Integration of personality constructs: The role of traits and motivation in the willingness to exert effort in academic and social life domains

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A B S T R A C T

The willingness to exert effort in pursuing important life goals enhances goal attainment and achievement (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1998). Individuals invest effort in a number of arenas. As such, they need to make choices and decisions about how much effort to put into a particular goal and consider how to divide their “effort budgets” across multiple life domains (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Salmela-Aro, 2009). During the transition to adulthood, appropriate engagement in academic and in social domains, in particular, is known to be critical for successful development (see for a review Dietrich, Parker, & Salmela-Aro, 2012; Parker, Lüdtke, Trautwein, & Roberts, 2012; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). The choice of how much effort to channel into these key life goals is affected not only by opportunities and constraints in an adolescent’s social environment but also by personal resources (Arnett, 2000; Nurmi, 2004; Roberts, O’Donnell, & Robins, 2004).

Both personality traits and motivation have been identified as key predictors of human behavior in a variety of settings (Fleeson, 2001; Little, 2007; McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008) and with variables associated with effortful striving to meet long-term life goals (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Roberts, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2009; Turban, Tan, Brown, & Sheldon, 2007). Although recent theoretical work has considered the inter-relationship between different groups of personality variables (e.g., Bleidorn, 2009; Little, 2007; McCabe & Fleeson, 2012; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008), personality trait and motivation research have largely progressed in isolation. Personality trait research has typically focused on constructing traits as domain-general predictors of behavior (Cantor, 1990; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008), whereas motivation research has progressed by exploring goals and goal motivation within particular domains of human interest (Little, 2007; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Nurmi, 2004). Both sets of constructs are part of a spectrum of personality constructs that have been found to be important predictors of outcomes, including effort and goal striving (e.g., Trautwein et al., 2009). Many of the assumptions of integrative models of personality are poorly tested with empirical research. The current study considered several assumptions about the role of traits and motivational personality variables in predicting willingness to exert effort in academic and social life domains. It explored the juxtaposition of these variables in predicting willingness to exert effort to obtain important goals and clarified whether basic personality traits and motivation are independent (independent effects model) predictors of willingness to exert effort or whether motivation mediates the effects of personality traits on effort (the mediated effects model). It also compared and contrasted the domain specificity of personality traits and motivation constructs as predictors of willingness to exert effort.
in different life domains to clarify the nature of their predictive effect.

1.1. Personality: Conscientiousness and agreeableness as predictors of effort

The Big Five framework is the most widely used taxonomy of personality (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). The framework organizes broad individual dispositions in social and emotional life into five factor analytically derived traits, most commonly labeled extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness to experience (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). In some personality theories, traits have been described as basic tendencies, which describe broad dispositional patterns of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions across a range of life domains (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 2008), whereas in other theories they have defined as concepts that can change by context (e.g., Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Conscientiousness and agreeableness are of specific relevance to academic and social life domains, respectively.

Conscientiousness is known to be associated with task completion and goal-directed behavioral tendencies, such as thinking before acting, following norms and rules, planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009). As such, conscientiousness is often used as a predictor of greater effort and success in school and work life domains (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Bleidorn, 2012; Corker, Oswald, & Donnellan, 2012; Digman 1989; Noftle & Robins, 2007; Shiner, 2000). Conscientiousness has been shown, for example, to foster effort investment in class and homework (Trautwein & Lüdtke 2007; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Kastens, & Köller, 2006), facilitate high academic achievement (Digman, 1989; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Kölö, & Baumert, 2006; Mervielde, Buyst, & De Fruyt, 1995; Noftle & Robins, 2007), and predict job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Agreeableness includes tendencies such as altruism and trust (John et al., 2008). As such, it is often used as a predictor of outcomes in social relationships (Digman, 1989; Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1989; Parker et al., 2012). It has been shown, for example, to foster intimate relationships (Hogan, 1996) and to facilitate family relationships and parental investment (MacDonald, 1995).

1.2. Motivation: Do reasons for pursuing goals predict effort?

Personality traits are potent predictors of behavior, but they may not fully address the complexity of human goal striving. To better understand personality and behavior, motivational research over the past two decades has studied so-called goal units (Pervin, 1989). These units, conceptualized, for example, as personal action constructs (Little, 1989) are associated with what people do in their daily lives (Cantor, 1990) and are believed to signify human agency toward important life goals in domains such as academic life (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). The framework organizes broad individual dispositions in social and emotional life into five factor analytically derived traits, most commonly labeled extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness to experience (McAdams & Olson, 2010; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). In some personality theories, traits have been described as basic tendencies, which describe broad dispositional patterns of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions across a range of life domains (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 2008), whereas in other theories they have defined as concepts that can change by context (e.g., Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Conscientiousness and agreeableness are of specific relevance to academic and social life domains, respectively.

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1.3. Associations among personality traits, goal motivation, and invested effort

There is an abundance of theoretical models that delineate personality traits and personal goal relationships, and studies have shown that both personality traits and goal motivation are associated with invested effort. However, few studies (e.g., Corker et al., 2012; Trautwein et al., 2009) have explored these factors simultaneously. The current paper extends previous research by testing two competing hypotheses (mediated and independent effects) by which personality traits and autonomous goal regulation affect effort expenditure in two domains (academic and social). In both the mediated effects model and the independent effects model, basic traits and intermediate constructs, such as motivation, are conceptualized as a hierarchy of personality. However, the two models differ in their expectations about how these traits and intermediate constructs predict outcomes, such as effort.

1.3.1. Mediated effects hypothesis

The best-known paradigm, referred to by Trautwein et al. (2009) as the mediated effects hypothesis, has been used by a
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