

***The Welfare Trait: How State Benefits Affect Personality.* Adam Perkins. 2016. Palgrave MacMillan.**

In *The Welfare Trait*, Adam Perkins has produced an extremely brave, thoughtful and, above all, very well-written piece of work. The book is very timely, as the UK government has, for the last few years, been pursuing a policy of welfare cuts. Welfare payments in the UK are linked to the number of children a claimant has, and only recently have the government limited welfare payments to any given family so that they cannot be more than the average income of a working person. Even so, they remain significantly above the average minimum wage, so long as one has a child. The Labour opposition in the UK have campaigned vociferously against even these cuts, insisting that those who find themselves on welfare are only there through a combination of bad luck, discrimination, and an unfair capitalist system.

This book has raised the ire of these people by convincingly challenging this view and, in particular, challenging it via a mainstream publisher. According to the journalist Toby Young, a senior editor at the leading science journal *Nature* refused to consider it for review because she regarded research into the personalities of the long-term unemployed as unethical (Young, 16 January 2016). Perkins' essential argument will be nothing new to many readers of this journal, but will be shocking to most sociologists. He claims that being on welfare is predicted by a certain kind of personality; one that is aggressive, anti-social, impulsive and, in essence, averse to work. Perkins cites evidence that, in the UK, a 3% rise in welfare payments leads to a 1% rise in the fertility of welfare recipients. Accordingly, Perkins argues, welfare encourages those who have an 'employment resistant personality' to breed. Indeed, he shows that those who are on welfare have higher fertility than those who are not. Perkins - who lectures the neurobiology of personality at King College London - notes the evidence for the relatively high heritability of personality, concluding that it is personality which causes

people to end-up on welfare rather than relative poverty which causes the development of a certain kind of personality. Perkins argues that the result of this will be the eventual collapse of a society that is able to maintain a welfare system. Moreover, the parasitic nature of many welfare claimants will shatter taxpayer confidence in this system.

Elaborating on his argument, Perkins shows that welfare recipients don't simply outbreed workers because they are impulsive and thus less efficient users of contraception. He presents evidence that they quite deliberately increase their fertility in response to increased welfare. Thus, foreign welfare recipients in the UK have higher fertility than welfare recipients in those peoples' home countries, where welfare is less generous. Perkins also shows that these recipients waste their welfare on extravagances, leaving their children impoverished. Perkins demonstrates, therefore, that the employment resistant personality leads to a negative environmental impact on the children. Even putting aside its heritability, they are more likely to be neglected and are even spoken to less than children of the employed are.

The aim of Perkins' book is to persuade sociological types, so he is extremely careful in his next move, which is to show that personality is significantly genetic. As such, the children of those with an 'employment resistant personality' will inherit the genes for this very personality type. With the educated layman in mind, he introduces the reader to the evidence for personality heritability in animals in some detail and only then moves on to twin research in humans. He stresses that environment is also a significant dimension to personality, and explores the 'Life History Model' of development. This is that an unstable environment leads to a 'fast' or 'r-strategy,' in which you are aggressive, invest little in your (many) offspring and live for the now. A predictable environment leads to a 'K-strategy,' where you are cooperative and invest greatly in a small number of offspring. This careful, slow-roast method, hopefully, beguiles and persuades the sceptical, sociological reader.

Indeed, Perkins attempts to ingratiate himself with such people by stressing that he has, himself, claimed welfare, implying that not all claimants are degenerate. And he emphasises that he wants to preserve the welfare state and it is for this reason that welfare must be less generous such that the ‘employment resistant’ stop outbreeding those who work.

However, despite the book’s bravery and readable nature, many readers of this journal will spot two fundamental problems with it. The first is that Perkins completely ignores intelligence, which has been shown to be a very significant negative predictor of being on welfare and which is more heritable than personality, at around 0.8 (see Lynn, 2011). Much of the research he cites would seem to imply that it is actually those with low intelligence whom the welfare state is effectively encouraging to have children. For example, an analysis of low income families in the northern English industrial town of Sheffield in the 1970s showed that the 33 families regarded as ‘problem families’ – those requiring assistance from social services and other government agencies – were more impulsive, apathetic, paranoid and aggressive. These characteristics are associated with low Agreeableness and low Conscientiousness as Perkins rightly argues. However, they are also associated with low intelligence.

Perkins also cites the so-called Dunedin Study, a New Zealand longitudinal study which began in 1972. It began by presenting children aged 4 and 5 with a marshmallow and telling them that they could eat the marshmallow now or wait 15 minutes and receive a second marshmallow in addition. This is a standard ‘delay of gratification’ test and it correlates with intelligence. The children who were able to delay gratification, unsurprisingly, were rated by their parents as ‘more academically and socially competent, verbally fluent, rational, attentive, planful, and able to deal well with frustration and stress’ (quoted in Perkins, p.48) Again, these traits are associated with intelligence. Those who were found to be lower in this ability to delay gratification were more likely to find themselves unemployed or having low

socioeconomic status as adults. Clearly, Perkins' research, or that which he cites, demonstrates that a personality comprised of low Agreeableness and low Conscientiousness is associated with elevated levels of unemployment and the welfare state may be assisting these kinds of people to have children. But much of it also implies that intelligence is highly relevant and this is congruous with the earlier research (see Lynn, 2011).

Indeed, new evidence would actually seem to indicate that the welfare state is *not* causing those with low Agreeableness and low Conscientiousness to have more children than the employable. As such, it will not collapse – as Perkins fears – due to it increasing the fertility of the employment resistant personality, even it contributes to this. Low intelligence is the other major factor in welfare and there is every reason to think the welfare state encourages fertility among those of low intelligence. As Perkins argues, Conscientious and Agreeableness are part of a constellation of inter-correlating characteristics known as a slow Life History – or K – strategy. Woodley et al. (2016) have shown that in Sweden (a strong welfare state) and the USA (a weaker welfare state), slow Life History strategy actually positively correlates with fertility. They argue that the reason for this is that living 'for the now' involves having as many kids as you can as quickly as you can because you perceive the environment to be unstable. However, you invest little in the children and are, in essence, simply programmed to seek out lots of sex with lots of attractive partners. Modern contraception means you can avoid the resultant large number of children. In earlier times, you could have these children and invest very little energy or resources in them and some would likely survive. But, now, you do not want these children because modern society will compel you to invest resources in them, on pain of punishment. It has developed agencies to track fathers down and extract money from them, for example. By contrast, the 'slow' strategists want to invest their energy in raising children, even if they don't want many of them. Accordingly, in this kind of environment, the only way that an r-strategist would end

up with lots of children would be by accident; if he was so impulsive that he didn't use contraception, for example.

It can be argued that the welfare state discourages such a person from making the effort to use contraception, because it means that he doesn't have to invest much of his limited resources in the resultant children. The welfare state will provide for them. But the welfare state will not collapse due to causing r-strategists to outbreed K-strategists, because it is evidently *not* causing this. It would seem that people of low relative intelligence, such that they are unable to hold down all but low-paying jobs, are likely to be intelligent enough to rationally calculate that they are better-off not working as long as they have lots of children. They can then fritter away the 'child support' which these children entitle them to on their own pleasures, investing as little of it in the children as they can. So, they are intelligent enough to deliberately have a large number of (neglected) children, in order to play the system, meaning that the welfare state encourages their fertility and contributes to declining intelligence. However, they are not intelligent enough to realise – or have the foresight to care about the fact – that their behaviour is parasitic, would lead to the collapse of the system they rely upon if too widely adopted, and this means that the system is unsustainable in the long-term as taxpayers realise they are being exploited. This is because low intelligence predicts low levels of foresight, empathy, altruism, and civic-mindedness (see Dutton, 2014). Moreover, they are not sufficiently intelligent to understand that civilization – which permits a welfare system to be maintained – is underpinned by intelligence (for discussion see Dutton, 2014) and their behaviour is reducing the average intelligence of the society, which will ultimately lead to the collapse of the very welfare state upon which they rely.

Perkins couldn't be expected to have known about Woodley et al.'s research at the time of going to press. But he would have known about the importance of intelligence. It is

possible that he chose to ignore it because his area is personality and he felt that ‘intelligence’ would be too contentious and the softer approach of ‘personality’ should be employed in the first instance. This is, perhaps, a sensible political move, but it makes the book no less question-begging for intelligence researchers and it makes one of its key arguments no less inaccurate. But, that aside, this is an important, courageous and well-written book. Let us hope policy makers take heed of its warnings.

References

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