



‘Big Five’ personality dimensions and social attainment: Evidence from beyond the campus

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ABSTRACT

Research on the contribution of personality traits to attainment has focused heavily on grades among college students. Conscientiousness emerges consistently as the most powerful personality dimension. However, while university students are a convenient group to study, there remain questions about the generalizability, and utility of examining the link between personality and attainment, in a group that consists mainly of educational high-achievers who have not yet earned an income. In this study, data were instead drawn from a more diverse and representative sample gathered in the British National Child Development Study (NCDS). Regression analyses indicated that, in the general population compared to student samples, Openness and Emotional Stability are stronger predictors of educational attainment and earnings than conscientiousness.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Personality and success

There are a number of determinants of economic and social success in life that are well validated by empirical research. For instance, socio-economic status and educational attainment of parents are predictors of the outcomes of their children’s lives (Johnson, McGue, & Iacono, 2007; Sorenson, 2006). Individuals’ intelligence from an early age is also associated with subsequent academic success and attainment (Bartels, Rietveld, Van Baal, & Boomsma, 2002; Deary, Strand, Smith, & Fernandes, 2007). Harris (1940) influentially argued that along with intelligence, motivation or drive was crucial in explaining academic success. Eysenck (1967) also examined the relationship between personality and ability to learn, independently of intelligence. Lavin (1965) published a detailed overview of the attempt to link personality constructs to academic performance. In their influential book “Who gets ahead?” Jencks (1979) also demonstrated the considerable role personality plays for educational outcomes.

1.2. Conscientiousness and academic success

In recent years, the conceptualization of personality traits achieved an important boost with an emerging consensus around the ‘Big Five’ dimensions. The five dimensions that emerge consistently in empirical studies across cultures (see McCrae & John, 1992) are conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism. With the development of questionnaires like the NEO-Personality Inventory-Revised (Costa & McCrae, 1992) to assess these dimensions, and widespread interest in the antecedents of academic outcomes, it is not surprising that many researchers have been drawn to investigate the impact of personality traits on educational attainment and achievement. In a thorough overview of the question, Nofle and Robins (2007) summarized studies that had been published on the issue of personality traits and academic outcomes in college. Of the 20 studies (published between 1995 and 2006), three studies find mildly negative effects of extraversion on academic achievement, and one a mildly positive one; three studies find mildly positive effects for agreeableness; four studies support a picture of moderate positive effects of emotional stability, while five studies show mildly positive effects for openness. However, for conscientiousness, nine of the studies showed strong effects, two were moderately positive and four more were mildly positive. In other words, the overwhelming picture that emerges is that conscientiousness is the dimension of greatest importance for college academic achievement, showing the largest mean correlation with academic

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics of NCDS variables used in the analysis.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<i>Dependents</i>				
Education	4.37	2.44	1	9
Weekly earnings	398.43	323.05	19	5000
Log-Earnings	5.76	0.69	2.94	10.96
<i>Cognitive functioning</i>				
Vocabulary	22.28	6.30	0	65
Memory	5.97	1.52	0	10
Processing	26.03	7.41	6	65
<i>Personality</i>				
Agreeableness	36.78	5.36	12	45
Conscientiousness	33.71	5.46	11	45
Emotional stability	28.42	7.27	9	45
Extraversion	29.35	6.68	9	45
Openness	32.47	5.27	11	45

achievement at $r = .26$ (see Nofle & Robins, 2007, p. 118, Table 1 for summary details).

Nofle and Robins (2007) also conducted their own analysis of personality and academic outcome by assessing 11,867 undergraduate students on Big Five dimensions. Controlling for other indicators of academic achievement like an individual's SAT score and High School GPA, the authors found that the conscientiousness score had "a robust association" (p. 126) with college grades. Several studies subsequent to Nofle and Robins (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2008; Cheng & Ickes, 2009) also support the idea that conscientiousness is robustly linked to academic achievement among college students, with some evidence of a mildly positive role for openness, as well.

1.3. Generalizability of the personality and academic link

Most of the studies so far have examined the link of personality with college grades either of psychology undergraduates, or undergraduates in elite institutions of higher education, or more usually both. There is nothing inherently wrong with such an approach, and almost all of the studies explicitly mention the limitation that their findings were only generalizable to the population of college students. But if we wish to understand the ways in which personality and academic outcomes are related in general, there may be a legitimate concern about a research program that focuses so exclusively on young people studying a much sought-after academic subject in very sought-after universities, i.e., people who are atypically able in terms of intelligence and highly selected in terms of background variables (e.g., better-off families). In fact, people who achieve the necessary academic prerequisites to engage in such study can be considered *ipso facto* to be educational success stories. By and large then, the studies reviewed by Nofle and Robins (2007) looked at the impact of personality variations among high-achievers in the educational field, representing a relatively small segment of society. The dangers of relying on undergraduate student samples to make general claims about human nature are a growing concern to researchers (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). While some have pointed out that in many cases findings from undergraduate samples can be generalized to the general population (Bennis & Medin, 2010; Danks & Rose, 2010; Maryanski, 2010), it can surely not be assumed. The data drawn from the high-performing students indicate that those who rate themselves as highly conscientious are most likely to get higher college grades, other things being equal. The question examined in this paper is whether that personality link to educational outcome holds true for a broader population including those whose educational record is average or below average.

Furthermore, while understanding the role of personality in academic outcome is a legitimate and perfectly justifiable goal in-and-of-itself, many of the researchers in the field also discuss implications of their findings for intervention. It seems obvious that those most in need of external support are the people at the other end of the educational scale, in particular those at risk of early school dropout. And intervention will almost certainly have greater potential for such a group if only because there is a large room for improvement, e.g., O'Connell and Sheikh (2008) have shown that interventions that seek to modify people's 'non-cognitive abilities' are much more likely to pay dividends among those with lower cognitive ability. The position of this paper is that data drawn from a sample representing the broadest population will generate research outcomes with greater validity, and more appropriate policy implications.

1.4. Earnings and personality

One other potential bias introduced by relying too heavily on student samples is that 'success' becomes equated only with 'academic success'. While the latter is an increasingly necessary element in accessing many types of employment, it has never been a sufficient one. Those who entertain the possibility that certain personality traits can confer an advantage on otherwise equally qualified individuals must be interested in following students after they leave university, as well as looking at those who have never studied there. The influential review by Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, and Goldberg (2007) of personality variables and their impact, includes 'attainment' (educational and in the workplace) as one of the three key areas of investigation for researchers (along with health and personal relationships). This corresponds to the outcomes chosen by Ozer and Benet-Martínez (2006) as the most consequential for the public: health and well-being, marital relationships and career success. Personality dimensions were associated consistently with outcomes in these key domains in both reviews. In this paper, we are also interested in investigating the link between personality and occupational attainment. The traits that propel academic success in the micro-culture of a university campus may- or may not- be the same ones that work well in a factory, office or farm. Earnings among the general population represent an important occupational outcome – not without limitations and shortcomings – that allows for a generalization of the examination of links between personality and social attainment to a broader environment and population. And an occupational outcome such as earnings is acutely needed for personality traits research: as (Roberts et al., 2007; p. 333), "there are far fewer studies linking personality traits directly to indices of occupational attainment such as ... income". In summary, the aim of this paper is to examine the personality dimensions associated with both educational and occupational attainment in a large, representative, and diverse general sample.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The current analysis interrogated the longitudinal British National Child Development Study (NCDS), which has a representative sample of a cross-section of the UK population, and which provides measures relevant for the purpose of this study. The NCDS sample consists of all 17,634 babies born in Great Britain in one week of March 1958. As of 2008, there have been eight follow up surveys. Over time, the sample has declined to 9790 individuals due to deaths, permanent emigration, and attrition (i.e. dropout of participants). Measures of the Big Five personality factors were

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