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Book Review:

‘The Welfare Trait: How State Benefits Affect Personality’,  
by Adam Perkins, published by Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

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The centenary of the birth of Hans Eysenck was celebrated in 2016 by a special issue of *Personality and Individual Differences* (PAID; Corr, 2016a), and articles elsewhere (Corr, 2016b,c,d,e). As readers of PAID will know, Eysenck was often seen to be controversial, which led on one occasion, in 1973, at the London School of Economics (LSE), to a punch to his nose for daring to speak his well-informed, but contrarian, mind - this time regarding the relationships between personality, intelligence and social issues. It is, therefore, something of a chronological coincidence that one of my former PhD students, Adam Perkins, recently (February, 2016) had his lecture postponed at the LSE because of negative media reaction to his 2015a book, *The Welfare Trait: How State Benefits affect Personality* (hereafter the 'WT'). His rescheduled lecture in June, 2016, passed off without incident, but not without invective (LSE, 2016; a film of this lecture may be seen) – as the *Times Higher Education* put it, 'Welfare state critic savaged at LSE talk' in a scholarly 'bare-knuckle boxing match' (Grove, 2016). Much in keeping with Eysenck's record, while much of the reaction to the WT has been negative – now facilitated by instantaneous social media - many positive views have been expressed, especially in the more sombre national newspapers (e.g., in *The Times*; Russell, 2016).

Adam Perkins is Lecturer in the Neurobiology of Personality at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience (IoPPN), at King's College London, formerly the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP), where Eysenck spent the best part of his academic life - Perkins's academic title could hardly be closer to his central research interest. Perkins has another connection to Hans Eysenck. In 2015, he won the Early Career Development Award from the *International Society for the Study of Individual Differences* (ISSID). In my introduction to his ISSID Award Lecture I said that I considered he embodied the true spirit of Eysenck by which I meant that both are principled enough to put forward views *as they see*

*things*. The WT book is very much in the Eysenckian tradition of extending differential psychology to social issues – and for so daring, it has outraged many people.

As summarised in Perkins (2016), the WT thesis argues that a generous welfare state has the capacity to foster an ‘employment-resistant personality’, as he dubs it, especially in some claimants who have pre-disposing traits of low agreeableness and low conscientiousness. This is a contentious, if not unreasonable, hypothesis because in the UK alone there are some 4.5 million (employment aged) households where nobody works. Of course, personality is not the whole picture, nor necessarily the largest part of it, as unemployment is partly the consequence of the rapidly changing landscape of the global workforce and the structural changes wrought by technology.

The central plank of Perkins’s WT thesis is that personality *is* part of the unemployment picture. This suggestion is quite novel because in policy considerations of social welfare, at least in the UK, it is not considered at all – indeed, the *very* idea is treated with utter suspicion. This was clearly shown at a public debate involving Adam Perkins and James Bartholomew at the venerable Royal Institution, London, in June, 2016 (Intelligence<sup>2</sup>, 2016; this was recorded) where a Labour Member of Parliament, Jesse Phillips, and the former head of the Number 10 Policy Unit (under the Tony Blair administration), Matthew Taylor, were clearly perplexed as to why personality needed to be considered at all. Their comments reflected the wide-spread (mis)understanding that to talk of ‘personality’ is to make judgements about character and personal virtue, and this is especially distasteful when applied to those most disadvantaged in society. Despite their opposition, of interest to the WT thesis, both opponents of Perkins’s (and Bartholomew’s) view expressed their belief that long-term disability welfare payments, in particular, makes people, on average, more ill, and that some welfare claimants, as Jesse Phillips put it, “swing the lead” (in British parlance, meaning to shirk labour or malingering).

In the arena of public policy debate, personality psychology has manifestly failed to get its message across. The WT tries to correct the situation. It does so by putting forward the message that there is a personality x situation/environment interaction occurring: the incentives offered by the welfare state are not processed in the same way by different personality types. For example, there is evidence that people low on conscientiousness need a higher level incentive to be motivated to work (Borghans, Meijers, & Ter Well, 2008; Segal, 2012). The WT argues that ‘employment-resistant’ personality traits are inculcated largely via social (by also with the help of genetic) means, passed on to offspring who, Perkins argues, are more numerous among non-working families. The WT presents the case for personality and, thus, have proved explosive.

As shown below, the reaction to Perkins’s book attests to predictive accuracy of the dust-cover comment:

“The Welfare Trait is electrifying energising and shocking. Dr Perkins, an expert in the neurobiology of personality, argues that a generous welfare state can proliferate employment-resistant personality characteristics. The scientific discharge of this new theory is sure to spark high voltage debate be prepared for a jolt!”

### **The Welfare Trait (WT) thesis**

The WT is composed of a patchwork of empirical evidence weaved together to form a novel theory, but one in much need of further data. To its credit, it highlights the type of evidence required to test adequately its central claims. The limitations of the WT thesis is not the fault of Perkins who had to rely on the extant empirical literature which, at best, is sparse and unequal to the task of permitting anything approaching compelling, let alone definitive,

conclusions. Yet, the available evidence raises intriguing possibilities with major policy implications – Eysenck-like, bringing personality psychology into the public limelight.

At the outset, it should be noted that Perkins is not the only academic with an interest in voluntary unemployment (e.g., the sociologist Dunn, 2013, 2014, has written extensively on the ‘choosiness’ of many unemployed claimants who prefer unemployment to an undesirable job, even when it would pay more than they receive on benefits; see also, Dunn, Grasso, & Saunders, 2013). (However, it should be conceded that it is much easier for an employed person to agree to the statement that ‘almost’ any job is better than being unemployed when they are not likely to be in a position to be required to take one.) Also, Perkins is not the only person who doubts that the millions of people on unemployment benefit, as well as a large number in receipt of various forms of disability welfare are actively looking for work, and those on in-work benefits fully employed. Although almost everyone would agree that not *all* these claimants can be genuine, Perkins’s WT thesis is that the problem is much worse than usually assumed. He also points to the intergenerational cycle of unemployment, which has independent empirical support (Macmillan, 2014).

The WT thesis is composed of the following parts.

1. Conscientiousness and agreeableness are the personality factors most related to work success – conscientiousness by promoting ‘contracted’ work (e.g., explicit performance criteria) and agreeableness by promoting ‘non-contracted’ work (e.g., implicit performance of organisational citizenship) – what Perkins might call, but does not, the ‘employment-receptive personality’.
2. There is evidence that, *on average*, compared to those fully employed, those unemployed have lower levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness (and higher levels of composite psychoticism) – Perkins (2015a) call this the ‘employment-resistant personality’. This is not surprising because these personality types are more

likely to be over-presented among the unemployed, either out of free choice or by exclusion from employment due to their negative attitudes and behaviour.

3. Typically, unemployed people are less attentive to their children, and behave towards them in a non-conscientious and disagreeable manner; and this leads to the socialisation of children along non-conscientious and disagreeable lines (there is also a genetic transmission mechanism) – Perkins (2015a) call this outcome the ‘mis-development’ of personality.
4. Unemployed (and part-employed) females regulate their fertility in response to changes in welfare benefit and this seems to be achieved by the better use of contraception rather than increased number of abortions, which indicates that females are capable of and willing to adaptively regulate behaviour.
5. More children are born to unemployed households, which serves only to worsen the above negative effects and imposes a larger financial burden on the welfare state.
6. Following David Lykken’s (1995) work, Perkins advances the intriguing claim that those at the extreme poles of conscientiousness and agreeableness are relatively fixed in their ways and, in consequence, are less vulnerable to social influences of both positive and negative kinds. He argues that it is those around the middle of the distributions who are most vulnerable - for Perkins, this is worrying because this is where the majority of people, especially children, are located.

Many empirical studies are cited in support of these claims, and since the publication of the book further data has been published to support the WT thesis. Perkins (2016) updates the WT theory in his contribution to the special issue of PAID devoted to Hans Eysenck.

## Synopsis of Book

Somewhat unusually for an academic work, Perkins starts the book by stating that before his academic career he worked in a variety of low paid jobs, and in intervals between them claimed unemployed benefit. He is clear about his “great admiration for our welfare state, as well as the belief that most unemployed individuals are keen to work and only rely on the welfare state temporarily” (p. 16/17). With his scientific career in personality psychology, coupled with his personal employment history, he may be well placed to join together these two fields. He is especially eager to avoid the crass characterisations of the unemployed as either: “stereotyped as genetically hardwired to be unconscientious and disagreeable, shunning work for a life of idleness courtesy of the public purse” or “helpless victims of capitalism, mere leaves blown around by the powerful winds of the global economy” (p. x). As is evident from these quotes, Perkins’s theory inevitably touches on political issues, and he ends the book with policy recommendations. Contentiously he recommends that welfare payments should be reduced to a level that equates to no more children, on average, being born to workless families. A second recommendation is built on the early intervention studies showing long term benefits to non-cognitive ‘soft’ skills, which relate to lower unemployment, less welfare dependency and so on. Perkins heavily relies upon the early intervention studies in the USA, analysed by James Heckman and others (e.g., Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013), which show that, compared to those entered into the treatment arms, control subjects from social disadvantaged households are much more likely to develop aggressive, antisocial and criminal behaviour that impairs later-life social and occupational outcomes. Perkins advocates an increase in early intervention in what used to be called ‘problem’ families, now ‘troubled families, in the UK (UK Government, 2016). This second recommendation is consistent with Eysenck’s revised views on the value of early

interventions, such as Headstart. After noting that IQ is not changed in the long term by such early-life, he stated in his last book in 1998, *Intelligence: A New Look*:

‘To say this is not to downplay the very real achievements of the Head Start program. Concentration on IQ obscures the many real advantages enjoyed by the children affected, and the general educational achievements often reported. The early stress on IQ improvement was undoubtedly misplaced.’ (p. 101)

The WT opens with discussion of the problem of providing unrestricted unemployment payment which may discourage some people from choosing to work for a living. This issue was very apparent to Beveridge (1942) when the social welfare system was first introduced in the UK in the 1940s – the danger being that the supply of welfare creates its own demand and poses a ‘moral hazard’. As observed by the Nobel Prize winner, James Heckman (2008): “Those cohorts who have lived the greater fraction of their lives under the generosity of the welfare states come to accept its benefits and game the system at higher rates.” Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 *The Selfish Gene*, makes a similar point when he opines that this greatest example of altruism has the potential to self-destruction by being exploited by free-loaders. Perkins’s point is that to “protect the welfare state from itself” we need to understand the psychological mechanisms that erode the work ethic and human capital so that “we can implement amendments that preserve its good points but ameliorate its weaknesses” (p. 2).

### **Incentivisation to (Un) employment**

The first point Perkins’s WT thesis emphasizes is that the rate of reproduction of children born into disadvantaged households tracks the generosity of welfare benefits. Although all such social data must rely upon correlational methodology, even when

associations (i.e., apparent ‘effects’) are studied over time, a causal interpretation is strengthened by interviews with welfare claimants who report discontinued use of contraception in response to increased welfare payments (Dunn, 2014). As discussed by Perkins, the work of Brewer and colleagues in the UK (Brewer, Ratcliffe, & Smith, 2012) show very clearly that women in households with a low level of education significantly increase (by around 15%) their number of children following a generous increase of in-work child-related benefits, which increased per-child spending by 50% in real terms – this incentivised them to reduce the number of hours worked because of the punitive marginal rate of taxation incurred by continuing to work more than 16 hours per week. All of this makes sense because, by the design of these changes, working fewer hours resulted in higher net benefits.

But Brewer (2016) takes issue with the conclusion that these families were having more children. He considers an alternative possibility, namely that families were deciding to have babies earlier, and not more of them. As he says: “We think it is highly likely that at least some of the change was in the timing of births and in the paper we present evidence that the reforms slightly reduced women’s age-at-first-birth. This means that the 15% is an upper bound on the true impact on the number of additional children being born.” Brewer goes on to make another point; as they say: “Perkins conflates low-income households (which are the focus of our study) with workless households”, adding “So, it is not the case that our research found that the reforms increased births amongst workless or welfare-receiving families by 15%: instead, our research found that the reforms increased births amongst couples where both adults have relatively low levels of education by 15%, and where the majority of the additional support for families with children was conditional on having at least one adult in work.” This is an important clarification. Yet in terms of the WT thesis, it implies that changing welfare benefits affects a broader class of welfare claimants than even

the WT considers. Brewer concludes by saying: “Our research highlights the fact that decisions about whether and when to have children are affected by material circumstances and incentives. It adds to a body of research that shows that the generosity of government support can have an impact on birth rates for some households. But it does not imply the scale of changes to the number of children born into workless families that Perkins has suggested.” Clearly more work is needed to quantify what has already been established: more generous welfare payments lead to more births, at least in the short term.

The WT thesis contention is supported by other work. For example, in the USA, Argys, Averett and Rees (2000) analysed data from a naturalistic (quasi-experimental) study of the effects of not paying extra benefits to families who have additional children. This study capitalised on the fact that, at the time, such provision varied state-by-state. The results lend support to the claim that reducing incremental benefits decreases pregnancies (without increasing abortions) by presumably, greater and more careful use of contraception.

Other evidence further supports this general point. For example, Skirbekk and Blekseaune (2013) point to *reduced* reproduction in conscientious females. In contrast, males higher on openness to experience show reduced fertility. If replicated, this would imply that more births are found among low conscientious females, and less cognitively open males – as openness to experience is correlated with general cognitive ability, this would imply that, on average, such children will be less conscientious, less open to intellectual curiosity and, possibility, lower in cognitive ability. The WT thesis takes comfort from findings which show that countries with a higher rate of fertility also have significantly enhanced welfare benefits (Halla, Lackner, & Scharler, 2016).

Not only does the number of children born to claimants seem to track the generosity of welfare benefits, the WT thesis contends that this situation is compounded by the finding that people with an employment-resistant personality are likely to have more children in the

first place. Something that is bound to raise hackles, Perkins considers the ‘financial irresponsibility’, as he sees it, associated with this personality profile which contributes further to social and economic disadvantage. As he rather indelicately puts it: “...such parents do not tend to manage their welfare benefits conscientiously to improve the lot of their children, but instead tend to waste the money on unnecessary purchases.”

In addition, Perkins surveys the evidence that despite having more time on their hands, unemployed parents have less interaction with their children and of a much lower quality (e.g., talking with them less often than employed parents). He believes that this finding provides further evidence that employment-resistant people are also less agreeable and conscientious not only with the world of work but also with their own children. This lack of social and verbal investment serves to foster less conscientious and agreeable children: personality ‘misdevelopment’, as he labels it and it may contribute to the intergenerational unemployment effect (Macmillan, 2014).

### **Reactions to the Welfare Trait thesis**

Reactions to the WT reflect the fact that several tacit assumptions are at play in the discussion of personality and the welfare state. There is still a tendency to assume that what is physical is (largely) beyond our control, but we must bear more responsibility for psychological states and conditions. This dichotomy in personal agency reflects deep-seated Cartesian dualism: this seems especially true when we are attributing personal responsibility on the basis of personality. But as Perkins states: “I realised that blaming welfare claimants who are work-shy for their attitude is pointless: we are no more responsible for our personality profiles than we are for height or our shoe size” (p. 16/7). This scientific attitude to the notion of free will and agency is very much in agreement with Eysenck’s who made essentially the same point in relation to personality and criminality (see Corr, 2016d).

Perkins anticipates, quite accurately, the likely objections to his work. (1) It may be mischaracterised as an attempt to undermine the welfare state and/or demonise its claimants – Perkins’s comments given above speak for themselves (this did not stop a piece by The Equality Trust (2016) calling the book ‘The Hateful Trait’). (2) A personality psychologist should say nothing about the welfare state, and especially a neurobiologically-inclined one should not speak on such sensitive social matters – to the extent that this criticism is worth answering, it is professional demarcation dispute. (3) The relationship between personality and the welfare state is simply too complex for much light to be cast – Perkins provides a compelling retort: “...my argument is that, at the moment, there is no scientific discussion of personality and welfare. What this book is aiming to do is to blaze a trail”, but this “...will no doubt be bedevilled by thorny topics, empirical quicksands and conceptual wrong turns” (p. 17). Furthermore, Perkins is clear that “...this book is not an attempt to dress up political motives as science” (p. 17). Eysenck certainly believed that scientists should be free to explore whatever problems they want, without fear or favour (Corr, 2016c,d).

In any event, all scientific theories must be subject to criticism, and very few of them survive entirely the ravages of time and test. The WT thesis is likely to be no exception. It is, therefore, appropriate to consider some of the current criticisms of the theory. Regarding these, it should be remembered that it can take many years for the evidence to come in to support a major contentious position, as is now clearly seen in the case of Eysenck’s hereditarian position on the IQ question (Corr, 2016e).

### **Specific Criticisms**

Criticism of the WT comes in three forms. First, the abusive comments that fly around social media – *ad hominem* attacks were all too familiar to Eysenck during his lifetime. We need not dwell upon them further.

Second, there are *ad rem* criticisms by psychologists on the concept of the employment-resistant personality profile. For example, Essi Viding (2016), a professor of developmental psychopathology at University College London, who is an expert on antisocial behaviour makes the point that the WT fails to show causal links for the claims made and what is said is likely to do harm than good: “Childhood disadvantage is clearly not good for anyone, but the dots do not connect between the welfare state somehow inducing ‘employment-resistant parents’ to maltreat and neglect their children. The problem is that the constellation of traits that Perkins describes does not predict who will maltreat and neglect their children with any reliability. And having better welfare most certainly does not induce dysfunctional parenting, if anything the opposite.” However, Viding concedes: “Children of the most vulnerable people in society run a higher than average risk of being maltreated or neglected, but the answer is not to increase the stressors to such families by cutting all financial support, the answer is to have more rigorous child protection and early intervention.” (*Note.* nowhere in the WT does Perkins make the suggestion that “all financial support” should be cut.) Viding adds: “Furthermore, there is (sic) no data on ‘employment-resistant personality’ and likelihood of maltreating/neglecting your children. Cumulative disadvantage in childhood is associated with poor long-term outcomes. The whole point of welfare is to mitigate such an effect.” This “no data” is an important point – the WT proposes a theory which can be tested by data, and it is such hard evidence that is not available at present. Viding makes a good point that, at the micro level, and without some form of mass personality testing, it is not yet possible to “predict who will maltreat and neglect their children with any reliability”. To cut benefits to all would disadvantage many families who are trying their level best in difficult circumstances.

Although reactions to the WT are to be found on UK national newspaper ‘reply’ pages, and across Facebook and Twitter, and there is even a website devoted to the critique of

it (PsychBrief, 2016), a representative collection of comments is available on *The Conversation* website in reply to Perkins's (2015b) summary of the WT thesis. Given that this journalism site is aimed at academics and journalists – it is meant to be conduit from academia to the media – it is somewhat dismaying to read comments such as this one from a (best not to be named) Lecturer at Cardiff University who states “The author mingles and quite deliberately, it seems, confuses the effects of disadvantage and of what he terms ‘the welfare state’. In so doing, he reveals that he is less concerned about research than about pushing an agenda.” However, this comment from this university employed academic is a tad undermined by the frank admission: “I haven't read the book.”

In the same *The Conversation* reply page, a good point is made by an Oxford University Senior Professorial Research Fellow, Pam Sammons: “This article shows a strong tendency to attribute causation from correlational data (interestingly the author does not report the effect sizes or any correlation or regression estimates)” and “The argument presented is highly simplistic and dangerous, moreover there is no evidence I have seen that reducing benefits would benefit disadvantaged children, quite likely the reverse would be the case.”

Another commentator makes another relevant point: “Adam - seems that you have made your case for a particular group of people on welfare. It also appears from the comments below that many academics disagree with you - but most seem to have read your article as if you are writing about ALL of the people on welfare.” This is an important point to which I return below.

Predictably, but not inappropriately, Critics jumped on several instances where statistics have been incorrectly reported in the WT. There is statistical muddle over the meaning of Multiple R square estimates in a paper by Perkins and colleagues (Perkins, Cserjesi, Ettinger, Kumari, Martin, & Arden, 2013) that got quoted in the WT book.

Dishonourably discharged military personnel compared to those honourably discharged showed higher fertility (explaining .03% of variance rather than 3% as stated) and higher unemployment (3.1% of variance rather than 31% as stated). Concerning Perkins's culpability in these errors, it should be noted that they were not detected by the other authors of this paper, which included three professors, and nor by the reviewers of the submitted manuscript – for this reason, it is unfair that Perkins should bear full responsibility for these oversights and nor can these errors be interpreted, as some have claimed, as evidence of mendacity.

Across the four studies, the Perkins et al. (2013) paper also reported personality correlations with reproductive fitness, but the multiple regression results were mixed (unlike the consistently positive association with being a catholic and the negative association with education level). Extraversion was negatively correlated in only one study, as was Neuroticism; Psychoticism was positively correlated in one study; and Conscientiousness and Openness negatively correlated in one study (where only the Big-5 measures were taken) – Agreeableness was not significantly correlated with fitness in this study. The zero-order correlation were not clearer – in Study 4 which included Big-5 measures, we see statistically significant correlations with fitness: Conscientiousness =  $-.10$ ; Openness =  $-.11$ ; and Neuroticism =  $.09$ . The consistency and strength of these associations are far from convincing.

A second statistical issue raised by critics that call for attention is the relationship between nonworking households and reproduction. Following a Freedom of Information (FoI) request, Perkins obtained UK government statistics (only mean values; the government statistical service would not supply standard deviations) that show the following average number of children per household: all working in household (1.63); some working, some not (1.74) and all not working in household (1.83). 'Household' is where there is, at least one

child between the ages of 0-15 years of age – this is important because it excludes households with no children. Perkins sees this comparison as a strength because it compares like-with-like. Also, as he notes there will be childless unemployed households due to medical conditions which negatively affect reproduction, and other types of households who would be much less likely to have children (e.g., disabled and homosexual couples). However, critics argue that when all households are included then this reproduction gradient flattens or even reverses in pattern – which may well be expected if many such households are not really in the reproduction market.

This specific difference of opinion highlights something of importance: although the ‘include everyone’ aggregate picture is informative at the macro level of analysis, it fails to do justice to the micro heterogeneity of groups of people claiming welfare benefits, which include the disabled, single mothers, those actively seeking employment but unable to find suitable jobs that would enable them to raise their family – in some areas, few jobs are available that pay enough to compensate for the loss of benefits and the additional costs of going to work – and, for sure, those unemployed people who have no intention of working (most of us can probably think of examples in among our own family and those people we know!), and those engaged in nefarious activities of one form or another. Perkins’s book takes a wide angle lens view of the social welfare problem, and the fine-grained analysis is not readily in view, although it is implied by some comments made in the book (see below).

In all of this debate, it is rather easy to put the WT on the backfoot because the extant evidence is poor. Perkins has marshalled what evidence exists; in contrast, critics have been notably reticent to present counterevidence of the type needed to refute the core pillars of the WT thesis.

It is evident that much of the criticism of Perkins’s treatment of the unemployment and the welfare state emanates from his unwillingness to accede to the dominant Titmuss

view of sociology and public policy which contends that unemployment is not a consequence of flawed individual characteristics but a reflection of structural dysfunction in economic and industrial organisation (for a summary of this position, see Borrell-Porta, 2016). Structural unemployment, and inducements to work, can indeed change attitudes to work (Gottschalk, 2005) and it should be an important focus of future research to combine the structural and differential approaches to understanding employment resistant and receptive attitudes, motivation and behaviour.

Specifically, it would seem important to examine the prevalence of employment-resistant (and receptive) personality characteristics in welfare claimants. Little work of this nature has been conducted but what has tends to support to the WT thesis. In this regard the Sheffield studies (Tonge, James & Hillam, 1975; Tonge, Lunn, Greathead & McLaren, 1981) are particularly informative because, despite their history of dysfunctional behaviour, the adults in the problem families were close to the normal range for personality variation: only 3% (two out of 66) met the criteria for antisocial personality disorder. However, 58% of the adults in the problem families displayed milder levels of dysfunctional behaviour such as impulsivity, irresponsibility, aggression or apathy. In comparison, 10.5% of the adults from the control group displayed a similar level of dysfunctional behaviour. (It is important to know that the problem and control families in Sheffield lived in the same community, sometimes next door to each other, and were highly similar in many aspects of social background and status.) Since the problem families were predominantly workless and the control families were predominantly employed, Perkins contends that these data allow an estimate of employment-resistant personality characteristics approximately six times more common amongst welfare claimants than workers. However, this is not a conclusive finding because the sample size was small (only 66 families in total) and Tonge and colleagues recruited only families that were intact (i.e., with both a father and mother present in the

household) which would mitigate against including the full spectrum of welfare claimants (e.g., single mothers) as well as the full spectrum of personality variation. Clearly more work along these lines is needed.

However, many of the limitations with the Sheffield studies have been addressed by the work of Vaughn, Fu, Beaver, DeLisi, Perron and Howard (2010) in the USA. This study has the merit of using a large and nationally representative sample of 43,093 adults. These attributes of the sample are particularly important because by surveying a broad and demographically representative sample, Vaughn et al. could draw stronger conclusions about the true prevalence of the traits of interest. What they found is that approximately 7% of welfare claimants meet the diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder. This contrasts to a prevalence of approximately 1% for antisocial personality disorder in the population in general. As Perkins (2016) elaborates, we can see that both studies produce similar estimates for the relative prevalence of dysfunctional employment-resistant personality characteristics amongst welfare claimants, namely 6:1 for the Sheffield studies and 7:1 for the Vaughn et al study. Perkins contends that this convergence is all the more impressive because the studies were done in different countries, with different welfare states and more than three decades apart. The absolute prevalence of employment-resistant personality characteristics amongst welfare claimants is more difficult to estimate because it depends upon severity: based on these data and others cited in the book, Perkins suggests “as a conservative estimate” that approximately 3-7% of welfare claimants possess severely employment-resistant personality profiles roughly equivalent to antisocial personality disorder, whereas somewhere around 50% have milder issues with behaving conscientiously and agreeably (Perkins, 2016) – we must assume that such estimates fluctuate depending on the rate of unemployment at any given time reflecting the health of the economy.

Recent work lends support to the claim that preexisting personality affect longer-term unemployment. For example, Daly, Delaney, Egan and Baumeister (2015) suggest that “the capacity for self-control may underlie successful labor-force entry and job retention, particularly in times of economic uncertainty”. They analysed two nationally representative British cohorts ( $N = 16,780$ ) and found that a low level capacity for self-control in childhood is related to unemployment across four decades – this finding survived controlling for intelligence, social class and gender. These associations were particularly pronounced during times of recession when the opportunity for worklessness is greater and the likelihood of opprobrium lesser.

Specifically in relation to conscientiousness, and again using a longitudinal study, in a sample of 4,206 adolescents, Egan, Daly, Delaney, Boyce and Wood (2016) found that higher levels of conscientiousness, as measured at age 16-17, predicted levels of later-life employment. More specifically, controlling for intelligence, gender and socioeconomic status, the less (-1 SD) conscientious had a 75% higher predicted unemployment rate than the highly (+1 SD) conscientious.

In relation to agreeableness, where findings are generally weak in relation to unemployment, Kern *et al.* (2013) found that of the two facets, ‘compliance’ and ‘compassion’, it was compliance that related to risk of unemployment (as well as teenage fatherhood and crime) – in contrast, compassion was related to longer committed relationships. These findings suggest that facet level analysis may be needed to expose the finer-grained detail of agreeableness in particular, but also possibly conscientiousness, on socioeconomic outcomes. Domain level description and analysis may be too coarse-grained to reveal the personality processes central to the WT thesis.

Some of the criticisms levelled at the WT thesis have merit and need proper consideration – they should not be dismissed as the mere product of the ideologically motivated. However, it is interesting to compare the reaction to Perkins’s work with that of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). In an amusing piece, Charles Murray (2005) recalls his travails with which Perkins can, no doubt, identify. Murray points to a number of strategies to undermine an opponent’s theory. First, imply ‘The whole thing is a mess’ - the goal here is to soften-up the battleground for specific attacks by eluding to factual errors, and implying there are many more, perhaps yet to be discovered. Second, criticise the sample used (e.g., it is too small and/or unrepresentative). Third, challenge the interpretation of results, implying bias and prejudgement. Then, if the forgoing has been done sufficiently well, it should be easy to challenge the conclusions drawn: make it *look* like the author is incompetent, or worse. Lastly, once the battlefield has been softened-up, challenge the reader to conclude that ‘Nothing is innocent’ and the author is up to no good and, therefore, cannot be trusted on any point. The aim is the build-up of such a degree of doubt that the naïve reader is left wondering whether, after all, there is something fishy about the whole thing. Mendacious for sure, but, not without its merits as an effective form of intellectual assault. (Something of the kind happened to Perkins; see LSE, 2016.)

### **Heterogeneity of welfare claimants**

Everyday observation of social life is permissive of the view that people exist in many different varieties, from the manifest ‘employment resistant’ to the well-intentioned claimant who genuinely wants to engage in productive employment. Heterogeneity is the bread-and-batter of personality psychology but it can be poison in public policy debate. To point out, as the WT does, that some claimants conform to Perkins’s characterisation of the ‘employment-

resistant personality' in no way stigmatises people belonging to other categories. One criticism from a personality viewpoint is that the heterogeneous nature of these different welfare claiming groups is insufficiently clear in the book – but, again, to a large extent, this outcome is the result of the lack of relevant extant data.

In addition to the heterogeneity of welfare claimants, it might be said – and this is implicit in the WT – that, *to some extent*, all claimants are subject to the motivationally corrosive effects of welfare provision. We need only think of the highly motivated single parent who would need to take the risk, and incur the additional costs, of taking a relatively low paid job and, then, organising and paying for childcare provision. In many cases, especially in areas of economic deprivation where well-paid jobs are few-and-far between, the highly motivated unemployed person has an uphill struggle to secure and maintain a decent standard of living – minimum wage on a 'zero-hour' contract (where the hours to be worked in any one week is not known in advance) are not much of an incentive to forego the certainty of regular welfare payments. It is possible that such people do suffer motivational corrosion – if, indeed, this is the case then it should not be beyond our wit to sympathise with their predicament.

### **Evaluation of the Welfare Trait Thesis**

Perkins (2015a) makes clear (p.14/15) that his theory must: "...stand the test of time. Thus, the validity of the welfare trait theory will only become apparent decades from now. Even then, some new findings could be made that counter it, so the most accurate intellectual stance to take is that theory validation never really ends." But, where does the theory stand now?

1. The first postulate of the theory is well supported: conscientiousness and agreeableness are most related to 'contracted' work success (Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Indeed, specifically in the case of conscientiousness it would be most

strange if it were otherwise. Agreeableness is more complex because superior performance in some job roles may require lower levels (e.g., police officer), but it seems related to non-contracted ('citizenship-type') behaviours (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). There is evidence that higher levels of conscientiousness (along with lower levels of neuroticism) are related to job seeking behaviour and keeping a job; as Uysal and Pohlmeier (2011) say, "We can show that personality traits are major determinants of job search behaviour". However, their study showed that agreeableness (and extraversion) are not related in a similar fashion – it would be valuable to examine their facets to determine if more subtle effects are in play.

2. The second postulate that, on average, unemployed people have lower levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness (and higher levels of psychoticism) has good face validity, and these differences could be driven by the higher prevalence of personality disordered people who are unemployed – once more, it would be surprising if it were otherwise. However, the extant evidence on the general unemployed population is much weaker for the simple reason that very little data has been collected. The data reported by Perkins is suggestive at best, at best, of such an association. However, recent data between childhood self-control (Daley et al., 2015) and adolescent Big-5 traits (Egan et al., 2016) and (un)employment status lends better support to the claim that personality contributes to unemployment.
3. The third postulate relates to the 'employment-resistant' personality (low conscientiousness and agreeableness) and fertility. As summarised by Perkins (2016), low scorers on conscientiousness tend to have more children (e.g., Jokela, Hintsanen, Hintsanen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2010; Jokela, Alvergne, Pollet, & Lummaa, 2011; Jokela, 2012); and, conversely, higher levels of conscientiousness are related to decreasing levels of female fertility, at least in Norway (Skirbekk & Blekesaune,

2014). In addition, criminal offenders have, on average, more children than individuals never convicted, in Sweden at least (Yao, Långström, Temrin, & Walum, 2014). Finally, addressing the generational issue, lower levels of conscientiousness are linked to more children and grandchildren in both sexes (Berg, Lummaa, Lahdenperä, Rotkirch, & Jokela, 2014), and there is an intergeneration effect on unemployment (Macmillan, 2014). Here, the WT thesis is not without empirical support.

4. The fourth postulate, again talking in terms of average behaviour, unemployed people are less attentive to their children, and behave towards them in a non-conscientious and disagreeable manner is more problematic. Here, the reliance on the *average* behaviour of what are, most probably, heterogeneous groups of the unemployed and part-employed renders this claim weak by virtue, once again, of a lack of empirical evidence – however, there is little doubt that child neglect/abuse is more prevalent among socially and economically disadvantaged families, so this would seem an important target for a differential psychological research programme.
5. Related to point 4, the claim that the negative socialisation of the children along nonconscientious and disagreeable lines requires further theoretical elaboration and empirical data. We might think that the behavioural genetics finding of the relatively small influence of shared environmental effects should mitigate against this pernicious outcome.
6. The findings that unemployed (and part-employed) females regulate their fertility in response to changes in welfare benefits has good empirical, and quite independent, support; and this should come as no surprise because a major part of sensible ‘family planning’ is consideration of present and future occupational and financial factors. But, what we do not know is whether this regulation merely brings forward

reproduction or leads to more children being born. Again, it would be reasonably easy to test these various predictions.

7. Related to point 6, we do not know whether more children are born to unemployed households with the 'employment-resistant personality', as assumed by Perkins. The mean values presented for different types of household can only be a starting point, and such data must contain many confounding factors to render conclusions anything other than tentative. It would be far more informative to know the number of households in each category with 0, 1, 2, 3,  $n$  children. It could well be the case that most unemployed households do not have more children than those employed, but there is a higher incidence of 'larger families' among them – this would not necessarily be evident in means between different household types.
8. The intriguing proposal, adapted from David Lykken's (1995) work, that those children in the middle of the combined conscientiousness and agreeableness dimensions are most susceptible to social influences is well worth testing, and this could start with social influence experiments of the kind conducted in experimental social psychology. For now though, this must remain an intriguing possibility. On the face of it, we might assume larger roles for extraversion and neuroticism in socialisation/conditioning, and differential reactivity to reward and punishment; however, Perkins is right to point to psychoticism as a crucial factor here (Corr, 2003), which highlights the potentially important, but hitherto neglected, roles of Big-5 conscientiousness and agreeableness in welfare state effects.

### **Conclusions**

We have already encountered above Eysenck's position on the question of personal (ir)responsibility, and it is to Perkins's considerable credit that he does not attribute blame to those who, according to his WT thesis, may have acquired through no fault of their own,

both genetically and environmentally, a personality profile that militates against productive and agreeable engagement with society. To simply ignore this possibility seems, itself, morally reprehensible, and even callous to those who have to bear the consequences of a life on welfare (including psychological adjustment and mental illness).

But, the WT must be seen as a polemic, building-up the argument for personality *effects* in welfare and work attitudes, motivation and behaviour, however the thesis is limited by its reliance on *correlations*. It is for this reason that many public policy academics (see Kitty Stewart, LSE, 2016) take issue with the WT thesis – it is revealing that there is talk of a differences of ‘values’ and questioning of the ethics of even raising personality and welfare issues. It is evident that there remains a stronghold of the Standard Social Science model in modern thinking – and it contains little space, or tolerance, individual differences.

There are still too many unknowns in the literature to arrive at any definitive conclusions. However, if the test of a good theory is that it helps to explain the past and the present, and has the capacity to propose new hypotheses, then Perkins’s WT thesis passes it. The WT delineates a serious social problem that calls for psychological attention – whatever one’s *a priori* opinion on the matter, few would deny that this is not an important social issue. But, what is currently lacking is good-enough data. Given the prominence of this issue for the whole of society – and especially for those who are afflicted -- it would now seem an important task to set about collecting the necessary evidence to decide the issue one way or another. This is the Eysenckian way of addressing important questions of a social nature.

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