

6-13-2015

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### Recommended Citation

Obschonka, Martin; Lievens, Filip; Wille, Bart; and De Fruyt, Filip (2015) "DOES SELF-EMPLOYED WORK MAKE INDIVIDUALS NOT ONLY MORE ENTREPRENEURIAL BUT ALSO MORE NARCISSISTIC AND ANTISOCIAL? A 15-YEAR LONGITUDINAL PERSONALITY-BASED ANALYSIS," *Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research*: Vol. 35: Iss. 3, Article 2. Available at: <http://digitalknowledge.babson.edu/fer/vol35/iss3/2>

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# DOES SELF-EMPLOYED WORK MAKE INDIVIDUALS NOT ONLY MORE ENTREPRENEURIAL BUT ALSO MORE NARCISSISTIC AND ANTISOCIAL? A 15-YEAR LONGITUDINAL PERSONALITY-BASED ANALYSIS



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## ABSTRACT

The potential socialization effects of entrepreneurial work are largely underresearched. In this longitudinal study, we quantify socialization effects of self-employed work by examining the career progression in a sample of college students between their final college year (T1) and 15 years later. We focus on both changes in “dark traits” such as narcissistic and antisocial profiles and changes in an entrepreneurial personality profile (intraindividual entrepreneurial constellation of the Big Five traits). We find indications that self-employed work is indeed associated with an increase in “dark traits” in males and in the entrepreneurial profile in the total sample. We further found that job autonomy mediates the socialization effect of self-employment on the entrepreneurial personality profile.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a renewed interest among entrepreneurship researchers in what Kets de Vries (1985, 1996) once termed “the dark side of entrepreneurship”: aberrant or even psychopathologically relevant personality characteristics in entrepreneurs, when compared to non-entrepreneurs. Such a focus on the potential “downside to the entrepreneurial personality” (Miller, 2014) involves subclinical dimensions that are generally regarded as dysfunctional and counterproductive but may also lead to positive consequences in the case of entrepreneurship. Several studies found support for this “dark side”-hypothesis, for example regarding psychopathy (Akhtar et al., 2013), narcissism (Mathieu & St-Jean, 2013), and rule-breaking (Obschonka et al., 2013a; Zhang & Arvey, 2009). But if entrepreneurial individuals score higher on (some) “dark traits” than others, is this due to a selection effect or due to socialization through entrepreneurial work experiences (cf., Kohn & Schooler, 1982)? Existing studies usually focused on the selection effect. Hence the socialization effect, through which entrepreneurial work experiences may systematically shape one’s personality, remains an understudied research field. Here we ask: Does self-employed work leave an imprint in the individual personality structure? Does self-employed work make individuals not only more entrepreneurial but also more narcissistic and antisocial over time?

In fact, the psychological literature deems occupational socialization an influential mechanism in human development in context across the lifespan (Frese, 1982). This concerns the issue of plasticity in personality characteristics - not only in specific but also in broad traits such as the Big Five (Roberts et al., 2003). Indeed, psychological research revealed a socialization effect of work experiences on personality characteristics including specific and broad traits (e.g., the Big Five personality traits) (Frese et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2003).

Following a person-oriented perspective (Magnusson, 1998), in this study we investigate both “dark traits” such as narcissistic and antisocial personality profiles and an entrepreneurial personality profile. First, to assess socialization effects on “dark traits” we considered a set of 10 aberrant personality profiles that are established and validated in both the clinical and work psychology literature (De Fruyt, 2013a, 2013b; Wille et al., 2013): Paranoid, schizoid, schizotypal, antisocial, borderline, histrionic, narcissistic, avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive profiles. These trait profiles were assessed by means of specific personality facets such as assertiveness, altruism, impulsiveness, or angry hostility.

Second, we investigated socialization effects on the entrepreneurial Big Five profile (Obschonka et al., 2013b). The entrepreneurial Big Five profile within a person is characterized by higher values in extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness, and lower values in agreeableness and neuroticism. Research showed this profile to predict entrepreneurial behavior and intentions as well as underlying motivational factors (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs, passion, self-identity, risk-taking, internal locus of control, and attitudes) and human and social capital (e.g., entrepreneurial skills and networks, Obschonka et al., 2010, 2011, 2012; Stuetzer et al., 2013). Other research showed that regions in the US, the UK and Germany that show higher average scores in this profile in the local population also show higher entrepreneurship rates (e.g., start-up rates) (Obschonka et al., 2013b), particularly when the region is endowed with knowledge resources (Obschonka et al., 2015). Another study found that those regions scoring higher in this profile showed economic resilience during the Great Recession of 2008–2009 (lower decrease in the local start-up rate). Finally, historical analyses with instrumental variables show that the regional variation in this profile is explainable by the same historical roots that causally explain today’s regional differences in entrepreneurial activity – a dominance of large-scale industries and factories in the past (which led to lower levels in entrepreneurial activity and the entrepreneurial Big Five profile). These findings are in line with the notion of occupational socialization through work conditions and experiences.

### HYPOTHESES

Given that narcissistic and antisocial tendencies figure so prominently in the entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Kets de Vries, 1996; Mathieu & St-Jean, 2013; Zhang & Arvey, 2009), we expected to find socialization effects of self-employed work especially on these two aberrant profiles, besides potential socialization effects on the entrepreneurial profile (Obschonka et al., 2013b). We expected that self-employed work makes individuals more entrepreneurial but also more narcissistic and antisocial over time.

### METHOD

*Dataset:* We analyse a Belgian dataset widely used in the work psychology literature: The longitudinal research program on personality and career unfolding in a Flemish undergraduate alumni sample (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1999; Wille et al., 2013). In total, 934 final-year college students from various faculties enrolled in this research program completed personality questionnaires three months prior to graduation (T1). 15 years later (T2), a smaller follow-up ( $N = 366$ ) of this sample was conducted with the main purpose of investigating alumni career progression over this substantial and pertinent time interval. The personality data at T1 and T2 were collected by means of the Dutch authorized adaptation of the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Hoekstra et al., 1996). The NEO PI-R is a comprehensive personality questionnaire consisting of 240 items that measure the Big Five traits and 30 specific sub-facets (e.g., impulsiveness, altruism, depression etc.).

*Entrepreneurial personality profile:* Following the earlier research (e.g., Obschonka et al., 2010, 2011, 2013b, Stuetzer et al., 2013) and consistent with seminal person-oriented research in personality psychology (Block, 1971, 2008), the entrepreneurial personality profile at the individual level is based on Cronbach and Gleser's (1953)  $D^2$  approach of quantifying the similarity between the individual Big Five profile and a fixed reference profile. This measure is based on the individual match between a person's empirical Big Five profile and a fixed reference profile with the extreme statistical scores in each Big Five dimensions, defining the outer limits of the single Big Five traits within an entrepreneurial personality structure (i.e., highest possible value in extraversion, conscientiousness, openness; lowest possible value in agreeableness and neuroticism). This profile (T1 and T2) was calculated by considering an entrepreneurial intraindividual constellation in the Big Five (higher in E,C,O; lower in A,N; Obschonka et al., 2013b).

*Aberrant personality profiles:* Following research establishing and validating a taxonomy of aberrant profiles based on the 30 Big Five sub-facets (Wille et al., 2013), 10 aberrant profiles (T1 and T2) were calculated (Paranoid, schizoid, schizotypal, antisocial, borderline, histrionic, narcissistic, avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive profiles).

*Self-employed work:* Two indicators were considered. First, we included the self-employment status at T2 in 2009 (no/yes). Second, we considered career information collected at T2 to indicate whether the respondent had worked as a self-employed at least once over the 15-year career (Self-employment history: no/yes). This information was collected using an interactive web tool whereby participants retrospectively reconstructed their 15-year career trajectories using idiosyncratic anchor points in their careers (Wille et al., 2010).

*Job autonomy:* This was measured at T2, using an established six-item scale based on Barrick & Mount (1993).

By studying this age cohort of alumni, our analysis is not confounded by interindividual age differences associated with normative lifespan patterns in "dark traits" (Foster et al., 2003). We also study males and females separately to consider potential gender differences in these profiles and in the effect patterns (Foster et al., 2003).

## RESULTS

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted predicting the T2 level for each personality profile (e.g., narcissistic) as the DV. The IV's were the respective T1 level of this profile (to account for stability over time; Step 1) and the self-employed work indicators (to test whether they predict change over time; Step 2). Whereas self-employed work showed no socialization effect on the other aberrant personality profiles in both genders, we found a positive socialization effect on the narcissistic and antisocial profiles in males (see Table 1). Moreover, the data revealed a positive socialization effect of self-employed work on the entrepreneurial profile in the total sample and in females (Table 1). Table 2 and 3 present a more fine-grained analysis testing for socialization effects on the sub-facets behind the narcissistic and antisocial profiles.

To examine whether self-employed work was indeed associated with an *increase* in the "dark traits" and in the entrepreneurial profile over time, we analyzed the respective changes in personality profiles (see Figure 1). Those male participants that engaged in self-employed work indeed showed an increase in the narcissistic and antisocial profiles. Moreover, those participants that engaged in self-employed work developed higher levels in the entrepreneurial personality profile.

We further examined job autonomy measured at T2 as a mediator between self-employment and the changes in the personality profiles. We found a mediation effect behind the socialization effects of the entrepreneurial personality profile.

### DISCUSSION

By generating longitudinal findings, this study delivers new insights regarding the socialization effect of self-employed work. Although we cannot infer strictly causal effects by means of these data, the present results nevertheless suggest that self-employed work may indeed foster narcissistic and antisocial personality tendencies, but only in males. Moreover, self-employed work also appear to increase the entrepreneurial personality profile, an effect that was explainable by a higher job autonomy-level at work. The results, which underscore an occupational socialization-perspective, have important implications for research and practice.

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**Table 1: Socialization effects of self-employment on the personality profiles**

Personality profiles		Self-employment in 2009		Self-employment history	
		$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
<b>Narcissistic profile</b>	<i>total</i>	.05	.264	.04	.456
	<i>males</i>	<b>.13</b>	.031	.12	.067
	<i>females</i>	-.01	.905	-.06	.373
<b>Antisocial profile</b>	<i>total</i>	.05	.178	.05	.254
	<i>males</i>	<b>.12</b>	.032	<b>.13</b>	.031
	<i>females</i>	.00	.988	-.04	.581
<b>Entrepreneurial personality profile</b>	<i>total</i>	<b>.09</b>	.028	.08	.082
	<i>males</i>	.06	.279	.10	.130
	<i>females</i>	<b>.13</b>	.038	.06	.337

Note. Socialization coefficients are beta weights ( $\beta$ ) showing the relationship between self-employment and Time 2 personality traits holding constant the effect of Time 1 personality traits on Time 2 personality traits. Significant effects ( $p < .05$ ) are printed in bold

Table 2: Socialization effects of self-employment in 2009 on NEO PI-R facets

Traits	Self-employment in 2009					
	total		males		females	
	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
<i>Narcissistic and Antisocial shared facets:</i>						
N2: Angry hostility	.01	.766	.05	.367	-.02	.815
N4: Self-consciousness	-.06	.188	-.02	.796	-.10	.115
E3: Assertiveness	.05	.209	.03	.612	.08	.202
E5: Excitement seeking	-.04	.332	-.03	.649	-.05	.484
O4: Actions	.04	.342	-.06	.322	.11	.065
A1: Trust	-.05	.249	-.11	.082	.00	.986
A2: Straightforwardness	-.04	.392	<b>-.15</b>	.023	.06	.394
A3: Altruism	-.03	.486	-.13	.054	.04	.552
A4: Compliance	-.03	.491	-.09	.172	.01	.842
A5: Modesty	-.02	.733	-.04	.460	-.00	.968
A6: Tender mindedness	-.03	.545	-.11	.084	.05	.435
<i>Narcissistic facets:</i>						
E1: Warmth	-.02	.677	-.10	.113	.06	.391
O3: Feelings	.05	.298	-.04	.567	.13	.062
<i>Antisocial facets:</i>						
N1: Anxiety	-.05	.215	-.05	.341	-.06	.389
N5: Impulsiveness	-.01	.879	-.02	.711	.01	.941
E4: Activity	.09	.050	.08	.171	.09	.226
C3: Dutifulness	-.01	.854	<b>-.13</b>	.048	.10	.145
C5: Self-discipline	.05	.342	-.06	.356	.15	.030
C6: Deliberation	.00	.997	-.02	.716	.02	.690

Note. Socialization effects are beta weights ( $\beta$ ) showing the effect of self-employment on change in personality facets. Significant effects ( $p < .05$ ) are printed in bold.

Table 3: Socialization effects of self-employment history on NEO PI-R facets

Traits	Self-employment history					
	total		males		females	
	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
<i>Narcissistic and Antisocial shared facets:</i>						
N2: Angry hostility	.07	.131	<b>.14</b>	.028	.00	.961
N4: Self-consciousness	.02	.662	.02	.812	.03	.663
E3: Assertiveness	.06	.223	.09	.117	.03	.688
E5: Excitement seeking	-.02	.591	-.02	.781	-.04	.622
O4: Actions	.05	.308	-.09	.192	<b>.17</b>	.010
A1: Trust	-.04	.444	-.08	.243	.01	.906
A2: Straightforwardness	-.01	.903	-.12	.083	.13	.068
A3: Altruism	-.06	.236	<b>-.20</b>	.007	.08	.267
A4: Compliance	-.07	.177	<b>-.15</b>	.024	.03	.677
A5: Modesty	.01	.815	-.01	.889	.04	.614
A6: Tender mindedness	-.02	.769	-.11	.137	.10	.192
<i>Narcissistic facets:</i>						
E1: Warmth	.01	.839	-.01	.866	.04	.610
O3: Feelings	.05	.298	.05	.501	.11	.130
<i>Antisocial facets:</i>						
N1: Anxiety	-.05	.215	-.08	.214	-.09	.211
N5: Impulsiveness	-.01	.879	.00	.994	.05	.440
E4: Activity	.09	.050	.06	.414	.06	.466
C3: Dutifulness	-.01	.854	-.08	.257	.13	.092
C5: Self-discipline	.05	.342	-.04	.620	.14	.066
C6: Deliberation	.00	.997	-.05	.486	.01	.923

Note. Socialization effects are beta weights ( $\beta$ ) showing the effect of self-employment history on change in personality facets. Significant effects ( $p < .05$ ) are printed in bold.

Figure 1: Changes in the personality profiles (z-standardized values) broken down by self-employment status at T2.

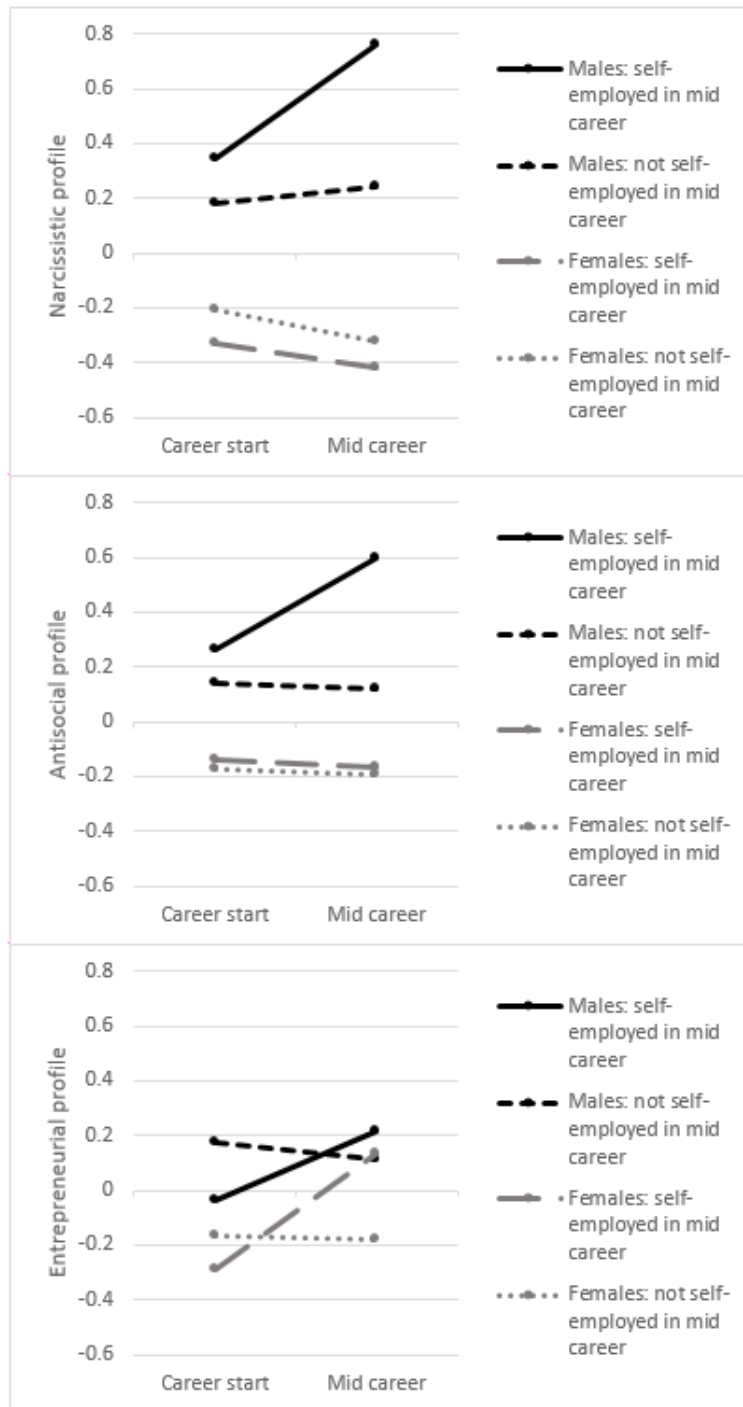




Figure 2: Mediation effect of job autonomy.

