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A Model of How the Welfare State Leads to Personality Mis-Development

Up until this point in the book, we have primarily been preoccupied with laying out the evidential building blocks of the welfare trait theory: now it is time to assemble those blocks of evidence into a coherent model of welfare-induced personality mis-development, beginning by reminding ourselves of what this book is about. This book is about personality and the welfare state. It’s about our attitude to work and the factors that shape that attitude. But most of all, it is about asking how the welfare state might alter the personality profile of the population to any significant degree.

As we know from our own experiences in the workplace, as well as decades of scientific research, our employment prospects don’t just depend on how intelligent we are, but also on how keen we are to turn up on time at work, to do what we are told, to be polite to customers, to cooperate with colleagues, to obey workplace regulations and so on. In short, our employment prospects are influenced by our scores on two dimensions of personality that, in the jargon of personality research, are usually labelled as conscientiousness and agreeableness. Briefly stated, people with personality profiles that are relatively lacking in conscientiousness and agreeableness tend to do worse than average in the workplace (Barrick et al., 2001; Hogan, 2011). In line with this notion, people with this particular combination of personality characteristics – what I call the employment-resistant personality profile – are over-represented amongst welfare claimants (for example, Caspi et al., 1998). Studies suggest that part of this personality difference between welfare claimants and working
citizens is likely to be a result of the demoralising effects of unemployment (for example, Boyce et al., 2015), but we know that part of it is caused by these personality traits themselves, since longitudinal research shows that low levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness as measured in childhood are predictive of unemployment in adulthood (for example, Moffitt et al., 2011).

In the previous three chapters, we saw evidence that personality characteristics are transmitted from parent to child via both environmental and genetic channels. The over-representation of employment-resistant individuals in the welfare-claiming sector of the population therefore suggests that a welfare state which increases the number of children born to claimants risks proliferating the employment-resistant personality profile, because these children will tend to take after their parents in personality terms for both environmental and genetic reasons. This seems like an unfortunate situation, but scarcely a reason for hitting the panic button, because thus far we have not estimated the size of the problem caused by welfare-induced personality mis-development. The primary purpose of this chapter is to estimate whether welfare-induced personality mis-development is likely to be a large enough problem to deserve the attention of policymakers.

We will begin by revisiting the Perry Preschool Project which we first examined in detail in Chapter 5. This time, instead of comparing the life outcomes of the two groups of Perry Preschool participants (tutored versus untutored), we will compare their life outcomes to those of average individuals from approximately the same sector of society (African Americans who were approximately 40 years old in 2004). Such a comparison is very much a blunt instrument, but it will allow us to obtain an initial, tentative estimate of the magnitude of the effects on life outcomes of childhood disadvantage in the population as a whole.

Next we will examine the size of genetic effects on personality because, although the genetic influence on personality is modest compared to other traits (for example, intelligence), it is real. Therefore a full picture of the scale of welfare-induced changes in personality can only be obtained if genetic factors are also taken into account.

Finally, we will end this chapter with the presentation of a model that provides a quantitative estimate of the scale of welfare-induced