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# A closer look at the relationships among trait procrastination, neuroticism, and conscientiousness

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## Abstract

This study with academically-undecided college students investigated the relationships among trait procrastination and two Big Five personality factors, Neuroticism and Conscientiousness. Results from structural equation modeling analyses comparing two hypothesized mediation models favored a model with Conscientiousness as a mediator over a model with procrastination as a mediator. The Conscientiousness mediator model accounted for 24% of the variance in trait procrastination. Bootstrapping procedures indicated the significance of the mediation effect.

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## 1. Introduction

Trait procrastination, which is “the tendency to postpone that which is necessary to reach some goal” (Lay, 1986, p. 475), is a strong predictor of students’ dilatory behaviors (Lay & Schouwenburg, 1993), and is associated with detrimental consequences, including poor grades (Rothblum, Solomon, & Murakami, 1986), course withdrawals (Beswick, Rothblum, & Mann, 1988), and delay in completing dissertations (Muszynski & Akamatsu, 1991). Given the adverse effects,

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understanding personality correlates of procrastination would advance researchers and practitioners' knowledge base on the construct.

### *1.1. Procrastination and personality correlates*

Trait procrastination is consistently associated with both Neuroticism (N) and Conscientiousness (C) of the Five-Factor Model of Personality (Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Lay, Kovacs, & Danto, 1998; Milgram & Tenne, 2000; Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995). N is defined as a tendency to feel negative emotions and psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem) and C refers to a tendency to be organized and persistent in pursuing goals (Costa & McCrae, 1991). The procrastination literature suggests that N is positively correlated with procrastination, with  $r$ s ranging from 0.18 to 0.42 (Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Milgram, Batori, & Mowrer, 1993; Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995; Watson, 2001). Similarly, C has a strong inverse relationship with trait procrastination, with  $r$ s ranging from  $-0.57$  to  $-0.79$  (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Lay et al., 1998; Scher & Osterman, 2002; Schouwenburg & Lay, 1995). There is a modest to moderate inverse relationship of N and C, with  $r$ s ranging from  $-0.28$  to  $-0.49$  (Bailey & Ross, 1996; Costa, McCrae, & Dye, 1991; Johnson & Bloom, 1995; Milgram & Tenne, 2000; Ross, Canada, & Rausch, 2002). In essence, there are moderate to strong correlations among procrastination, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. Given the intercorrelations, it is of interest to examine the mechanism by which procrastination is related to N and C. Based on the literature review, two hypothesized mediation models are postulated: (a) procrastination mediates the relationship of N and C (Model 1), and (b) C mediates the link between N and procrastination (Model 2).

#### *1.1.1. Procrastination mediator model*

Ross et al. (2002) reported that dispositional self-handicapping (presumably encompassing trait procrastination) significantly mediated the relationship of N and C using a partial correlation strategy. They argued that “higher levels of Neuroticism (including anxiety and indecisional procrastination) lead to an avoidance of threat stimuli (like manifest as task avoidance procrastination) which would be evoked by approaching achievement situations [facets of conscientiousness]” (p. 1182). They further asserted that despite the presumed orthogonal nature of N and C (Costa & McCrae, 1992), there are still considerable correlations between the two constructs, suggesting a possible mediation effect of dispositional self-handicapping. Two issues remain dubious regarding their conclusions. First, is it theoretically sound to postulate that a lower-order trait such as self-handicapping (or procrastination) mediates the association between two higher-order personality factors such as N and C? Second, the partial correlation strategy is not a robust statistical method to test a mediation effect because it does not assess measurement errors. Structural equation modeling approach is favored over a simple regression-based method for testing mediation (see Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004).

#### *1.1.2. Conscientiousness mediator model*

Based on Eysenck's (1947) hierarchical structure of personality, trait procrastination could be a lower-order trait that is influenced by higher-order traits (Carttell, 1962). Thus, it is reasonable to infer that N predicts trait procrastination (Steel, Brothen, & Wambach, 2001). Individuals high on N may easily feel overwhelmed by tasks and be distracted by unimportant activities, which may lead to their procrastinating tendencies. In this vein, C (a higher-order factor) could be conceptu-

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