Personality and Individual Differences 103 (2016) 172–178

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

The welfare trait: Hans Eysenck, personality and social issues

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 3 November 2015
Received in revised form 6 May 2016
Accepted 1 June 2016
Available online 9 June 2016

Keywords:
Hans Eysenck
Personality
The welfare state
Reproduction
Employment-resistance
Work-motivation
Twitter

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Hans Eysenck's belief that personality research can provide insights on societal problems, this article summarises a theory – the Welfare Trait – which attempts to explain the tendency of the welfare state to erode work motivation. This theory stems from the discovery that exposure to disadvantage during childhood promotes the development of employment-resistant personality characteristics. If true, this discovery matters because it means a welfare state which sets up perverse incentives that cause extra children to be born into disadvantaged households may harm the prospects of the nation by shifting its personality profile towards greater employment-resistance. Although still in need of more refined data, the Welfare Trait theory conforms to Hans Eysenck's belief that psychology in general, and personality psychology in particular, is germane to addressing important issues of widespread social impact. However, as in Eysenck's time, discussion of such 'controversial' issues leads to severe criticism and personal vilification, facilitated today by the ease of communication via social media (e.g., Twitter).

1. Introduction

A hallmark of Hans Eysenck's scientific career was his belief that discoveries from individual differences research should be used to help address societal problems. He stuck to this belief even in the face of opposition from vested-interests, some of which had a distinct political agenda (Eysenck, 1997). This philosophy put Eysenck on a collision course with 'political correctness' and as a result he was often attacked verbally and, once even, physically during a lecture he was delivering on the topic of individual differences in brain processes at the London School of Economics on 8th May 1973 (Buchanan, 2010).

Yet Eysenck refused to give in to intimidation and continued to tell the truth as he saw it – a commitment to scientific freedom that was perhaps forged by his experience of growing up in pre-war Germany (Corr, 2016a). It was, therefore, a central irony of Eysenck's life that he fled from Germany to escape fascism in the 1930s, only to fall foul of communism once in Britain (Corr, 2016b). In a convergence of life and science, this irony did not escape Eysenck's attention and he went on to study the personality correlates of political extremism, observing that fascists and communists share a tendency towards authoritarianism (Eysenck, 1954). This notion was ridiculed at the time (e.g., Rokeach & Hanley, 1956), yet it seems Eysenck has the last laugh, as modern research backs up his claim that authoritarian attitudes are not the preserve of the extreme right, but are also found on the extreme left wing of the political spectrum (e.g., De Regt, Mortelmans, & Smits, 2011) – a position that even his arch-critic, Rokeach (1973), later conceded.

But the criticism sparked by Eysenck's refusal to acquiesce to the vacillating dictates of political correctness cannot tarnish his towering scientific achievements in the domain of personality research, especially his elucidation in the mid-twentieth century of three robust, biologically-based, personality dimensions (extraversion and neuroticism in 1944, 1947, and later psychoticism in 1952). This breakthrough is acknowledged as transforming personality psychology from a chaotic, armchair-based guessing-game to standard-issue science, amenable to experimental test under laboratory conditions (Gray, 1997). Indeed, the modern consensus that human personality can be captured adequately by five dimensions (the so-called Big Five personality model; Digman, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1992; Goldberg, 1993) leans heavily on Eysenck's work, since two of those dimensions (extraversion and neuroticism) are borrowed from his personality model and two more (conscientiousness and agreeableness) can be conceptualised as inverted subdivisions of psychoticism – the final dimension of the Big Five, usually known as openness to experience, is a more multi-faceted beast, with links to cognitive ability. Having elucidated extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism – in both statistical and the biological terms – Eysenck then sought to use this personality model to provide insights into such important societal issues as educational attainment and criminality (e.g., Eysenck, 1964).

Inspired by Eysenck's general approach and its implications for society, I am attempting to follow in his footsteps by showing how we can use discoveries from personality research to improve the welfare state. More specifically, we can increase the effectiveness and sustainability of the welfare state by using discoveries from personality

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.06.003
0191-8869/

psychology to address its tendency, as suggested by empirical research, to erode work-motivation (Heinemann, 2008; Ljunge, 2011).

Welfare state reform is a hot potato in political terms and anyone publishing on this topic today risks incurring the wrath of anti-reform campaigners. Perhaps unlike Eysenck, I hesitated to go public with my findings, since some of my more politically-savvy colleagues warned that I should remain silent for the sake of my career. In the end, I took inspiration from Eysenck's belief that scientists have a duty to the public to tell the truth as they see it and, in November 2015, published my book, 'The Welfare Trait: how state benefits affect personality' (Perkins, 2015). I was, therefore, honoured to be asked to contribute to this special issue which marks the centenary of Eysenck's birth.

In this article, I present an abridged version of my book, the centrepiece of which is a theory of welfare-induced personality 'mis-development', as I call it. This theory is based on the discovery that, in its most general form, exposure to childhood disadvantage promotes the development of a dysfunctional, employment-resistant personality profile characterised by aggressive, antisocial and rule-breaking tendencies which harm life chances in adulthood (Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013). This finding is crucial to my theory because it means that a welfare state which provides perverse incentives that cause extra children to be born into disadvantaged households risks increasing the number of people who possess employment-resistant personality characteristics as a result of exposure to disadvantage during childhood – and, in consequence, it imposes an ever increasing burden on the welfare state and related social provision (e.g., health care, social services and the criminal justice system).

Whilst I consider myself to be an intellectual midget compared to Eysenck's impressive scientific stature, The Welfare Trait has stirred up such an intense critical reaction that I have had an inkling of what he must have experienced. At one end of the scale of criticisms are sober, academically-rigorous, ad rem comments which I welcome because they highlight aspects of my argument that need refinement. For example, in The Welfare Trait I cited a study by Professor Mike Brewer and colleagues which showed that the approximately 50% rise in child-related benefit generosity that occurred in the UK in late 1990s/early 2000s caused births in disadvantaged households to rise by approximately 15% (Brewer, Ratcliffe, & Smith, 2011). In the book, I estimated how many extra births occurred due to this increase in benefit generosity, arriving at a figure of 14,000 per year. Professor Brewer has since stated on the website of the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) that, while he agrees that increased benefit generosity did indeed cause extra births, he does not agree with the size of my "back-of-the-envelope" estimate (Brewer, 2016).

Professor Brewer's critique is multi-faceted and has much merit: for example, he states that the 15% figure I used in my estimate was too high – there was actually only a 13% rise in births if the number of extra births is calculated as a fraction of all post-reforms births. He also states that because his analysis was limited to the years immediately following the reforms, some of the observed effect might have been due to bringing forward the timing of reproduction. But Professor Brewer's criticisms concerning the definitions of disadvantaged households are less convincing, in my view. These centre around his finding that the extra births prompted by welfare increases mostly occurred to couples containing at least one adult working at least 16 or more hours per week, a finding which at first glance seems to counter my position that the welfare state is increasing the number of children born into disadvantaged households.

However if we look more closely at the findings of Brewer and colleagues, it is difficult to view the households that had extra births in response to the welfare reforms of the late 1990s/early 2000s as anything other than disadvantaged. For example, the beneficiaries of the increases in welfare generosity in the late 1990s/early 2000s were concentrated mainly in the lowest two deciles on income (see Fig. 1 in Brewer et al., 2011). Furthermore, the disadvantage experienced by these families extended beyond financial issues: the fourth column of Table 3 in Brewer et al. (2011) shows that the "extra births" effect was statistically significant only in those low income households that also possessed low levels of education (i.e., the result only reaches significance at the 5% level when the sample is split by education). Since less conscientious individuals not only tend to have financial issues (Moffitt et al., 2011) but also are prone to under-achievement in education (e.g., Poropat, 2009), this finding fits with the notion that the lure of increased generosity of per-child welfare benefits is especially strong amongst less conscientious individuals – the very same individuals who are likely to neglect their children.

In the interests of setting a lower bound for the estimated number of extra births, I asked Professor Brewer to provide his own estimate of how many extra births were caused by increased benefit generosity. He replied (via Twitter): "I've explained why I don't agree with how @AdamPerkinsPhD used my figs. I don't need to provide counter estimate. And counter estimate would not be simple matter of back-of-envelope sums: would need new analysis".

At the other end of the scale are straightforward ad hominem attacks that make no pretence of presenting a reasoned, scientifically meaningful argument: for example, a lecture I was due to give in February at the London School of Economics was postponed when the organisers were threatened with disruption - it should be noted that LSE have now rescheduled the lecture for 29th June. Others seek to portray me as a blinkered, mono-causal obsessive, despite my acknowledgment in the first chapter of The Welfare Trait that structural and individual explanations for life outcomes are not mutually exclusive (e.g., socio-economic status, intelligence and personality can all affect an individual's chances of employment).

But the vast majority of attacks on The Welfare Trait occupy a middle ground, in which opponents of welfare state reform conceal ad hominem smears beneath the linguistic veneer of factually rigorous ad rem attacks. The clever thing about this approach is that there is no need to read The Welfare Trait, let alone master the literature in question, nor present peer-reviewed studies that counter the book's argument, and nor, for that matter, even get out of bed. A few Google searches will sooner or later reveal typos in a previous paper by the scientist being targeted or methodological limitations in the data they cite – all the critic has to do is highlight these issues in messages on social media that are peppered with melodramatic words like "fraud", "serious statistical errors" or "flawed research" and abracadabra, the theory is refuted, without any need to publish a cogent, evidence-based counterargument in a peer-reviewed format by a respected academic publisher. Critics of this type have even set up a special website to act as a one-stop shop for anyone wanting to vent their rage at me or The Welfare Trait (Anonymous, 2016). If nothing else, they must consider the issues addressed by The Welfare State as worthy of their time and effort – a compliment, of sorts.

But whatever their motivation, and in the face of extant empirical evidence, those who are serious about trying to refute The Welfare Trait need to cite a critical mass of studies that show personality traits are unrelated to important life outcomes such as employability, reproduction and criminality. This form of counterevidence is a pre-requisite for refutation because the theory in The Welfare Trait is based on the results of over 100 studies – only one of which is mine. I will now attempt to summarise these findings and show how they form my theory of welfare-induced personality mis-development. I will also present relevant research findings that have appeared since the publication of the book and clarify some misunderstandings that have arisen over the book.

2. Personality and employability

The most basic finding to acknowledge is that personality affects employability. We know this from four main types of evidence. First, neurological case studies of people who have suffered injuries to the prefrontal area of their brains show that such injuries do not usually impair intelligence but do tend to alter personality in a way that resembles