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Conscientiousness and Eysenckian psychoticism as predictors of school grades: A one-year longitudinal study

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Abstract

Using data from the Wollongong Youth Study, we assessed the extent to which psychoticism (P) and conscientiousness (C) (both Time 1) predict academic performance one year later. Participants were in their first year of high school at Time 1 ($N = 784$; 382 males and 394 females; 8 did not indicate their gender). The mean age was 12.30 yrs. ($SD = 0.49$). End of year grades were obtained for English, Science, Mathematics, Religious studies, Visual art, and Design. C, but not P, significantly predicted Total grade as well as outcomes in English, Religious studies, Visual art, and Design. The impact of P was more modest. Changes in P and C over time were also related to academic performance at Time 2. Results are discussed with reference to previous work in this area and the nature of these major personality dimensions. Suggestions for future research are also made.

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1. Introduction

Although the possibility that personality might be related to academic performance (AP) was raised almost 100 years ago (Webb, 1915), it is only more recently that this area of research has

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undergone a significant resurgence. From modest studies such as the importance of character (Webb, 1915), to the role of persistence and cleverness in AP (Garnett, 1919), the development and refinement of contemporary personality trait theory as espoused in the Big Five (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1985; Goldberg, 1999; Norman, 1963) and the biologically based Gigantic Three (e.g. Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985) has provided a significant impetus for research into AP. The links between academic achievement and personality as assessed by these major personality frameworks have received widespread research attention, although the impact of some of these dimensions is still debatable (e.g. Ackerman & Heggestad, 1997; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005).

There now appears to be general consensus among researchers in psychology and education that, in addition to an individual's innate cognitive ability, other factors (such as personality) are able to explain significant additional variance in AP (e.g. Grigorenko & Sternberg, 1995). As Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2003) have explained, intelligence refers to what a person can do or achieve, whereas personality research is more concerned with *how* the individual will achieve certain outcomes. This would suggest that personality researchers have an important role to play in the area of AP.

Research into personality and AP to date has yielded at least two trends which have implications for the present study. First, the two most consistent personality domains associated with AP are psychoticism (P; Gigantic Three) and conscientiousness (C; Big Five). These dimensions are located in different (but related) conceptions of personality and, to the best of our knowledge, are not normally included in the same data set. The extent to which these dimensions are overlapping remains unresolved (see Costa & McCrae, 1995; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985), nor is it clear how P and C differ in their respective influence on AP.

Secondly, a significant proportion of research produced thus far has been conducted among convenience samples of university psychology students (see, for example, the many studies cited in Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005). By their very nature, such samples are highly biased. Because adolescence is a time of transition and developmental change (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006) and because it is not clear whether results obtained from university students can be generalized to school students, the present research sought to assess the long-term impact of P and C on AP across a number of different subjects among high school students.

1.1. *Psychoticism*

Eysenck hypothesized that the “uncaring and hostile nature” of the high P individual will invariably result in poor academic outcomes (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985, p. 322), a prediction borne out by many subsequent studies across a wide array of academic outcomes. For example, high P scoring students were found to have poor oral expression and work habits (Furnham & Medhurst, 1995) as well as poor self-rated academic skills (Heaven, Mak, Barry, & Ciarrochi, 2002). School students judged by teachers to be interested in their studies were found to have low P scores (Aluja-Fabregat, Balleste-Almacellas, & Torrubia-Beltri, 1999).

Furnham and Medhurst (1995) reported strong links between P and tutors' reports of students' seminar behaviour. High P individuals were rated as having a low grasp of subject matter, work habits, motivation, written expression, oral expression, and participation in seminars. Petrides and colleagues found support for the important role of psychoticism in predicting school grades among senior school students (Petrides, Chamorro-Premuzic, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2005).

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