CHARITABLE BEHAVIOUR: UK evidence of the impact of the ‘big five’ personality traits

People’s donations of time and money to charities are strongly linked to their personalities. That is the main finding of research by Sarah Brown and Karl Taylor, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Geneva in August 2016.

Their study analyses data on almost 32,000 people in the UK based on their personalities and their charitable behaviour. Using the ‘big five’ psychological classes – openness to experience; conscientiousness; extraversion; agreeableness; and neuroticism – it finds that openness to experience is the most powerful trait for encouraging giving time and money, with these people giving an average of £11 more each year (compared with an overall average of £142).

Meanwhile, traits such as neuroticism and conscientiousness tend to lead to people to give less time and money – on average 48 minutes less volunteering a month for the former. Personality traits also have a stronger association with donations of time and money at the extreme points of the distribution of charitable behaviour: people who either give very little or a lot.

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People in the UK make substantial donations to charity, both in terms of time and money. For example, approximately £10.4 billion was donated by adults in 2012-13 according the Charities Aid Foundation, while Office for National Statistics (ONS) data reveals that in 2012, 2.29 billion hours were volunteered; this is around eight hours per individual among those who volunteer at least once per year, which based on ONS figures, represents 29% of individuals aged 16 and over.

Understanding what drives people to make these donations is an important issue and part of the policy agenda. For example, there are potential changes to the UK Working Time regulations that would allow individuals to take paid time off for volunteering activities.

In the first study of its kind for the UK, this research analyses the relationship between personality traits and charitable behaviour, namely donations of time and money, using data from Understanding Society, the most recent large-scale UK household longitudinal survey.

The researchers analyse a sample of 31,409 individuals, which includes information on charitable behaviour in 2011-13. Personality traits in the data are classified according to the ‘big give’ classification, commonly used in psychology: openness to experience; conscientiousness; extraversion; agreeableness; and neuroticism.

Since some individuals do not engage in charitable behaviour, the research uses appropriate statistical techniques to explore the effect of personality traits across the entire distribution of charitable behaviour rather than just at the average, which has generally been the case in the existing literature.
The researchers explore the effects of personality traits on those that donate very little right up to those that donate relatively large amounts. This flexible approach reveals whether various factors such as personality traits have an influence across the different levels of donating behaviour: for example, personality traits may have a smaller or larger influence at relatively low levels of monetary donations rather than at very high levels of donations.

Initially, the study considers average effects at the middle of the distribution of donations. Personality traits influence donations of time and money, even after differences in things like income, age and gender are taken into account. These effects are also evident having controlled for cognitive ability, as measured by tests of word recall, numerical ability and verbal fluency.

In general, conscientiousness and neuroticism are inversely related to donating time and money, while openness to experience, which has a positive effect, is the dominant trait in terms of magnitude. Specifically, the effect of ‘openness to experience’ on monetary donations is around one fifth of the size of gender, where females donate 34% more than males. This translates to those individuals who are characterised by ‘openness to experience’ denoting an extra £11 a year (as compared with an average of £142 a year).

In terms of the amount of time volunteered, the personality trait that plays the largest role is ‘neuroticism’, which is inversely related to volunteering and suggests that individuals with this personality trait volunteer approximately 48 minutes less a month than those individuals without this personality trait. The effect is around a tenth of the size of having children aged 2 or under, where such individuals volunteer eight hours less during a month than those with no children.

Personality traits have a stronger association with donations of time and money at the extreme points of the distribution of donations (that is, very low levels of donating behaviour and very high levels of donating behaviour) relative to that at the median, thereby highlighting the additional information revealed by this statistical approach.

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Charitable Behaviour and the Big Five Personality Traits: Evidence from UK Panel Data
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