COVER STORY
A child, Wendy Johnson was extremely shy. “One of my report cards said: ‘Wendy is so shy, it’s painful to watch!’” She’s not like that now. “I am definitely a person who learned to overcome overt shyness,” says Johnson, a psychologist at the University of Edinburgh, UK. She says shyness is an indicator of a low level of extroversion, a key measure of personality, which she studies. So does this mean Johnson has changed her personality? Undoubtedly, she says.

That answer might surprise you. Most of us consider our personality to be an integral and unchanging part of who we are—perhaps the essence of that thing we call the self. In 1887, psychologist William James went so far as to argue that it becomes “set like plaster” by the age of 30. His idea stuck. Psychologists have long debated how to measure personality, settling eventually on the “big five” traits (see “What are you like?”, page 30). But at least they were able to agree on a definition: personality refers to an individual’s thought patterns and behaviours, which tend to persist over time.

Now mounting evidence is undermining that notion. Personality is far more mutable than we thought. That may be a little unsettling.

Not feeling yourself

Some conditions make us lose crucial pieces of what we view as our selves. But it’s also good news for the almost 90 per cent of us who wish our personalities were at least a little different.

There’s no doubt that personality is partly genetic. What’s less certain is how much is down to our genes and how much to nurture. Newborn babies don’t have personalities as such, but do have characteristic ways of behaving and reacting, something psychologists call “temperament”. This includes persistence in the face of setbacks, and “reactivity”. Very reactive babies are shy and avoid novel situations. Temperament is often viewed as the biological basis of personality, but it is far from innate. Genes and environment interact to influence it even before birth. For example, there’s evidence that mothers who are stressed during pregnancy are more likely to have an anxious child.

Experiences in childhood also shape our personalities. Research shows that young children become more extroverted and work harder when surrounded by other kids with these traits. Parental behaviour has an impact too. Jerome Kagan at Harvard University, who pioneered research on reactivity, found that if parents encourage reactive infants to be sociable and bold, they grow up to be less shy and fearful. This might help explain why temperament doesn’t always predict later ratings on big five traits. Smiley babies don’t necessarily go on to be extrovert, for example. And Kagan found that only 25 per cent of highly reactive infants were extremely shy, anxious, timid or cautious by the age of 15.

By adulthood, genes seem to account for
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