



# Persistent and repetitive: Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder and self-employment



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## ABSTRACT

Are individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) more likely to be self-employed? Building on recent works on mental health conditions and entrepreneurship, we examine whether the persistent and repetitive habits of individuals with OCPD could increase the odds of self-employment. Based on a sample of participants from the 2001–2002 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), those with OCPD were more likely to be self-employed. Additionally, our results suggest that males with OCPD and younger individuals with OCPD (marginally supported) were more likely to be self-employed. The findings are robust to additional specifications, and have implications for research on mental health and self-employment.

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between self-employment and mental health conditions has been at the center of a growing stream of entrepreneurship research. Several recent studies have examined whether specific mental health conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are associated with both the likelihood individuals will engage in self-employment (Verheul et al., 2015, 2016) as well as how well individuals will perform in entrepreneurial endeavors (Thurik et al., 2016; Wiklund et al., 2016). For example, evidence suggests that individuals with ADHD could potentially experience higher levels of creativity and innovation (White and Shah, 2006, 2011) which could enhance their ability to thrive in self-employment. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the coping strategies that individuals develop as a result of ADHD could prove beneficial within entrepreneurial contexts (Wiklund et al., 2016). However, while there is growing interest in the association between mental conditions and self-employment, most of this stream of research has focused specifically on the relationship between ADHD and entrepreneurship, to the exclusion of other mental conditions. Motivated by evidence suggesting that obsession is a characteristic that is strongly associated with entrepreneurs (Spivack et al., 2014), we develop and test a model intended to further our understanding of the association between Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD) (Grant et al., 2012) and self-employment.

Our contention that OCPD could be related to self-employment is based on the logic that specific traits characteristic to individuals who experience OCPD, have been shown to influence entrepreneurial activity and performance. Individuals with OCPD are known to be persistent, and because entrepreneurship often involves high levels of failure and adversity (Holland and Shepherd, 2013; Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011), the ability to persist could prove beneficial for those who engage in such activities. Furthermore, individuals with OCPD are often characterized as perfectionists, which can in turn translate into them having advantages in

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entrepreneurial learning efforts (Politis and Gabrielsson, 2015) and expending significant effort with regards to venturing activities (Stoeber et al., 2013), thereby potentially increasing their ability to succeed in entrepreneurial contexts (Gorgievski et al., 2014). Moreover, individuals with OCPD frequently exhibit an inflated sense of responsibility (Moritz et al., 2009), which has also been linked to entrepreneurship and self-employment (Fuller and Tian, 2006; Markman and Baron, 2003). Because recent evidence suggests that indeed OCPD might reflect a spectrum of various sub-conditions each with their own defining characteristics (Mataix-Cols et al., 2005), uncovering whether OCPD is associated with self-employment could provide valuable insights, and shine light on nascent research into the relationship between specific mental conditions and self-employment.

This article makes the following contributions. First, we extend research regarding the potential relationship between mental health conditions and self-employment (Thurik et al., 2016; Wiklund et al., 2016). Extending findings on ADHD and self-employment, our study provides evidence that these activities could also be related to personality conditions, namely OCPD, and that these relationships could be contingent on individual characteristics, specifically, sex and age. Second, we respond to recent calls regarding the necessity of examining the psychopathology of individuals who engage in self-employment (Hisrich et al., 2007). Finally, we extend our existing knowledge regarding OCPD as a personality disorder, and demonstrate that this perspective could have important implications for the study of entrepreneurship.

## 2. OCPD and self-employment

OCPD is characterized by the presence of obsessions (defined as unwanted intrusive thoughts, doubts, images or urges that repeatedly enter the mind), compulsions (defined as repetitive behaviors or acts that individuals feel the drive to perform in response to an obsession), or often both (Veale and Roberts, 2014). While the presence of such mental conditions has been shown to have generally detrimental effects on work performance within organizational settings (Erickson et al., 2009), the association between OCPD and self-employment remains unexplored.

Recent evidence suggests that OCPD is a somewhat heterogeneous condition (Amerio et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2012; Mataix-Cols et al., 2005), and that it could in reality represent an entire spectrum of sub-conditions (Miguel et al., 2005), each with their own unique traits and characteristics (Matsunaga et al., 2002). From this perspective, it is possible that certain forms of OCPD could relate to characteristics and traits that prove beneficial for individuals who are self-employed. As previously noted, some characteristics associated with OCPD could indeed provide benefits for those who are self-employed. The perfectionist tendencies often exhibited by individuals with OCPD (Moritz et al., 2009) could potentially manifest as workaholism (Stoeber et al., 2013), which has been shown to have a positive association with innovation (Gorgievski et al., 2014) and entrepreneurial activity (Spivack et al., 2014). Moreover, the elevated sense of responsibility that individuals with OCPD often experience could prove beneficial with regards to the likelihood of engaging in, (Fuller and Tian, 2006) and persisting with (Holland and Shepherd, 2013), entrepreneurial initiatives. As such, we expect that OCPD will have a positive association with the likelihood that individuals will be self-employed.

While it is important to understand the association between OCPD and self-employment, the strength of this relationship could be contingent on individual characteristics. One of the most prominent factors that could influence the relationship between OCPD and self-employment is sex, a factor also central to entrepreneurship research. Substantial evidence indicates that sex does influence function among individuals with OCPD (Matsunaga et al., 2002), and indeed OCPD is more common in males than it is in females (Grenier et al., 2009). Therefore, if OCPD is positively related to self-employment, it is likely that this relationship is more pronounced in males rather than females, resulting in males with OCPD exhibiting higher levels of self-employment than females with OCPD. Furthermore, males are also more likely to experience chronic or persistent OCPD type behaviors (Bogetto et al., 1999), which could also translate into a higher incidence of self-employment among males with OCPD than females with OCPD. Based upon this reasoning, we expect that sex will moderate the relationship between OCPD and self-employment, such that this relationship will be stronger for males than for females.

In addition to the moderating influence that sex might have on the relationship between OCPD and self-employment, age, “a proxy for general human capital,” could influence the association between OCPD and self-employment (Gimeno et al., 1997, page 759). Older individuals are more likely to accumulate financial, human, cultural, and social capital (Kim et al., 2006). It has also been shown that age can influence the expression of characteristics of OCPD related behaviors (Diniz et al., 2004). In fact, prior research indicates that older individuals can experience lower levels of psychological symptoms associated with certain mental conditions, and are potentially better equipped to cope with the specific issues related to psychological conditions (Segal et al., 2001). If so, it is possible that as individuals grow older, and are better able to manage and cope with their OCPD, they could be more apt to exit self-employment for more traditional forms of employment.

Therefore, while evidence implies that the likelihood of self-employment increases in general with age (Zissimopoulos and Karoly, 2007), for younger individuals, it is possible that OCPD will be more strongly associated with self-employment than for older individuals, due to the relative level of symptoms they experience in combination with their overall ability, or lack thereof, to manage their OCPD symptoms. As a result, although we expect older individuals in general to display higher levels of self-employment than younger individuals, we predict that OCPD will have a stronger association with self-employment for younger individuals than it will for older individuals.

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