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# Cognitive ability as a buffer to neuroticism: Churchill's secret weapon?

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## Abstract

The combined effects of cognitive ability and neuroticism on performance in military assessment centres were investigated in two separate samples. We hypothesized that individuals with a “stress intolerant” profile of low ability and high neuroticism would perform worst. In Naval ( $N = 607$ ) and Army ( $N = 62$ ) samples this hypothesis was supported: performance ratings were negatively correlated with neuroticism only in the less cognitively able individuals; in the more cognitively able individuals, neuroticism was uncorrelated with performance. These data help to explain variation in associations between neuroticism and performance in applied fields. Taken together with other studies, results suggest that organisations could obtain extra predictive validity by measuring interactions between psychometric variables.

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## 1. Introduction

Cognitive ability correlates positively with performance in occupational settings (e.g. Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), but the relationship between the major personality dimension of neuroticism and applied performance is less clear: despite its presence in most models of personality, as well

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as its widespread clinical significance, neuroticism does not correlate consistently with performance in applied settings. For example, in a large-scale analysis [Barrick and Mount \(1991\)](#) found no significant relationship between emotional stability (low neuroticism) and job performance, except amongst professionals. More recently, [Barrick, Mount, and Judge \(2001\)](#), in a review of 100 years of research on personality-performance relationships, found that emotional stability was significantly related to performance in some occupations but not others.

One possible explanation for this variability is that high neuroticism individuals are prone to perform poorly in stressful environments (e.g. [McFarlane, 1989](#)); however, in stress-free environments their performance may be unimpaired, or even improved. There is some evidence to support this contention. For example, [Cattell, Eber, and Tatsuoka \(1970\)](#) found that people employed in five hazardous occupations (policeman, fireman, electrical engineer, airline pilot and hostess) tended to be less apprehensive, less tense, less imaginative and more emotionally stable than people employed in five non-hazardous occupations (janitor, nun, priest, foreman and artist). [Hallam and Rachman \(1980\)](#) found that bomb disposal operators were not only significantly more stable than the general population but also the most successful operators were significantly more stable than their lower performing colleagues. In addition, [Bartram and Dale \(1982\)](#) found that, whilst military pilot applicants as a group scored significantly lower on neuroticism than the general population, less neurotic individuals were more likely to pass pilot training - this trend seems to be a product of the additional stress of military aviation rather than flying per se, as civilian amateur pilots tend to be much closer to the general population norms in terms of average neuroticism scores than their military counterparts ([Bartram, 1995](#)).

## **2. The cognitive buffering hypothesis**

These studies support the idea that high levels of neuroticism are debilitating in stressful occupational settings. They cannot, however, account for a subset of people who succeed in stressful occupational settings despite apparently high levels of neuroticism. A well-known historical example of such a person is Sir Winston Churchill who led Britain successfully through the Second World War despite a trait tendency to suffer from the characteristic signs of neuroticism, namely, anxiety, depression, hypochondria and fear of public speaking ([Moran, 1966](#)). Contemporary accounts suggest that Churchill may have succeeded because his cognitive resources buffered his neuroticism. For example, Churchill moderated his fear of public speaking with an elaborate routine of preparation ([Jenkins, 2001](#)), fought depression with physically creative pastimes such as bricklaying and painting, and reduced his tendency to worry with a primitive form of cognitive behaviour therapy that he described to his doctor in 1944: “It helps to write down half a dozen things which are worrying me. Two of them, say, disappear; about two nothing can be done, so it is no use worrying, and two perhaps can be settled” ([Moran, 1966, p. 167](#)). At an anecdotal level, these accounts of Churchill vividly suggest that cognitively able individuals may have a higher level of stress tolerance than their level of neuroticism might indicate.

In support of this possibility, [Eysenck \(1947\)](#) found that the cognitive ability scores of 5000 soldiers invalided out of the British Army for psychiatric reasons during World War II (the so called ‘war neurotics’) were on average significantly lower than the scores of 3665 normal soldiers. Eysenck was aware of the potential importance of ability in defining stress tolerance in interaction

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