

Research on the Comparison of Student Personality in Public and Private Secondary Schools: A Mixed Study in Mainland China

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Abstract. The current study investigated how public secondary school students' Big Five personality traits vary from private school students. 135 secondary school students from Mainland China participated in filling out the questionnaires and three of them were invited to complete a one-to-one semi-structured interview. According to data analysis, the public secondary school students' mean score in Conscientiousness is significantly higher than that achieved by private school students, but in Agreeableness and Neuroticism, their mean scores are substantially lower. With answers presented by the interviewees, the explanations for why such differences appeared are discussed. The result of current study can be used as guidelines for intervening specific behaviors of secondary school students.

1 Introduction

Since being introduced in the early 1980s, the Big Five model has already become an initial consensus on a general taxonomy of personality traits [6]. By utilizing the Big Five model to analyze diverse social phenomena, such as adolescents' career decidedness [8], students' academic performance [13], and teachers' knowledge sharing [1], it has been demonstrated that the five dimensions of this model have a significant impact on individuals understanding of human nature [5]. In this research, the Big Five model will be used to illustrate the differences in personality traits between public and private secondary school students in Mainland China. In recent years, due to the fast economic and social development, the number of private schools in Mainland China has increased dramatically, but they still face diverse problems and difficulties [15]. There used to be a few scholars who tried to compare public school and private school students' Big Five traits, but no one has conducted studies based on Mainland China secondary school context. This study will try to fill this gap and the result is hoping to not only enrich the Big Five theory but also can be used to intervene in secondary school students' psychological condition and behaviors.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Big Five model

The Big Five model, which is also termed the five-factor model, has been one of the most popular and widely used personality models [5][10]. In their research, McCrae and Costa [9] indicated that the Big Five model offers a universal and comprehensive framework for the

description of individual personality differences. Meanwhile, a lot of analyses have shown that the Big Five model is reliable and cross-culturally replicable [5][11]. The Big Five model has classified human personalities into five major traits, including neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. As for neuroticism people, they can easily become emotional, self-pitying, as well as self-conscious. Whereas extraversion people are usually seen as a group of individuals who are gregarious, active and affectionate. Meanwhile, agreeableness people, who are always lenient and soft-hearted, can easily trust other people and avoid having disagreements with people around them. In addition, compared with their peers, conscientiousness people are more ambitious, deliberate, and self-disciplined. Lastly, the openness people, who are imaginative and creative, always have a keen curiosity about the world they live in [2]. According to previous research, these five domains are relatively stable over time [3].

2.2 Linking the Big Five model with the Public School Students

The public school, which is called State School in some countries, usually refers to the schools that are paid and funded by the government. In recent years, there have been various studies that tried to associate the Big Five model with public school students. The vast majority of them focused on how students' Big Five personality traits affect their behavior at school, including their roles in school bullying incidents, academic performance, etc. The others also tried to explore some intriguing fields, such as the relationship between the students' Big Five traits and their personal life.

In terms of researches into the relationship between

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the Big Five model and students' ongoing performance at school, a previous study [14] in Italy found some relation between the children's Big Five personality traits and their participant roles in school bullying incidents. With the sample collected from two public schools in central Italy, the scholars indicated that compared with their peers, higher levels of neuroticism and lower levels of agreeableness typified both pro-bullies and school-bullying victims, and victims also scored low in conscientiousness. Furthermore, defenders showed high levels of agreeableness, whereas low levels of extraversion and agreeableness characterized outsiders. On the other hand, in 2015, a researcher in China, using a mainland China public students sample, investigated how the interactions between the Big Five personality traits and self-determination motivation orientations affect students' academic performance. After doing the hierarchical regression analysis, the scholar found that self-determined motivation and four of the five personality traits (openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion) were significantly positively related to students' academic performance in English. She stated that the academic achievements of students with lower levels of self-determination were more dependent on personality traits than those of highly motivated and self-determined [16].

Some associations between students' Big five traits and students' private life have also been noted. For example, a scholar from the University of Novi Sad recruited 500 adolescents who were studying in two large public schools as research sample for investigating the relationships between the Big Five personality traits, negative life events, and life satisfaction in adolescents. The conclusion demonstrated that the Big Five personality traits did not moderate the relationship between negative life events and life satisfaction and the association between negative life events and adolescent life satisfaction is independent of personality traits [7]. In addition, last year, two Poland scholars did a research to identify the relationships between the Big Five personality traits and locus of control in primary school students during their transition into early adolescence. By using the sample from a public school in Poland, the researchers interpreted all the data based on raw scores for both the LOCQ and the PBPS-C. The result claimed that there was a significant but weak relationship between personality traits and locus of control of success and failure [4].

2.3 Linking the Big Five model with the Private School Students

The private school, which is also known as independent school or nonstate school, is the school that is privately owned and funded without the assistance of local, state, or federal governments. Compared with public schools, they usually retain the right to choose the students they prefer and charge them for funding themselves. However, in recent years, only a few studies have tried to link the Big Five Model with private school students.

Some researchers tried to observe how private school students' Big Five traits affect their academic performance. For instance, in 2019, Kamilah Seman and Zurina Ismail, who came from Universiti Tenaga Nasional, did a research for exploring the relationship between the Big Five Personality traits and academic performance among foundation students. With the sample collected from several private universities in Malaysia, the final result reported that three of the Big Five traits, including agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness were positively significant related to students' CGPA, while extraversion and neuroticism were negatively related to it [13].

In addition, a few studies with regard to private school students focused on exploring how different educational backgrounds influence students' Big Five traits. For example, two scholars from Thailand conducted a study comparing how personality traits differ between students graduating from a Thai high school, those finishing from an international high school within the country, and those who graduate from high schools outside of the country. They collected the samples by letting the participants who were first-term undergraduates at a large international college finish a Big Five survey. Their finding confirmed that the students from an international school scored lower on conscientiousness than those from a Thai high school and schoolgirls from an international school had a significantly higher neuroticism score than females from a Thai high school [12].

2.4 Research Gap

Although the Big Five model is gaining higher popularity among researchers in the pedagogy field, a large number of previous studies have only pointed to use the sample from public or private schools for examining the relation of the Big Five model and some specific actions done by adolescents. There were a few scholars who tried to do a comparison between public school and private school students' Big Five traits, but studies based on the Mainland China context have not been conducted. Therefore, in the present study, we set out to conduct a study comparing the Big Five personality traits of public and private secondary school students in mainland China and the fundamental goal is to find out the predictors that may form such differences.

3 Method

This study used a sequential mixed research strategy, starting with a questionnaire administered to a total of 135 students from public and private secondary schools. Subsequently, three cases were invited to participate in a one-to-one semi-structured interview. Purposive and convenience sampling were used to select the sample, who were all secondary school students in Guangdong Province, Mainland China.

The final sample included 135 participants representing students studying in Public and Private Secondary School in Mainland China during the period

of this research. Among 135 students, 80 came from Public School and 55 studied in Private School. Eighth graders rank the top at 48.9% followed by students in ninth (38%) and seventh grade (13.1%).

4 Result & Discussion

By using SPSS V.26, which is one of the most commonly used statistics software in educational research field, to analyze the data collected by publishing questionnaire online and offline, the result indicates that the mean scores that public secondary school ($M_{extraversion} = 3.50$, $M_{openness} = 3.63$) and private secondary school ($M_{extraversion} = 3.50$, $M_{openness} = 3.57$) students achieved in Extraversion and Openness show no significant difference. However, as to Agreeableness and Neuroticism, the adolescents in private secondary school ($M_{agreeableness} = 3.16$, $M_{neuroticism} = 2.89$) scored much higher than those in public secondary school ($M_{agreeableness} = 2.98$, $M_{neuroticism} = 2.80$). Besides, compared with pupils in private secondary school ($M_{conscientiousness} = 2.83$), the students studying under the public education system ($M_{conscientiousness} = 2.95$) performed higher mean score in Conscientiousness.

Thus, from the data provided above, it can be seen that students coming from public secondary schools do have differences on the Big Five personality traits with those coming from private secondary schools in Mainland China.

To find out the reliable reasons to explain the statistically significant differences that I found above, I invited three secondary school students, including Kate, Sally, and Noah, who have participated in filling out the questionnaire to do a private interview. Two of them come from private secondary school and one is a public secondary school student.

The explanations for why students from public secondary school could score higher in Conscientiousness than students from private secondary school are based on 2 aspects, the first one is about students' family background. Due to the fact that most private secondary school students' families come from middle class and above, these students are less ambitious in their academic performance and are not achievement-striving individuals [9]. But the students in public secondary school usually do not grow in such privileged family and most of them have to take the expectation and pressure from their parents. Therefore, they tend to be more hard-working and dutiful. During the interview, in reacting to the question about their attitude of being Conscientious in study and work, Kate and Sally, who are studying in private secondary school, all emphasized that since they have sufficient family assets and family support, there is no need for them to worry about whether they can get a satisfying job in the future according to school performance. Therefore, they are not passionate about completing their assignments perfectly and getting straight As on tests. When interacting with their team members at school, they are more willing to say No to the tasks that they think are too difficult and give less attention to whether their low

contribution will affect their final mark. However, Noah, a boy from an ordinary Chinese public secondary school, showed different opinions. Noah is a person with high Conscientiousness. During the interview, Noah indicated that his parents have put a lot of burden on his shoulder since he was a little boy, because they believe only if Noah studies hard and be excellent in every field can he enjoy a satisfying life in the future, and maybe can he be possible to help this family leap to a higher class. Growing up in such an environment, Noah always tries his best to get good grades, practice piano, and be leader in group work. Because he is afraid of letting his parents down and being the "loser" of life, such as the individuals who fail to be admitted by universities and who cannot find a good job.

In addition, the other reason that caused such phenomenon is based on different levels of pressure that students experience in the school. Given to the fact that private secondary schools usually prefer shaping a free and open campus environment, the students there are less deliberate and show less interest in order [9]. However, since the public secondary school put more emphasis on students academic performance, the youngsters there tend to be more self-disciplined and well-organized [4]. Kate and Sally both pointed out that during their growth, their teachers did not put a lot of pressure on them. Instead, they gave enough respect to youngsters' own choices and gave a higher emphasis on their mental health. Thus, once Kate and Sally found the thing had made them feel stressed, they would like to press the pause button since they know their teachers would support them. However, at public school, Noah faced a large amount of pressure since the high school entrance examination is becoming increasingly difficult. For getting into the best local high school, Noah had to do a lot of homework everyday, and he also had to complete more than 4 quizzes every week. He said he had to make a busy daily to-do list in order to push himself to complete all the missions.

As to the explanations for why private secondary school students could score significantly higher in Agreeableness than students from public secondary school, the most essential reason is based on their family background. Due to the fact that most students in private school have complicated family relationships and higher family income, they are more modest and prefer to keep harmonious relationships with the other individuals [4]. In the meantime, since the students in public secondary school come from different social classes, they tend to be more indifferent and self-centered [1]. In the interview, both Kate and Sally told me that their families are not as warm and peaceful as everyone imagines. According to Kate's answer, her parents divorced when she was an infant and she was raised by a single mom. Her father only paid for her tuition and living expenses and they only met 2 times a year. Due to all these facts, Kate is very sensitive and more mature than her peers. She understands quarrels and fights will only bring hurt to each other but love can create happiness. Therefore, in her daily life, she prefers keeping peace with people around her and tries not to participate in any disputes. Moreover, since most students in private secondary

school come from high-income family, in most cases, their material desires in life can be satisfied by their family members. Thus, they are more willing to keep a positive attitude toward the society they live in. However, according to Noah, public secondary school students' family income disparity is relatively high and sometimes such gap can easily cause fights. In his interview, Noah shared a story that happened between him and his classmate A.

One day, during recess, my friend A told me that she thought South Korea must be very prosperous and people there can often have the opportunity to meet K-POP stars. Since I used to enjoy my summer vacation with my parents there, I told her that there are also a lot of people in South Korea who cannot afford to live and during my 15-day trip, I had not seen any idols at all. Then she started being mad at me and said I was a liar. I also felt angry because she had never been there. After maybe a year, I started to realize that our different positions in the social class led to this fight, because A's family cannot even afford the fee of such international travel.

Besides, my research found that adolescents in private secondary school scored higher in Neuroticism than their peers in public secondary school. By doing the interview with three students, I found such difference is also caused by students' different family background. As what I have mentioned above, based on the fact that most students in private school have complicated family relationships, they usually have high sensitivity and are more vulnerable [9]. However, the family relationships of students in public secondary school are more harmonious, so they are less emotional and more easily to achieve the sense of self-satisfaction [9]. In her answers, Sally told me that the relationship of her parents were pretty bad. Since she was little, her parents started to have quarrel with each other everyday. Her mother usually threatened Sally that if she did not behave well, she would divorce with Sally's father. Given to all these factors, Sally is very sensitive. Because she is always afraid of being a kid of a divorced family. Moreover, she has low rate of confidence and self-satisfaction because she blame the bad relationship between her parents to she didn't perform well enough at home. However, Noah told me that he seldom did things like self-pity or felt emotional. He explained that since he had a close relationship with his parents, he'd like to seek help from them when he came across difficulties. For instance, when he didn't perform well in the tests, his parents were willing to offer mental stimulation and help him do a test paper analysis. Therefore, the encouragement and love that Noah gained from his parents makes him become an optimistic boy.

5 Conclusion

The current research made a comparison between public and private secondary school student's Big Five personality traits. The final result illustrated that in conscientiousness, public secondary school students scored higher, while in agreeableness and neuroticism,

private secondary school students' scores ranked higher. Through conducting interviews with 3 secondary school students from different education system, the discussion pointed out that the 2 main aspects that lead to such statistical differences were students' different family background and educational environment. In conclusion, this study is conducted in hope of sparking the future education methods for teenagers in secondary schools and guiding the intervention of their behaviors.

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