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JUBILEE CENTRE  
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The Sutton Trust Report and Its  
Fallout: Some Curious Ideas about the  
Shaping of Personality as ‘Character  
Education’

*Professor Kristján Kristjánsson*

*Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues*

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## The Sutton Trust Report and Its Fallout: Some Curious Ideas about the Shaping of Personality as 'Character Education'

Kristján Kristjánsson

A research report by the Sutton Trust educational charity entitled 'A Winning Personality', published earlier this month (de Vries & Rentfrow, 2016), has set feathers flying. In this report, based on a large literature survey and an analysis of data from a BBC documentary on personality, extraverted people are shown to have a higher chance of landing a well-earning job in adult life; so do conscientious people, albeit to a smaller extent. More controversially, those traits are shown to be strongly correlated with socio-economic background. Unsurprisingly perhaps, much of the media fallout from this report seems to have been negative (see e.g. Baggini, 2016; Robinson, 2016; Rose, 2016).

The findings from the report have added fuel to long-standing debates about the extent to which individuals are masters of their own destiny as distinct from the extent to which they are products of a genetic and economic lottery. Those debates are academically respectable and need to be revisited at regular junctures. Various helpful observations about methodological shortcomings marring research of this kind have also surfaced in the media; for example, it is useful to remember that most associations found in such studies are correlational rather than causal, and many of the findings are based on self-reports, susceptible to possible deceptions and self-deceptions. Making these points is sensible, and we in the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues would be happy to add our grist to the mill in debating them.

Much less enlightening, from our point of view, are some of the conceptual assumptions underlying the Sutton Trust Report and the subsequent recommendations from its findings. Some of those infelicities have not so much been attacked as positively perpetuated in the critical fallout from the report, by writers who seem to buy into its conceptual framework although they resent its substantive conclusions. Here are a few examples.

(1) The main findings of the report are about the Big-Five personality traits of extraversion and conscientiousness. Those are discussed in the report in the context of the rising interest in character and character education, for example as expressed by Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan (see also the *Guardian's* coverage of the report in Weale, 2016). Baggini (2016) complains that this 'regurgitates the old middle-class myth that the poor would be perfectly fine if only they could shed the negative traits of their class and become more virtuous'. He then suggests a connection between the extraversion-for-attainment thesis and the recent character-education 'bandwagon', 'spearheaded in the UK by the Jubilee Centre'. It is difficult to know where to start with all of this. An elementary distinction is circumvented by both the report and its discontents between *personality* and *character* (with the exception of Baggini himself who notes it in passing). Personality traits, such as extraversion and conscientiousness and others posited and measured via the proverbial Five-Factor Model, are mostly non-malleable after an early age. They are genetic up to at least 50% and otherwise shaped in early childhood. In academic parlance, those traits would be described as *content-thin, non-morally evaluable, non-reason-responsive and mostly non-educable*. No amount of rational dissuasion or character education is ever going to turn an introvert into an extravert. And even categorising persons as 'conscientious', on the Big-Five understanding, says nothing about their moral worth (or virtue), for someone could be a conscientious member of the Hitler Youth. Character traits, in contrast, are *content-thick, morally evaluable, reason-responsive and highly educable*. The most prominent of those are the so-called virtues and vices. The Jubilee Centre focuses on character education as the development of good, virtuous character. It has never made any claims about the development of personality traits; hence the connection between the Sutton Trust Report and the assumptions of the Jubilee Centre is not only tenuous but non-existent.

This report makes, as far as I can see, no significant contribution to the debate about character and character education; nor unfortunately do most of the critical comments made about it in the media.

(2) In addition to identifying personality traits such as extraversion as the ingredients of life success, the Sutton Trust Report highlights some other 'non-cognitive skills' such as *self-esteem* and a *positive outlook* as beneficial for success (de Vries & Rentfrow, 2016, p. 2). Two observations need to be made here. First, self-esteem and a positive outlook are not non-cognitive traits (i.e. traits divested of 'cognitions' or 'beliefs'). Indeed, self-esteem could count as the most quintessential of all cognitive traits: it refers precisely to people's *beliefs* about the ratio of their own achievements to their aspirations. Second, the report stands here in danger of reproducing and reviving the fallacies of the self-esteem industry of the 1990s, memorably taken apart in Baumeister et al.'s meta-analysis (2003). Too high self-esteem is a more socially and morally pernicious trait to have than too low self-esteem, because of its creation of an invulnerability mindset which leads to risky and dangerous behaviours. Moreover, even hardened 'positive psychologists' argue that a purely positive outlook on life can have various negative repercussions (see e.g. Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). The report uses language here that is strangely illogical and antiquated, but that has typically not been picked up by its critics.

(3) Piling on the agony identified in point (1) above are some of the recommendations of the report, such that 'more research is required on interventions to improve beneficial personality traits' (de Vries & Rentfrow, 2016, p. 4). The *Guardian* interprets this as a call for schools to help develop 'character and social skills' (Weale, 2016). However, if taken literally, this recommendation encourages researchers to nothing less than turning the whole of personality psychology upside down. Unfortunately, howlers of this kind give the foes of all attempts to improve pro-social dispositions at school a field day. Sensing that they are on to a text that gets a lot of things wrong about the interplay between environment, selfhood and education, the sceptics conveniently turn their criticism into a broad brush that tars all attempts to cultivate non-academic dispositions in the classroom. Any believers in the possibility of such interventions can now be scorned as people who think that those who earn less than £40,000 do so 'due to their character flaws' (Robinson, 2016).

In a nutshell, the idea of character education, for which the Jubilee Centre stands, has been done considerable disservice by the Sutton Trust Report and the resulting media discourse.

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University of Birmingham | Edgbaston | Birmingham | B15 2TT  
[www.jubileecentre.ac.uk](http://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk)