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Article

"Young people's intention to study: Personality traits play a role": Seven questions to Johanna Storck

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Dr. Johanna Storck, Research Associate in the Department of Education and Family at DIW Berlin

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO JOHANNA STORCK

»Young People's Intention to Study: Personality Traits Play a Role«

1. Dr. Storck, the decision to study can be motivated by all kinds of reasons. You have examined to what extent young people's personality traits affect their intention to study. Why did you do this? We know, for example, that financial restrictions play a role in the decision to study, as does a lack of information. Young people may not know the benefits of studying or how to finance a college course. But studies in the economics of education that take these two points into consideration only provide a partial explanation, and personality traits or also risk behavior, or an individual's own motivational ability might also play a role. Here, we focus on various personality traits and examine the extent to which these may have an effect on intention to study.
2. How do you measure personality traits? We measure the personality traits using what is known as the five-factor model, a concept from psychology. We use the data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study for this. Personality is divided into five personality dimensions: these are openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.
3. How do the personality traits of young people who want to study and those who don't want to study differ? Our study shows that high-school students who intend to go to college after completing their Abitur, or school-leaving qualification, are more open than their classmates who have no plans to go to college. However, they score lower for agreeableness, and we also find that conscientiousness correlates positively with intention to study.
4. What personality traits are particularly important for intention to study? Openness to new experiences, neuroticism and agreeableness are certainly all important for intention to study. But we also compare the group of high-school students whose parents have studied and the group whose parents have not studied, in other words, high-school students who are potentially the first in their family to go to college. It is precisely for this group that openness is particularly important.
5. To what extent are these personality traits shaped by the parental home? Our data shows that there are differences in personality, depending on whether or not the parents have studied. We find, for example, that non-academics score lower for the trait of openness. At the same time, however, we find that openness is an important factor for intention to study. If we then estimate the correlation between personality traits and intention to study separately for children of academics and non-academics, we find that openness is of particular relevance for children of non-academics.
6. Do these findings apply equally to both genders? There is no difference in the correlation between personality traits and intention to study for men and women in our model. This means the individual personality traits are of equal relevance for men and women.
7. What is the significance of your findings for education policy? As far as education policy is concerned, our findings could mean that it is not only important to foster cognitive skills, that is, school performance, in school or even already in early learning but also important to promote non-cognitive skills, that is, personality traits. Mentoring programs and improved information about access to college could possibly bridge the gap to also allow those who would be the first person in their family to study. This would make it possible to remove obstacles hampering access to college for high-school students who are not as open to new experiences.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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