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Social origin, conscientiousness, and school grades: Does early socialization of the characteristics orderliness and focus contribute to the reproduction of social inequality?



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ABSTRACT

Among a child's skills and competencies, conscientiousness has been shown to be one of the most important predictors of school performance and later academic achievement. We refer this insight to the social reproduction of social inequality: Is socialization of personality characteristics in the parental home a significant mechanism that contributes to a child's life chances? Using school grades as the outcome measure, we combine different pathways toward their achievement: the impact of a child's conscientiousness on school grades, parental conscientiousness and parental stratification as sources for the differential conscientiousness of children, and the mediation of this interrelationship through different parenting styles. To date, almost no research has been conducted which integrates the unequal formation of personality and its consequences regarding life chances and compares it with the respective influences of social origin. Moreover, we add to existing research in social reproduction the distinction between different facets of conscientiousness. We show that it allows for more precise predictions of academic achievement than looking at the highly aggregated Big Five personality traits; moreover, these facets can be much better linked to the established body of sociological stratification theory. We combine data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) and the related Familien in Deutschland (FiD) study involving children 9–10 years of age and their parents and households. Using structural equation modeling (SEM), we found theoretical and empirical evidence that only the "focus" facet and not the "orderliness" facet is highly positively correlated with school grades even more than indicators of social background. Our main hypothesis—that conscientiousness, specifically the facet focus, acts as one "transmission belt" between social background and school grades—was confirmed.

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1. Introduction

Various studies have shown that cognitive and non-cognitive skills are important predictors of academic

achievement. Within the context of the social reproduction of social inequality, we pose the following question: Is the socialization of such skills among the significant social mechanisms contributing to the importance of the parental home for the life chances of the offspring? Focusing specifically on conscientiousness, we use school grades at ages 9 and 10 as the outcome to combine and compare three pathways toward achieving these grades: the impact of children's conscientiousness on their school grades;

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parental conscientiousness and parental stratification as sources for differential conscientiousness of children; and the mediation of this interrelationship through different parenting styles. Our study investigates three questions: How important is conscientiousness for success? Is the development of conscientiousness influenced by social origin, and if so, can parenting explain this influence? Is conscientiousness as a general trait one of the cogs and wheels in this transmission process, or is it a more specific facet of conscientiousness? These single questions are all part of the overarching research question of whether successful parents make better use of the time they spend with their children to develop skills that will be rewarded in the society's opportunity structure (Jencks & Tach, 2006, p. 45), both early in school and later in academic institutions and the labor market.

By focusing on conscientiousness and parenting, we do not expect to find the one paramount mechanism by which social advantage is transmitted from one generation to the next. However, we hope to shed light on at least one of the multifaceted factors that contribute to the mysteriously constant and universal impact of social origin on educational and occupational attainment (Jackson, Goldthorpe, & Mills, 2005), which is only partly explained by tangible resources such as education, money, or status. The transmission of skills obviously explains another part of why “the apple does not fall far from the tree” (Jencks & Tach, 2006; Anger, 2012). Conscientiousness stands for just one of the handful of influential skills that are transmitted from one generation to another and that have a significant payoff over a person's life course—but in comparison it is an especially important one (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006).

The literature highlights parenting as a social mechanism by which valuable skills might be transmitted to offspring, although the question of whether it contributes in addition to other parental resources or whether it mediates their impact remains unresolved.

The results add to our current knowledge in two ways. First, we combine all these individual, only partially studied interrelationships into a comprehensive model, going from social origin and parental personality through the social mechanism of parenting to children's personality and children's success as based on school grades. By looking at multiple direct and indirect pathways simultaneously, we overcome the shortcomings described by Hoff, Laursen, and Tardif (2002, p. 246).¹ In other words, we are not interested in skill formation as such, nor do we focus on the influence of skill on school success as such; instead, we investigate the complex chain of influences of how social origin affects a child's attainment via skill formation via parenting. With parental education as an indicator of social origin, we limit our focus to the most important single predictor found in the existing literature; by choosing school grades among children ages 9 and 10

as the outcome measure, we refer to an early stratified short-term outcome in children's lives. Given the specific features of the German school institutions, with school grades achieved in year 4 of the *Grundschule* (corresponds to primary school or the elementary school in the US) we look at an outcome which is hardly subject to institutional selectivity and therefore hardly exposed to unmeasured confounding influences at this level. It is a well-known fact that standardization of the German system of education is very high in international comparison (e.g., Kerckhoff, 2001), including the practice of grading. Access to primary schools is organized along neighborhoods with no parental choice involved. Moreover, in Germany private schools do not play such a big role as in many other countries: Less than eight percent of all pupils are taught in private schools, and hardly any of the private schools are elitist.

Second, we do not look at the trait of conscientiousness at the highly aggregated (and much more extensively researched) level of the Big Five personality traits. Instead, we refer to two sub-dimensions, or “facets,” of conscientiousness, namely *orderliness* and *focus*. By distinguishing between these two specific facets, we try to more precisely capture the relevance of this trait with regard to the intergenerational transmission of social inequality, because we argue that they can be linked to the established body of sociological stratification theory more closely than can the more general trait of conscientiousness.

2. Conscientiousness as a skill relevant for social inequality

This call for a stronger theoretical and empirical integration of personality traits and skills into social inequality research is not new. It is a long established fact that cognitive skills play a significant role, but non-cognitive skills also have a significant influence on various dimensions of an individual's success in life (see e.g., Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & ter Weel, 2008; Cunha & Heckman, 2009; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999). The term “non-cognitive skills” refers quite loosely to a set of attitudes, behaviors and strategies that are thought to facilitate success in school, at work, and in society at large. There is now growing attention from policymakers to how such non-cognitive skills are developed in children and young people, and how one might compensate for a lack of those skills.

It is not clear what reasonably belongs in the category of non-cognitive skills, and the causal relationship between non-cognitive skills and later outcomes is, in general, not well established: “There is no single non-cognitive skill that predicts long-term outcomes. Rather key skills are inter-related and need to be developed in combination with each other” (Gutmann & Schoon, 2013, p. 3). Specific non-cognitive skills are not of equal importance across all fields of activity—if less so than cognitive skills—and they may play a significant role in one case and a minor role in another. Irrespective of these doubts, there appears to be a consensus that social and economic change has rather strengthened the importance of non-cognitive skills as compared with certified qualifications (see e.g.,

¹ “Right now, we know more about the relation between socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting and between SES and child outcomes than we do about the extent and manner in which the effects of SES on child outcomes are mediated by parenting.”

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