

On the Move: Personality Influences Migration Patterns

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When meeting someone for the first time, the second question that is usually asked (following “what’s your name?”) is “where do you live?”. Until recently, it was not apparent just how revealing that answer may be. Although behavioral research has suggested that people who are extremely outgoing have a tendency to relocate often, was unknown if specific areas attract particular personality types.

Psychologists Markus Jokela and Liisa Keltikangas-Järvinen from the University of Helsinki along with their colleagues Marko Elovainio from the National Research and Development Center for Welfare and Health and Mika Kivimäki of University College London, wanted to know if certain personality traits would influence migration patterns more so than others.

The psychologists randomly selected participants from a population-based health study in Finland. The researchers studied data which spanned over nine years and included information relating to personality (via self-assessment questionnaires) and a variety of demographic information (including where participants had lived over the nine year period). The three personality traits (or temperaments) that the researchers focused on were sociability (people with high sociability prefer the company of others to being alone), emotionality (increased emotionality indicates a tendency to experience negative emotions, especially fear and anger) and activity (high activity is characterized by being very active, energetic and also restless).

The results, reported in the September issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggest that personality traits determine not only where people relocate to, but also how often they move and how far away they move. The researchers found that people with a very active personality have a tendency to migrate, to both urban and rural locales. People who are very emotional are more likely to move away from home, but do not migrate very far and do not move very often. Emotional people tend to migrate equally to both urban and rural locations. People with very social personalities are more inclined to leave rural settings for urban areas and are more likely to migrate over long distances.

The authors suggest that since urban areas are densely populated, they appeal to people with high sociability traits—urban areas offer plenty of opportunities for social interaction. Although very emotional people are more likely to move away from home, the fact that they do not move often or selectively to urban locations indicates that people with this personality trait move simply because they are not content where they are. In addition, very emotional people were found to migrate over shorter distances. The authors suggest that emotional people may prefer shorter moves because they are less stressful compared to long distance moves and that “emotionality appears to have a dual role in migration by increasing migration probability but decreasing migration distance.”

This study has implications for urban planners, neighborhood developers and also the real estate market. A better understanding of the types of personalities a certain place attracts may improve the way housing

and jobs there are marketed, as well as the types of stores that are brought into that area. In addition, personality based migration may have long term consequences for a particular location. “Temperament-related self-selection may also modify population structures, and in the long run, genetic variation underlying temperament differences may become differentially distributed across geographic regions,” the authors conclude.