



Who gets ahead in life? Personality traits and childhood background in economic success

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ABSTRACT

In many societies around the world, the ideal is that anyone can achieve a successful life independent of family background. An indication of such social mobility could be that personality characteristics have stronger impact than childhood background on economic success. The present study investigated how much of life outcomes (i.e., educational attainment, annual income, and life outcome satisfaction) were accounted for by adult personality traits (the Big Five), when controlled for childhood socio-economic status (SES). The results from a large, representative Swedish sample ($N = 5280$) showed that personality traits (especially neuroticism) were associated as much as or more than childhood SES to annual income and life outcome satisfaction, whereas childhood SES related more to educational attainment. These results may help facilitate our understanding of the mechanisms behind individual economic success.

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1. Introduction

The ideal society for many can be described with equal opportunities for success and upward social mobility. According to Pew Research Center,¹ a majority of people believes that economic success is related to individual characteristics, such as working hard. Critics of this point out that childhood socio-economic status (SES; i.e., parents' education, income, and occupational status) is still the greatest predictor of economically relevant life outcomes (see [Furnham & Cheng, 2013](#)). It has been reported that socio-economic status persists across generations, especially for the low and high-end earners ([Bowles, Gintis, & Osborne Groves, 2005](#)). In a large U.S. sample, the chance of moving up from the bottom income quintile to at least the middle quintile was near 30% ([Davidai & Gilovich, 2015](#)). Childhood background and educational attainment has long been regarded as more important than individuals' personality traits ([Jencks et al., 1979](#)). However, there have been more recent reports showing that personality traits may be growing in importance parallel with the contexts of individualism in modern society (cf. [Skirbekk & Blekesaune, 2014](#)). We analyzed a representative sample from Sweden, comparing how adult personality traits relate to life outcomes of economic success, while controlling for childhood SES.

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¹ <http://pewrsr.ch/1yMLfo4>.

1.1. Socioeconomic status (SES) and life outcomes

The power of one's upbringing has demonstrated relationships to life outcomes in every society – for instance in the US longitudinal study on mortality (Jokela, Elovainio, Singh-Manoux, & Kivimäki, 2009), the Swedish longitudinal total-population study on criminality (Sariaslan, Larsson, D'Onofrio, Långström, & Lichtenstein, 2014), the Port Pirie study in Australia on educational attainment (Keage et al., 2016), the Whitehall II study in England on health (Singh-Manoux, Ferrie, Lynch, & Marmot, 2005), and the Paths of Generation study in Estonia on occupational status and economic income (Strenze, 2006). All mentioned life outcomes (e.g., education, health, and occupational status) are arguably also indicators of economic success. A meta-analysis based on 286 studies concluded that socio-economic factors account for well-being throughout life (Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000). Nevertheless, the mechanisms behind childhood SES and life outcomes are still vague. One theory is that a resourceful childhood environment (i.e., high SES) enhances social networks, cognitive ability, and even physical attractiveness. These factors are consequently known to enhance opportunities for future employments and salary increases (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009).

1.2. Personality traits and life outcomes

One of the more impacting long-term, individual characteristics in life outcomes is personality traits (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). Personality is known to be genetically influenced with an overall heritability of approximately 50% (Polderman et al., 2015). The most researched conceptualization of personality is the Five-Factor Model, which is organized into the Big Five traits; neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (McCrae & Costa, 1997). These traits have consistently demonstrated predictive power in life patterns, among various cultures, age groups, cohorts, and ethnicities (e.g., Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martínez, 2007). Personality traits are known to stabilize in adulthood around the age of 30 and mature predictably according to rank-order patterns into old age (Briley & Tucker-Drob, 2014). The majority of reliable variation over a life-time (83%) has been shown to be due to stable factors such as genetics and social maturation (Anusic & Schimmack, 2015). The consensus is that the Big Five are useful psychological constructs for predicting many important life outcomes, such as mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts et al., 2007). Similarly, personality traits have been found to correlate with accumulated wealth, even after controlling for factors such as education, risk preferences, financial knowledge, and need for cognition (Estrada-Meija, de Vries, & Zeelenberg, 2016).

1.3. Personality and SES in life outcomes

One of the most cited studies, comparing how personality and childhood SES relate to life outcomes (Roberts et al., 2007), consists of 53 studies, which measured personality by using adults' assessments of children's behaviors. The findings demonstrated that the Big Five outperformed ($\beta = 0.23$) childhood SES ($\beta = 0.09$) in predicting occupational prestige. Conscientiousness was reported to have the strongest impact out of the Big Five traits. Another influential, longitudinal study was Project Talent by the American Institute for Research, which was conducted in 1960 using a representative sample of 5% of U.S. high school students (Damian, Su, Shanahan, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2014). All the Big Five traits were correlated with life outcomes; education ($r_{Md} = 0.13$), income ($r_{Md} = 0.04$), and occupational prestige ($r_{Md} = 0.15$). However, overall, family background showed even stronger relationships; education ($r = 0.42$), income ($r = 0.13$), and occupational prestige ($r = 0.35$). A similar study from Europe was based on Luxembourg students' characteristics as assessed by teacher-ratings in 1968 (Spengler et al., 2015). This study demonstrated that economically relevant variables could be predicted 40 years later – studiousness was related to educational attainment ($r = 0.41$), individual income ($r = 0.29$), and occupational status ($r = 0.40$), while childhood SES was related to educational attainment ($r = 0.41$), individual income ($r = 0.21$), and occupational status ($r = 0.33$). The overall conclusion was that studiousness, similar to the Big Five trait conscientiousness, slightly outperformed childhood SES in predicting career success. Not many studies have compared personality in adulthood, after traits have stabilized at the age of 30, with childhood SES in economic life outcomes. The exception is one British sample which 50 years after having had childhood SES measured was measured on the Big Five traits (Furnham & Cheng, 2013). The results showed that childhood SES predicted earnings ($r = 0.21$) better than adult personality traits; neuroticism ($r = -0.09$), extraversion ($r = 0.10$), and conscientiousness ($r = 0.14$).

1.4. The present study

Based on the reviewed literature there is evidence suggesting that both individual personality traits and childhood SES are related to economic life outcomes. It is thus of importance to study how personality in adulthood may be associated with economic life outcomes while controlling for childhood SES.

There is a compelling body of research showing that the best economic decisions will involve emotions (Fehr, 2009; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Self-regulation of emotions has long been regarded to be associated with personality traits, and is often explained as the tendency to postpone immediate rewards for a later reward (Mischel, 2004; Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989). This delay of gratification is an important individual disposition that directs long-term success. Self-regulation is an intricate part of several personality traits, such as neuroticism (cf. emotional stability), extraversion

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