

CAN THE POSITIVE TRAITS OF ENTREPRENEURS WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS ENABLE THEM TO SUCCEED THROUGH THE PANDEMIC?

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurs possess both human strengths and weaknesses. Many of them come with their own personality traits and often quirky behaviors. Some of them are also challenged by psychological conditions and disorders that could impact constructive actions in their daily lives. In this paper, the researchers have selected three conditions to address in this context: ADHD, NPD, and Dyslexia. We demonstrate that while these three conditions may provide challenges to such entrepreneurs, they also allow them to overcome the associated negative aspects by focusing on complementary positive traits to succeed in their entrepreneurship. Under normal economic conditions, entrepreneurs frequently face stress, whether from competitive pressures, financial issues, or everyday problems. With the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic and resulting issues, many small-business owners are facing the highest levels of stress they have experienced as entrepreneurs, coupled with additional costs associated with COVID-19 compliance as critical stressors. Therefore, entrepreneurs with psychological conditions need to be aware of how they can leverage their positive traits to mitigate the added COVID-19 stress to significantly promote successful outcomes.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, psychological disorders, COVID-19, ADHD, NPD, dyslexia, stress

INTRODUCTION

“Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.”

–Michael Jordan

Despite showing positive entrepreneurial efforts in the community, entrepreneurs need to be cognizant of their mental state (Uribe-Toril, Ruiz-Real, Ceresia, & de Pablo Valenciano, 2019; Leung, Franken, & Thurik, 2020). Leung et al. (2020) noted that both the researchers and members of the media recently started to explore the link between entrepreneurship and symptoms of various psychological disorders. Consequently, researchers reviewed a variety of investigations which showed that entrepreneurs with specific mental health issues should be approached differently (Uribe-Toril et al., 2019). Uribe-Toril et al. (2019) also specified that some research may show specific mental health challenges, but the issues may not negatively affect entrepreneurial performance. In fact, positive traits of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and Dyslexia could constructively promote entrepreneurial success despite mental health challenges triggered by the negative traits.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 below lists some key psychological traits that challenge individuals with three specific psychological disorders: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and Dyslexia. It identifies both negative and positive traits associated with these disabilities. It is suggested that these entrepreneurs could overcome the identified negative traits they are challenged with by supplanting them with the countervailing positive traits toward becoming successful entrepreneurs.

TABLE 1
Positive and Negative Psychological Traits and Their Effects on Entrepreneurship

Disorder	Negative Traits	Positive Traits
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	Easily distracted, potential for substance abuse, subject to other mental health disorders; sometimes hasty, thoughtless, impulsive	Willingness to take risks, creative, imaginative, high-energy, self-motivated, driven, resilient, determined, courageous, potential for strong intelligence, innovative, inventive
Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)	Conceited, grandiose attitude, lacks sympathy, misjudges personal abilities, pretentious, manipulative, feels superior to others.	Strong, self-confident, desire to improve society, accepts positive feedback, possible innate ability to lead, self-motivated, driven, pioneering, innovative, self-starter
Dyslexia	Low self-esteem, challenges with spelling and reading, possible poor literacy, disdain of a structured environment, inferior ability to process knowledge	Innovative, creative, possible solid mechanical ability, strong spatial ability, can be original, can observe issues others cannot see, utilizes alternate effective paths to success, sometimes ingenious

Source: Lerner, Hunt, & Verheul (2018); Lerner, Verheul, & Thurik (2019); Yu, Wiklund, & Perez-Luno (2018)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Lerner, Verheul, & Thurik (2019) indicated that Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can be considered a common clinical condition among entrepreneurs. Moreover, their condition can affect various individuals in the population (Lerner et al., 2019). For a diagnosis of ADHD to exist, thoughtlessness, as well as hyperactive and distracted behavior must be measured against age-appropriateness (Lerner et al., 2019). Additionally, an impairment of typical functioning such as occupational or social functioning should be present.

ADHD, like other mental health disorders, can be diagnosed by the following licensed professionals: a clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, or a licensed social worker (e.g.: MSW degree-holder). A differential diagnosis must also be considered that involves the clinician mediating the impairment, and behavior that does not result from another source or disorder (Lerner et al., 2019). Sources of the disorder may include substance abuse and/or other deleterious practices. Similarly, Lerner et al. (2019) noted that clinicians also suggested that no single test or psychometric measure could determine a clear and complete diagnosis of ADHD.

Persons with ADHD can demonstrate hyperactive and distracted behaviors. ADHD may involve showing impulsive behavior, and could often result in criminal activity, social isolation, poor performance, and substance abuse (Wiklund, Patzelt, & Dimov, 2016). Consequently, such impulsive actions can negatively impact entrepreneurial pursuits that result in ill-conceived and thoughtless decisions (Wiklund et al., 2016).

Social and occupational consequences of ADHD disorder may affect a person's work performance and networking abilities (Lerner, Hunt, & Verheul, 2018). Fortunately,

entrepreneurs with ADHD can show positive traits such as self-efficacy, motivation, gains, and achievement—and thus be significantly successful. A positive outcome for the entrepreneur with ADHD can involve making swift decisions in complicated and ambiguous situations. Additionally, Yu, Wiklund, and Perez-Luno (2018) indicate that entrepreneurship may provide an environment where people could demonstrate positive aspects through innovation and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, entrepreneurs with ADHD may also show positive qualities such as creativity, proactiveness, and willingness to take risks to be successful.

ADHD can be considered one of the most fundamental and characteristic disorders among entrepreneurs. Research also shows that an increased interest with ADHD symptoms and entrepreneurship may be evident (Yu et al., 2018). Entrepreneurship can thus involve complex, groundbreaking, and risk-taking behavior which can attract people diagnosed with ADHD. Notable entrepreneurs such as David Neelman, Richard Branson, and Ingvar Kamprad claimed to have succeeded as entrepreneurs despite having ADHD (Wiklund et al., 2016). Past studies made significant progress in showing a positive correlation between ADHD and celebrities as featured in the major media (Lerner, Verheul, & Thurik, 2019).

Unfortunately, Lerner, Verheul, and Thurik (2019) indicated that numerous studies did not yet empirically scrutinize ADHD among its classifications and origin. Entrepreneurs conduct effective planning and execution which can adversely provoke ADHD symptoms. Consequently, some entrepreneurs with ADHD may not always consider the consequences of their actions. Recent studies did not show any concrete evidence that ADHD can increase or decrease the likelihood of one becoming an entrepreneur (Lerner et al., 2018). Interestingly, Lerner et al. (2019) found by using regression analysis that people in their study with an ADHD diagnosis demonstrated especially elevated entrepreneurial intentions.

Individuals with ADHD were found to be 1.7 times more likely to possess entrepreneurial goals (Lerner, Verhei, & Thurik, 2019). They also showed significant correlations between hyperactivity and entrepreneurial intention ($r = <0.20$) including narcissism and ADHD ($r = 0.23$) which is a significant positive relationship between entrepreneurial action and an ADHD diagnosis (Leung et al., 2020). Further research shows that there is a positive relationship between hyperactivity and entrepreneurship ($b = 0.42, p < .01$). However, a significant relationship between entrepreneurial intention and inattention did not exist ($b = -0.07, p = 0.36$). Therefore, research supports the notion that people with ADHD can successfully manage their own business. Apart from ADHD, other personality disorders can be present among entrepreneurs, such as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) as described below.

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)

Yu, Wang, Zeng & Shi (2020) noted that beginning more than one hundred years ago, narcissistic traits began to be recognized. Narcissists may perceive themselves as more intelligent than others and possess significant self-confidence in their skills (Yu et al., 2020). In general, narcissism can be considered an attribute that involves an inflated interpretation of oneself, a feeling of grandiosity, and substantial self-love (Leung et al., 2020).

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) might include traits such as conceited behavior and a belief of self-importance. Narcissists may exhibit an expectation of awards, lack sympathy, and misjudge their skills (Leonelli, Ceci, & Mascirarelli, 2018). Also, other components can include manipulation, dominant behavior, and the need for power and superiority (Wu, Wang, Lee, Yu, & Guo, 2019). Therefore, key components of NPD involve a feeling of grandiosity, love of self, and an inflated self-image (Wu et al., 2019). On the other hand, NPD may also include positive attributes such as wanting to improve society and taking risks to make a company successful. Considering the positive aspects, we can opine that a relationship exists between narcissism and entrepreneurship. In this regard, culture may play a part and should be taken into account. In a recent study, Leung et al. (2020) revealed that a negative relationship apparently exists between narcissism and entrepreneurial intention among Chinese university students. It is therefore necessary to factor culture into entrepreneurial environments when narcissism is studied.

Not surprisingly, narcissists can be attracted to leadership positions and can significantly impact their businesses (Blair, Palmieri, & Paz-Aparicio, 2018). Personality characteristics such as narcissism can strongly influence intentions and motives. These areas can negatively or positively impact the organizational structure and the organizational culture of a business (Baldegger & Furtner, 2017). Those with high levels of narcissism might be motivated to seek attention or to manipulate people. However, narcissistic people may also demonstrate distinctly positive traits such as finding potential opportunities and having the drive to accomplish goals to improve themselves. Furthermore, narcissists tend to believe that they will outperform others and establish self-efficacy for personal reasons (Baldegger & Furtner, 2017).

According to Leonelli, Cedi, and Mascirarelli (2018), narcissistic traits might be significant among some entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs with NPD could overstep boundaries, and yet may develop into successful leaders. Leonelli et al. (2018) found that the relationship between narcissism and innovation showed nonlinear results in their research. Hence, high amounts of narcissism negatively impacted innovation in the organization; however moderate levels of narcissism also include increased levels of innovation (Leonelli et al., 2018).

Minimal research exists to show relationships between narcissism and leader development outcomes (Blair, Palmieri, & Paz-Aparicio, 2018). However, narcissism can also negatively impact the effectiveness of growth, and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is negatively related to overall leader development that is consonant with negative interaction with peers (Blair et al., 2018). The researchers also linked communication among peers to identify narcissistic propensities. Narcissists could thus negatively impact the organization indirectly by not engaging effectively with peers. Therefore, narcissists may want to reflect on their negative behaviors including rash decision-making and accept feedback from their consequences.

Narcissism can be known for its cognitive and motivational traits. However, Liu, Yong, Li, Hao, and Zeng, (2019) noted that motivation, rather than cognition, could be emphasized more in the organization. Thus, narcissists may be more motivated to maintaining their superiority. Fortunately, narcissists can possess positive qualities such as affirmations and accepting positive feedback. Consequently, narcissists show high self-esteem but can also demonstrate fragile self-esteem (Liu et al., 2019). The authors specified that based on their

research, narcissists tend to struggle with restarting a failed business when social costs may be involved. However, constructive social support might bolster their success in their entrepreneurial endeavors (Liu et al., 2019).

Dyslexia

Limited research can be found that discuss entrepreneurs with dyslexia personality disorders. Dyslexia is perhaps one of the most well-known childhood mental illnesses. Franks and Fredrick (2013) noted that dyslexia reduced mental processing and included an inferior capacity to process knowledge. An individual with dyslexia may experience challenges with spelling and reading which can impact executive processing of the brain. Yet people with dyslexia can also exhibit various talents and demonstrate an average-to-above average intellect. Strengths may include the following: innovation, increased creativity, a solid mechanical ability, and spatial ability (see Table 1 above).

Dyslexia was first discovered during the 1890s and can be hereditarily inherited and therefore seen as genetic blindness (Franks & Fredrick, 2013). The disorder may be considered unfavorable by some people, but dyslexic individuals might also show strengths in business startups. Reasons for this might include both negative and positive skills for dyslexics starting their own business. The negative motivation for dyslexics building a company may include their struggle to find support to succeed, thus drawing empathy (Logan, 2013). However, dyslexics can develop significant stress and burnout from working under a demanding supervisor.

Interestingly, many dyslexics choose entrepreneurship due to their effective coping skills and strengths (Logan, 2013). Additionally, small-business owners show strengths in forming a business such as originality, allocation, and communication. Firstly, dyslexics with originality can observe matters others cannot see. Secondly, dyslexics may be able to delegate effectively. Lastly, dyslexics might possess excellent communication skills and team development, and produce creative solutions for organizational success. Their interest might involve alternative skills utilized in their childhood for applying entrepreneurial efforts (Bowers, 2007). Subsequently, dyslexics can be motivated to pursue potential entrepreneurship opportunities.

Consequently, people who struggle with reading and writing seem to apply other strengths developed in their lifetime. Careers in engineering, fine arts, and the medical field could be considered prime examples (Halfpenny & Halfpenny, 2012). Dyslexics are also often found in the field of entrepreneurship in the United Kingdom. Halfpenny and Halfpenny (2012) indicated that 300,000 dyslexics exist in the United Kingdom alone and tend to create their own businesses more frequently than business owners without dyslexia.

Logan (2013) noted that dyslexics tend to display right-brain skills which generate our levels of creativity. This study found that 35% of entrepreneurs in the United States experience dyslexia, while only 20% of entrepreneurs across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom exhibit this challenge. The research findings accounted for this anomaly due to the differences in the educational systems in the respective countries. Some famous people with dyslexia include the following: Muhammad Ali, Albert Einstein, Jim Hendrix, and Steven Spielberg (Halfpenny & Halfpenny, 2012). Additional examples can be found below in Table 2. Weaknesses may include

areas such as low self-esteem, poor literacy skills, and a disdain for a structured environment. Unfortunately, not all dyslexics will be successful entrepreneurs and may need to find an alternative occupation. (Logan, 2013). Bowers (2007) noted that dyslexics can be fascinated about starting their own company and indicated that dyslexics who overcome difficulties in life developed compensatory expertise.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As if entrepreneurs do not have enough stress to contend with, COVID-19 has created hyper-stress for many entrepreneurs as some of the usual stressors have become even more challenging, while additional new stressors have changed “business as usual” into day-to-day survival for many small-business owners. Just how many small businesses have closed due to COVID-19 is uncertain, but a survey conducted in early April 2020 by Main Street America and reported by CNBC estimated that as many as 7.5 million small businesses could close if the disease is not stopped (Iacurci, 2020).

With so many instances of small-business closures, determining an accurate estimate is challenging. For example, a widely reported Yelp study found 163,735 businesses that were reported to be open in April 2020 closed by September 2020 (Kvue.com, 2020). Another study conducted by the University of California-Santa Cruz found 317,000 businesses closed between February and September 2020, which is an estimated 1,500 closures of small businesses per day (kvue.com, 2020). However, neither study indicates whether these business closures were temporary or permanent, nor do they account for typical year closures (Kvue.com, 2020).

Current pandemic stressors include keeping employees and customers safe from COVID-19, complying with constantly changing state emergency regulations (such as outdoor dining, indoor dining, wearing masks, cleaning and sanitizing, and social distancing), financial pressures, and ultimately, being able to keep the small business from permanent closure. Business owners also face the challenge of having customers comply with safety measures while some customers strongly object to compliance. This sometimes results in an employee being asked to play “traffic cop” when customers choose to ignore one or more of the emergency regulations. Violent conduct has also occurred as widely reported in news media. This puts the employee in an unfair situation and may require the business owner to step in to enforce the COVID-19 compliance requirements.

Table 1 above listed the positive traits associated with dyslexia, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) that can provide coping skills for the small-business owner who is stressed and afflicted by them. These traits include the willingness to take risks, resilience, innovativeness, a driven attitude, and the ability to observe issues from perspectives most others might not experience.

As evidence of positive traits in people with psychological disorders, Table 2 below highlights some of the better-known entrepreneurs and successful corporate CEOs who cope with one of the three identified disorders—dyslexia. With small-business owners significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, these beleaguered entrepreneurs must take advantage of

every skill, ability, and positive psychological trait in their arsenal to help them guide their small businesses through this global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TABLE 2
Entrepreneurs with Dyslexia

John Chambers	CEO, Cisco Systems
Paul Orfalea	Kinkos Founder
Alan Meckler	CEO, Jupiter Media
Charles Schwab	Founder, Charles Schwab Financial Services
Richard Branson	The Virgin Group (400 companies)
Ingvar Kamprad	Founder, IKEA
Barbara Corcoran	Founder, The Corcoran Group Real Estate
Daymond John	Founder, FUBU

Source: Halfpenney & Halfpenney (2012).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could examine whether persons with the psychological disorders identified consistently exhibit the positive traits inherent in these maladies through cross-sectional, and even longitudinal studies. These positive traits could then be fostered and further developed even beyond the pandemic. Society could thus benefit from a larger pool of successful entrepreneurs. Significantly, these persons could be enabled and channeled to develop career opportunities as entrepreneurs, leaders, and role-models. They could thus overcome their adverse experiences as employees in organizations where their peers tend to focus on the negative aspects of their perceived—and often hereditarily derived—psychological disorders.

CONCLUSION

As the adage goes, “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade!”. Certain psychological conditions in individuals may be perceived negatively, or as glaring weaknesses. However, many entrepreneurs with these conditions need not be saddled with negativity. Rather, they could develop a positive attitude and marshal creative means to overcome these conditions by invoking and applying the often-latent positive traits of these maladies. In fact, many such entrepreneurially minded, psychologically challenged individuals are often found to be creative problem-solvers as they consistently apply their positive attributes. This paper demonstrates that some psychological disorders typically considered negatively—perhaps even as debilitating—can be channeled successfully to produce positive results. Aspiring and practicing small-business owners with psychological disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), and Dyslexia can apply compensatory positive traits to overcome the drawbacks. Studies show that many positive traits associated with these psychological disorders can help small-business owners to succeed through operationalizing these compensatory traits. This may even equip them to navigate the added stress and challenges through the COVID-19 pandemic.

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