The Prestige Effect: Childhood SES Factors as Predictors of Personality

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Abstract

This study explored the predictive power of individual factors of childhood socioeconomic status (SES; i.e., income, education, occupation, and prestige) over adult personality traits. College students completed surveys assessing their personality and their childhood SES. The results revealed a significant positive predictive relationship between Parental Education and Prestige to the personality trait of Openness to Experience. We suggest that these relationships are important for several reasons. Primarily, they emphasize parental education as a significant factor within personality development. Secondly, they introduce parental prestige as an important factor within personality development, warranting further research. Finally, the results offer insights to the cyclical nature of poverty, with promise of modification based on the influences of education and prestige.

Background & Rationale

• Overall SES is related to specific personality factors: Conscientiousness, Openness, and Neuroticism (Jonasaitis, Sieger, Barlow, Edwards, & Williams, 2011)
• Childhood SES is related to adulthood personality (Ye & Waite, 2005)
• Social power, or prestige, is a part of SES (Wojciszke & Strzynska-Kuligowska, 2009)
• Previous research has yet to examine the relation between individual factors of childhood SES (Parental Income, Education, Employment, and Prestige) and adult personality (Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism)

Hypotheses

1. Traditional measures of childhood SES (Income, Education, Employment) will predict adult personality, specifically Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness
2. The addition of Parental Prestige into the measurement of childhood SES will contribute additional explained variance of adult personality traits above and beyond the traditional measures of childhood SES.

Method

Participants
• 60 college students (Mean age = 25.96, SD=8.89 )
• 72 Females, 28 Males
• 71% White, 11% African American, 2% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 6% Other

Materials
• Personality Assessments
  • Goldberg’s (1992) IPQ measure
  • Openness to Experience
  • Conscientiousness
  • Extraversion
  • Agreeableness
  • Neuroticism

• Childhood SES Scale
  • Harrell-Henderson Childhood SES Scale (adapted from Ye & Waite, 2005)
  1. How would you classify your family’s average yearly income prior to age 12?
  2. How many COMPLETED years of post-secondary college-level education did your parents (guardians) have prior to you being age 12?
  3. Describe the highest level of responsibility your parents (guardians) had on the farm prior to you being age 12 with “a” being the lowest level of responsibility and “b” being the highest level of responsibility.
  4. In general, describe how well respected your parents (guardians) were in your community prior to you being age 12?

Results

Hypothesis 1: Traditional measures of childhood SES will predict personality traits

• Traditional measures of childhood SES (income, education, employment) significantly predicted Openness to Experience, F(3, 94) = 4.43, p=.006, R² = .124

• Only Parental Education significantly predicted Openness to Experience (β=1.70, p=.001)
• Non-significant trend for Parental Income (β=-1.17, p=.09)
• No other personality traits were significantly predicted by traditional childhood SES variables

Hypothesis 2: Parental prestige will significantly predict personality traits

• Our second model, which included Parental Prestige, significantly predicted Openness to Experience, F(4, 93) = 4.46, p=.002, R² = .16, ΔR²=.037
• In this model, both Parental Education (β=1.60, p=.001) and Prestige (β=1.46, p=.045) significantly predicted Openness to Experience
• Non-significant trend for Parental Income (β=-1.28, p=.059)
• Other personality traits were significantly predicted by traditional childhood SES variables

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 partially supported:
• Traditional measures of childhood (especially Parental Education) were significantly predictive of the personality factor Openness to Experience.
• Consistent with Jonasaitis et al. (2011) and Ye and Waite (2005).
• No other personality variables were explained by traditional measures of childhood SES.
• Inconsistent with Jonasaitis et al. (2011) and Ye and Waite (2005).

Hypothesis 2 supported:
• The inclusion of prestige into the overall model contributed additional explained variance in Openness to Experience, indicating that traditional metrics of SES are incomplete.
• Possible explanations:
  • Well-respected parents/guardians might have access to a wider array of socially-dense friends and acquaintances, exposing children to an expanded world view, thereby increasing Openness.
  • Being raised by well-respected parents/guardians might have an insulating effect on becoming closed to experience (i.e., seeing the social rewards of a parent/guardian’s perceived openness [respect]), might encourage openness in the child via social learning.

Implications
• Prestige should be included in measures of SES.
• Parental investment into their own education and strong community relationships is an investment in their children, specifically into their children’s intelligence and creativity, the traits most associated with Openness.

Future Directions
• Examine possible differences in the observed predictive relationships based on whether the participant was raised in a single or double-parent household, and by traditional gender roles (male as breadwinner, female as caretaker).
• Future research should also include a measure of Prestige within established SES research.

References