

Study finds vast regional differences in personality within the UK

March 30 2015, by Christopher Boyce



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

How exactly do we become the people we are? A [study](#) published earlier this week found that there are vast regional differences in personality within the UK.

Londoners are more extroverted, for example, while people in north

England and areas of east Scotland are quieter and more introverted. Scots have highly agreeable personalities, while those in London and areas of east England have low levels of agreeableness, described in the study as "uncooperative, quarrelsome, and irritable."

What's more, the study found that these differences relate meaningfully to regional socio-economic outcomes, including voting tendencies, health behaviours, education level, and social tolerance.

The research was [reported by the BBC](#) with the suggestion that people with specific [personality traits](#) might be better suited to certain locations around the country. But implicit within this suggestion is the notion that personality is fixed – and this is by no means the case.

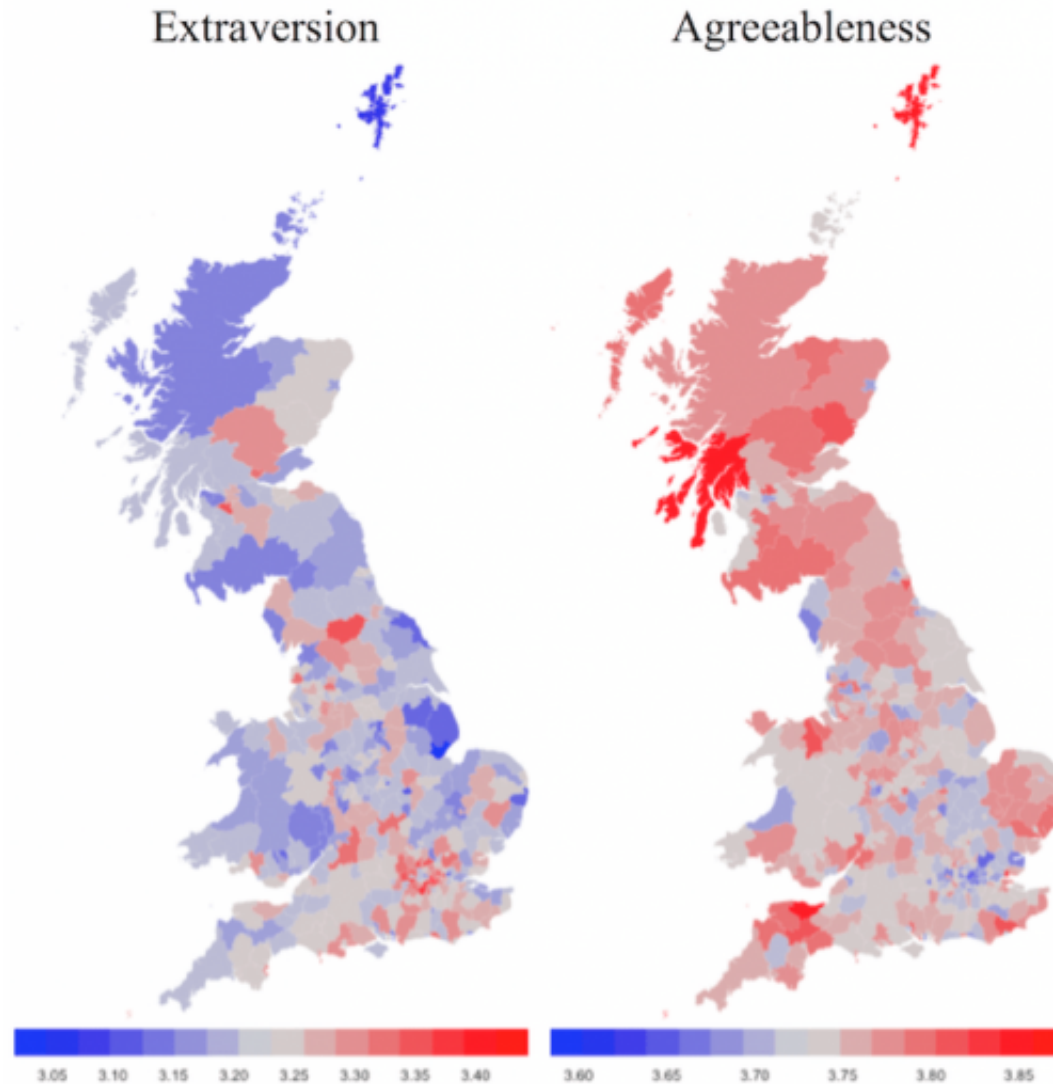
The science of personality

After decades of research psychologists have a [fairly good understanding](#) of the psychological component that remains with us from one situation to another – otherwise known as our personality.

At the very broadest level who we are is made up of five [personality dimensions](#) – our tendency to be agreeable, conscientious, extroverted, emotionally stable, and open to experience. But how personality develops through our lives is still poorly understood – and we are only just beginning to discover that there could be big socio-economic implications.

The idea that personality is more or less fixed over the course of our lives has been [a popular belief](#) in personality psychology for years. Changes due to biological factors were thought to occur until about the age of 30, at which point it was assumed that personality becomes set in stone. This is a belief that has permeated throughout society, which may have understandably led many to believe (rather dishearteningly) that it

is impossible to change.



Heat maps of personalities in the U.K. Blue is comparatively low, red is comparatively high. Credit: Rentfrow et. al/PLOS ONE

Change is possible

However, while personality is on the whole stable from one situation to

the next, this does not mean it cannot and does not change over time. Personality researchers have traditionally paid little attention to aspects of long-term change, but there is now [substantial evidence](#) which shows that our personalities continue to change throughout our lives.

Given the recent work linking regional personality with regional socio-economic outcomes it is dangerous to imply personality is fixed. It may lead to the erroneous claim that people somehow deserve the situations in which they find themselves.

Recently we published a [study](#) showing that unemployment, a major life event that could happen to any of us, can reprogramme us fundamentally by changing our core personality – we become less agreeable, less conscientious and less open to the world around us. Thus the regional personality differences found in the research reported by the BBC may in fact be the result of the socio-economic conditions themselves.

A key to happiness

In recent years there has been a [movement](#) for promoting well-being in our societies. It has long been known that once basic material needs are met, income growth is no longer the key to greater well-being. More important factors are social relationships, mental health, and of course our personality.

Personality is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of higher well-being. Being agreeable, conscientious, extroverted, emotionally stable and open to experience are all linked to higher well-being. Our personalities can also help us deal with difficult and traumatic life circumstances, something almost everybody will have to deal with at some point in their life.

How we deal with challenging events such as becoming disabled or

unemployed depends heavily on our personality. For example, being agreeable, perhaps itself due to better quality relationships, [appears](#) to help individuals when they become disabled.

Personality development

Our research has also shown that personalities are [just as likely to change](#) as many socio-economic factors, including how much we earn. In fact, personality may contribute substantially more to changes in many indicators of well-being. For example, it has been found that counselling, and even powerful entheogens such as [psychedelic mushrooms](#), may promote large positive personality change. Perhaps we would find ourselves on a faster route to greater well-being if we placed more attention on who we are, rather than on what we have.

By better understanding personality change, we may be led to a society where [personality development](#) is recognised as a valuable endeavour. We could try to limit the deep psychological damage from difficult life events such as unemployment and support psychological growth more generally.

It seems that we can change, and under the right circumstances such change may be positive and meaningful. By understanding and considering our [personality](#) more widely, we may uncover significant benefits to the quality of our lives.

More information: "Regional Personality Differences in Great Britain." *PLoS ONE* 10(3): e0122245. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0122245](#)

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