

Intergenerational Transmission of Personality Traits in a Representative Sample of American  
Parents and Their Adult Children

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Abstract

Personality has garnered increasing attention in economics and sociology, hypothesized to influence preferences and govern human capital accumulation. While there is empirical documentation of the predictive power of personality traits in several social and economic dimensions, there has been less examination of the intergenerational correlation in personality and its potential role as a catalyst for the intergenerational correlation in economic outcomes. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health and the Add Health Parent Study, we characterize the transmission of the Big Five personality traits and, for the first time, grit, for a nationally representative sample of young Americans, interviewed at adulthood. We document sizable correlations, particularly for conscientiousness and grit, which are highly predictive of educational attainment and income. We find that a 1 standard deviation increase in the parent's conscientiousness (grit) is associated with 0.10 (0.14) standard deviation increase in the child's conscientiousness (grit). Rank-rank comparisons show that a 10-point increase in the parent's rank in the personality distribution corresponds to a 1-point increase for the child. There are no observable differences in transmission rates by gender or by socio-economic background.

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