7   Subjective Perception of Personal Change

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Personality stability and change is mostly studied nomothetically, usually by means of questionnaires. Therefore, we focus on subjective description of personal change. The research was done with the sample of 56 adults (22 men and 34 women aged from 36 to 40). We used the life-line technique to elicit a life-story telling – respondents were asked to draw a line representing their lives and then were invited to tell a story about their lives. We asked the question about personal change explicitly. In most cases the referred changes can be labelled as *normative*, which are typical for adulthood (acquirement of autonomy, deepened sense of responsibility, shift towards the more rational and calm approach to life events, expected bodily changes). Non-normative personal changes are associated with unusual life course (eg. continued living with parents) or life events (eg. death of son).

Personality Stability and Change: Current Status of Research

One of the basic topics of life-span psychology is the issue of the longitudinal stability of personality, along with the possibilities and conditions of its change. The present knowledge of the stability of personality can be summed up in five points. First, the initial assumption is the fact that personality *is* stable. It is the essential quality of personality and its basic defining feature.

Secondly, personality is even more stable than it could seem. According to a number of researchers, the differences between the results of the first and second administration are far more affected by measurement errors and by social and historical changes than by the development of the subjects themselves (eg. Costa and McCrae, 1997).

Third, personality is generally more stable than people would expect from their own personalities. The proof of this fact has been produced by the research dealing with the comparison between the subjective perception of change and its objective measurement. For example, Woodruff (1983) found out that the questionnaires which were completed in the past correlate more strongly with the respondents' present view of themselves than with recalled previous scores.

Fourth, some components of personality are more stable than others. High stability is found namely in traits, ie. in personality dispositions – either inborn,

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or gained during early stages of development (eg. Roberts and DelVecchio, 2000). The area which is more vulnerable to changes is a socially rooted part of personality – interpersonal characteristics, attitudes, values, etc.

Fifth, in case changes do occur, they are developmental changes, not personality ones (Helson and Moane, 1987; Roberts, Caspi and Moffitt, 2001). In other words, they are typical changes in the frame of life course. The changes found in research are represented rather by shifts and alterations than by turns and transformations. For example, within the five-factor model of personality, neuroticism, extraversion and openness to experience decrease with the age, whereas conscientiousness and agreeableness increase (Costa and McCrae, 1989).

In most cases, the mentioned findings come out from the research which is based on nomothetical manner. It is typical of them that they deal with the objective measurement of change, they focus on personality traits, they use quantitative methodology (ie. questionnaires and statistical computation), and – although they deal with longitudinal stability of personality – they do not often use longitudinal, but cross-sectional design.

However, according to critics, self-report methods are not sensitive enough to detect real changes of personality which take place in far more subtle areas than in personality traits. With our study, we want to extend the research which deals with subjective perception of change. We use an idiographic approach (or combine nomothetical and idiographic approach), follow the whole personality, use qualitative methodology and a longitudinal design.

The general purpose of our study was to investigate how the people themselves perceive whether and in which way they change, or whether and to what extent they remain the same. With the help of a narrative interview and free telling about the change of their own person, we tried to capture what objective methods are not able to reflect:

- Sources, circumstances and character of the change of personality

- Personal conception and interpretation of these changes (ie. what people consider as a change and how they understand it).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 56 people (22 men and 34 women in the age from 36 to 40 years) who participated in the longitudinal research of children in the 1960s – 1970s and who decided to participate in the new longitudinal research.

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Procedure

In order to bridge the period of 20 years which have passed since the exploration and to get information about participants, we decided to use the life-line method (Čermák, 2004; Tyl, 1985). Respondents were asked to draw a line representing their lives and then were invited to tell a story about their lives. The interview is semi-structured. Respondents are gradually asked to speak about important events in their lives, about people who they considered important, and about their future prospects (they may also be asked to draw important points on the line). Their last task is to draw an ideal life-line.

During the interview, we also asked a question about the change of personality. It was as follows: "Do you have a feeling that you have changed (during your life)?" By asking the question about the change of their own person during the interview we had the possibility to take into consideration the statements about the change in the context of the whole life story.

We decided to analyse only the interviews where the question about the change was raised explicitly. The final number of analysed interviews was 41 (17 men and 24 women). The remaining 15 interviews were excluded for the following two reasons: the first reason was technical problems such as a bad quality of the recording; the second, more frequent reason, was the fact that the question about the change was not explicitly raised. Despite the fixed structure of the interview, we did not follow it rigidly. The development of the interview was guided by the nature of communication with participants. For example, in one case it was necessary to provide the respondent with a therapeutic intervention.

Results

Analysis of Telling About the Change: Categories of Description of the Change

We assumed that most people would consider themselves stable, that they would perceive their life as coherent, and that they would feel the changes of their person only in some aspects of their personality. Our assumption may be expressed with the following statement: "Yes, I have changed, but it depends …" Therefore we expected the following development: Apart from the answer to the question about the change of personality (*whether* they had changed), respondents would also speak about *in which domain* they had changed (ie. "domain" of the change).

During the analysis it emerged that the statements contained another two categories of the description of the change. The first category was related to the source or cause of the change, ie. *why* respondents had changed. We labelled this category "causal agent" of the change. The second category was related to

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the process of the change, ie. *how* the change had happened. This category was labelled "mode" of the change. In Table 1 the numbers of statements in individual categories are given. The question *whether* the respondent had changed was of course answered by all participants, therefore it is not included in the table. According to our assumption, the majority of respondents said in which domain they had changed, the number of 26 respondents stated the cause of the change and 20 respondents stated the process of the change.

Table 1   Categories of Telling About the Change

	Categories of Statements About Personal Change	Number of Answers
Assumed	Domain of change	36
Revealed during analysing	Causal agent of change	26
	Mode of change	20

Analysis of Individual Categories

Results of analysis of the category *whether* are given in Table 2. Thirty-four people said they had changed – their answer was *yes*. However, nobody said they had become somebody else or had been completely changed (including, for example, the change of a lifestyle, break-up with some milieu, etc.). They always referred to a partial change, saying, "Yes, I have changed, but only partly". Six people said they had not changed, but they always added some additional information ("No …, but you know, it changes you, some kind of event, when a relative dies … now, when I have a child, I have a different view …"). These answers were labelled *no*, *but* … and we consider them more or less subcategories of the answer *yes*. Only one person said he/she had not changed.

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Table 2   Perception of Personal Stability and Change

Whether change had occurred	Number	(%)
Yes	34	83
No, but ...	6	15
No	1	2

The number of 36 people said *in which domain* they had changed. The identified areas of changes correspond to psychological characteristics of an adult person, as described – at least – in Czech professional literature (Říčan, 1990; Vágnerová, 2000). Individual areas of changes are given in Table 3. The "plus" and "minus" indicate the direction of normative change – for example the change towards higher self-confidence, greater rationality, etc. We have created only the category "activity" which contains not only physical activity (which might be subordinated to "physical changes"), but also social and overall activity ("Now I am not as active as I used to be"). All changes are also interpretable in the terms of five-factor model of personality where the decreases in neuroticism (increase of calm, rationality and self-confidence) and extraversion (activity), and increases in conscientiousness (responsibility, autonomy) and agreeableness (responsiveness) are suggested (Costa and McCrae, 1989).

Table 3   Domains of the Change

In *which* domain change had occurred		Trend	Number of statements		
			F	M	Total
Autonomy		(+)	4	2	6
Responsibility		(+)	1	3	4
Self-confidence		(+)	4	0	4
Calm		(+)	4	3	7
Rationality		(+)	4	1	5
Responsiveness		(+)	1	2	6
Values	Women	Towards family	4		7
	Men	Towards profession		3	
Bodily changes		(-)	1	2	3
Activity		(-)	1	1	2
Others			2	1	3

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The causal agent of the change (*why* respondents had changed) was given by 26 respondents. Their reasons were either general ("Life taught me a lesson" – 11 cases) or specific (childbirth, parenthood, partner's influence, divorce – 15 cases). Similarly as the mentioned areas of changes correspond to psychological characteristics of an adult person, the causes of changes are represented by events which normally appear in the life of an adult person. The mentioned causes of changes correspond to life transitions, as showed for example by Settersten (2003) – eg. leave home, marry, enter parenthood, exit full-time schooling, enter full-time work, settle on career/job.

The last category is the mode of the change (the answer to the question *how*). Again, there were two basic kinds of answers – the change as a turning point or a leap, and the change as a movement or development. The answer describing the change as developmental was more frequent (14 developmental interpretations vs. 6 turn interpretations) and in several cases was directly described as "maturity" or "growing up".

Running Comment

People reflect (perceive) that they change. In our sample, all people gave this answer – with the exception of one person. The majority of people perceive the change of their own person as normative, ie. corresponding to their age and life experience. *They are not somebody else*, they have only changed in certain aspects of their person. These normative changes of their own persons are linked with normative life events, or with life course.

The fact that we asked about the feeling of change within the narrative interview enabled us to consider the change and its subjective perception in the context of the whole life story. This method revealed another important factor which influences the subjective perception of stability or the change of person: in their lives, people consider normal (including the change) not only things which are generally common (such as getting married, having children, etc.), but also the things which they themselves *expected* to happen. Unfortunately, for this conclusion we do not have as much quantifiable evidence as in the previous case, because this connection is mostly included in the statements implicitly. One of the respondents, whose statement was classified in the category *no, but …*, expressed it explicitly in the following way: "I think that I am what I have expected from myself to be …".

Our findings can be summed up in three points:

- People reflect that they change

- People perceive these changes as normative, ie. corresponding to their age and life experience

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- People consider normal not only changes which are generally common, but also the changes which they themselves expected to happen.

Supporting Evidence: Particular Cases of Change

The methodology used enabled us mainly to identify and describe also the particular cases of personality changes. Considering the small number of respondents, there were not many of them. Only in three cases the description or feeling of change markedly differed from the prevailing answers. Among these cases we also included the mentioned case of so-called "non-change" (the only one). Although we assumed a high stability of personality, this answer was really exceptional in the context of all other answers. Two other persons referred to an important personal change.

Despite the uniqueness of their personal stories, all three respondents had one thing in common: something unusual happened in their lives, or their whole life had an untypical, non-normative course. Of course, radical conclusions cannot be drawn from three cases but it is a support of the previous findings about the connection between life course and perceived personal change.

Story of Non-Change: Continued Living with Parents

The case of the "non-change" is represented by a woman who – as the only one – has not got married yet, has not had a partner and still lives with her parents. However, the conclusion "no life changes, no personality changes" would be too simplistic. It follows from her story that she is quite satisfied with her lifestyle – her distinct characteristics are expressed by passivity and certain general immaturity. Therefore it is very likely that the cause of her lifestyle, along with her personal stability (or rather non-development), consist in personality resources or personality predispositions.

Story of Several Independent Existences

In the second case, the connections between life course and personal change are much clearer. This case was about a woman who – in her opinion – had changed a lot: "… I have a feeling that I have changed a lot, and not only once. When I was thinking about it, I had a feeling as if I had been experiencing a number of totally independent existences …". She relates these individual existences to individual stages of her life: happy childhood, crises in adolescence, a relatively long period of loneliness after graduation which she bore with difficulties because she longed for a family, a period of happiness

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when she succeeded in finding a partner and starting a family, break-up of the marriage – divorce and current lawsuit about the custody of her children. The described changes correspond to characteristic changes of an adult in its direction, but they are more intensive and deeper. The woman herself says she has changed for the worse – she says she has become rougher and hardened. She sees the cause of changes not only in her life but also in her personality: "… I used to be a sort of person, … sort of non-assertive, sort of submissive … maybe these events made me level off with the majority of people". However, it is generally valid that non-normative life course is connected with non-normative personal change.

Story of a Death of Seven-Year-Old Son

The last case is the story of a father whose seven-year-old son died. It is an event which is obviously not common (normative) and which is not normally expected. In the interview, the man called the son's death, "the most important event in his life". In this context he himself started to speak about how this event had changed him. We ourselves have not asked him any question about it. He sees his change in the revaluation of his priorities: he devotes himself to his family much more than in the past, he consciously lives "at present", and he does not "dramatise" troubles and difficulties as much as in the past. However, in general, middle-aged men are more focused on their profession and they are concerned with performance and achievement.

General Conclusion

On the basis of the particular cases of subjective perception of personal change we can support and extend our above-mentioned conclusions:

- People reflect that they change

- People perceive these changes as normative

- People consider as normal those changes which they themselves expected to happen

- Unusual personality change is connected with disrupting the principles of normativeness and expectability.

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