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Your Personality Changes When You Move to a New Place

By Natalie Jacewicz



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When people move across state lines, they usually think about what their new place will be like, their new neighbors, their new town — in short, all the other changes that come with a change of address. But what most people don't consider is the way that the move will change them, too.

Studies show that character traits, like anxiety and extroversion, vary from one state to another. There's not only a New York state of mind; there's also a Montana mentality and an Idaho id. But what does that mean for someone who's spent much of their life bopping from place to place (like, say, this writer, who's spent chunks of her life in both New York and Tennessee)? Can we transport an intact personality from place to place, like a piece of furniture? Or does each new move add a fresh coat of paint?

To set the stakes, it helps to understand which personality traits are more prevalent in different parts of the country. So far, several studies have zeroed in on different aspects of how people approach interpersonal relationships; a [paper](#) in the *Journal of Research in Personality's* February issue, for example, outlines state-based differences in attitudes about romantic relationships.

New Yorkers should brace themselves for the results: From a survey of more than 127,000 adults, the study authors found that citizens of the Northeast and mid-Atlantic are, on average, more anxious in their romantic relationships than West Coast dwellers.

Utah, meanwhile, has one of the least anxious and most relationship-inclined populaces in the country, despite a trend in other mountain states to be less interested than average in forming romantic relationships.

"We have these stereotypes about places, and it turns out that a lot of those are confirmed," says lead author [William Chopik](#), a psychologist at Michigan State University.

To a certain extent, other studies of [character variations among states](#) support this idea. Research has shown that Northeasterners and Southeasterners tend to be [more neurotic than Westerners](#), for example, while people in the Southeast, Midwest, and Utah tend to be more agreeable than other Americans. (New York ranks as one of the most neurotic and least agreeable states.) Openness to new experiences, on the other hand, hopscoches across the country — New York, Colorado, Nevada, and all of the states along the West Coast [rank highly in this quality](#).

But this doesn't necessarily mean New Yorkers should pack their bags for California or Utah to become better adjusted: The degree of influence that place has on an individual can depend on what's driving that place's personality to begin with. Jason Rentfrow, a psychologist at the University of Cambridge, has [reviewed](#) three different potential factors that may, together or separately, drive state and regional variation: migration patterns, ecology, and social influence.

The migration-pattern explanation goes like this: Once a place gains a certain reputation — for example, as an enclave for artists or people of a particular religious tradition — others with similar inclinations move there themselves, thereby helping to cement that place's character. And that character can stay somewhat consistent from generation to generation: To the extent personality traits are genetic, selective migration to a certain region means that its gene pool may reflect some [personality traits](#) more strongly than others. Where you move, in other words, may be a better reflection of who you already are than of who you will become.

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An alternative explanation suggests that ecological influence plays an important role in shaping people. Depending on environment, "any kind of personality trait, at least in terms of how it plays out, is probably going to have certain costs and certain benefits," says [Mark Schaller](#), of the University of British Columbia. For example, in a [series](#) of studies, Schaller found extraversion to be less common in countries that have traditionally had a higher prevalence of infectious diseases. "If I'm extroverted, I'm going to be coming into contact with more strangers, and that makes me more likely to come into contact with disease," he says. In these same countries, which are often close to the equator, societies are also more likely to stress conformity.

If ecology does play a strong role in personality, it follows that something as simple as weather could change someone. A pleasant spring can lead to improved moods and better memory, according to one [study](#), while [aggressive behavior](#) increases with temperature.

But the most powerful influence on someone who moves may be good ol' peer pressure. Cultural institutions and values span generations and inculcate newcomers through "social contagion," and people tend to absorb practices and values of those around them. Schaller says social susceptibility may be one of the strongest forces in encouraging new residents to dial up some personality traits while toning down others. For example, a network of happy people can make a person happier, on the other hand, adults who move to new areas where they are in the ideological minority often feel isolated and [become less able to take the perspective of others](#).

Educated guesses abound about how moving might change personality, but Chopik and Schaller, as well as most of the studies on the subject, highlight the need for more research. In the meantime, geographic transplants may have to do some research of their own. When does a Tennessean know New York has changed her? Maybe when she starts throwing elbows on a crowded subway car.

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