are presumed to reveal our transcontextual essence—if they illuminate our ‘very selves’—then we have effectively endowed ‘that which had no meaning other than social with a metaphysical meaning, a meaning prior to any relationship with society’ (Sartre, 1963, p. 44). Precisely to this extent, our speculations fall outside the bounds of science.

References


**Acknowledgements.** I would like to thank Brad Hastings and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments in response to earlier drafts of this manuscript.

**Steven W. Quackenbush** is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri. He received his Ph.D. in 1996 from Kansas State University. His publications include 'Correlates of Reminiscence Activity among the Elderly' (International Journal of Aging
and Human Development, 1995) and ‘Recollection and Evaluation of Critical Experiences in Moral Development: A Cross-Sectional Examination’ (Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 2001), both with M.A. Barnett. His academic interests include both cognitive-developmental and narrative approaches to the study of moral development. ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, Central Methodist College, Fayette, MO 65248. [email: SQUACKEN@CMC2.CMC.EDU]