



## Big-five personality and BIS/BAS traits as predictors of career exploration: The mediation role of career adaptability

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### ABSTRACT

Based on career construction theory, the current research examined whether career adaptability mediates the relations of the personality traits (Five-Factor Model personality traits and behavioral inhibition and activation systems (BIS/BAS)) to career exploration behavior. Results from a survey in Chinese university students ( $N = 264$ ) showed that career exploration correlated negatively with neuroticism, and positively with openness to experience, extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and BAS. Results of regression analyses further showed that openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness and BAS served as the strongest predictors for career exploration. In addition, career adaptability was shown to be a key mediator for the relationships between personality traits and career exploration behavior. Career concern and career curiosity were the more important dimensions in the mediation model. These findings advance current understandings on how different personality traits predict career exploration behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

Career exploration refers to individuals' activities of collecting and analyzing information on their personal characteristics, as well as information on jobs, organizations and occupations (Stumpf, Colarelli, & Hartman, 1983). By searching and processing career-related information, individuals can better understand existing job opportunities (Werbel, 2000), and prepare themselves for the challenges in their career transitions (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Individuals' career exploration behavior correlates positively with their career self-efficacy (Forstenlechner, Selim, Baruch, & Madi, 2014) and career growth/success (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). In recent years, more and more work has examined the individual and contextual predictors of career exploration, in order to identify effective ways to promote individuals' adaptive career behavior (e.g., Cai et al., 2015; Fan, Cheung, Leong, & Cheung, 2011; Guan et al., 2015; Nauta, 2007; Reed, Bruch, & Haase, 2004).

Previous research has shown that the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality traits provides a valid framework to identify predictors of career exploration (Nauta, 2007; Reed et al., 2004). To further extend current understanding of the individual predictors of career exploration, we examined the relations of career exploration to the FFM of personality dimensions and the dichotomy of the behavioral inhibition system/behavioral activation system (BIS/BAS). The behavioral inhibition system represents a predisposition that motivates individuals to avoid negative stimuli. The behavioral activation system represents a predisposition that motivates individuals to approach positive stimuli (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1970). The BIS/BAS trait model is distinct from FFM of personality

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traits. It provides a new perspective to understand the relationships between individual traits and career exploration (Carver & White, 1994; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Gray, 1970). Drawing on career construction theory (Savickas, 1997, 2005, 2013), we also tested the mediation role of career adaptability in this process. Career adaptability is defined as individuals' psychosocial resources to manage various tasks in their career transitions (Savickas, 1997). We propose that career adaptability serves as a key explanatory link between individual traits (FFM personality and BIS/BAS traits) and career exploration. In order to situate the current research, we reviewed relevant literature and developed our hypotheses in the next section.

### 1.1. Big-five personality, BIS/BAS, and career exploration

In most previous work, the FFM of personality has been the predominant theoretical framework for investigating relationships between individual traits and career exploration. Reed et al. (2004) reported that career exploration correlated positively with conscientiousness, extroversion, openness to experience, and negatively with neuroticism, but they also reported a non-significant relationship between agreeableness and career exploration. In a two-wave study among college students, Nauta (2007) reported that openness to experience and extroversion were the only two dimensions that predicted career exploration across 18 months. After controlling for the effects of demographic variables, vocational interests and efficacy, openness to experience related positively to career exploration, but extroversion related negatively to exploration. Nauta (2007) posited that this result may be because extroverted individuals' focus on others rather than themselves inhibits their career exploration.

The first aim of this study was to examine the relationship between FFM of personality and career exploration among Chinese university students, to test whether previous findings can be generalized to the Chinese context. From a functional perspective (Digman, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1992), we propose that openness to experience correlates positively with career exploration as it is associated with high level of curiosity; conscientiousness correlates positively with career exploration as it is associated with high level of persistence; extroversion correlates positively with career exploration as it is associated with high level of vitality and proactivity; agreeableness correlates positively with career exploration as it is associated with high level of social ability, which may be particularly important in the Chinese context; and neuroticism correlates negatively with career exploration as it is associated with high levels of anxiety and depression.

**Hypothesis 1.** Career exploration correlates positively with openness to experience (H1a), conscientiousness (H1b), extroversion (H1c), and agreeableness (H1d), and correlates negatively with neuroticism (H1e).

The FFM of personality can be conceived as a lexically-based description of the multiple facets of personality (e.g. Digman, 1990). In contrast, the BIS/BAS model depicts individuals' dispositional characteristics from a physiological perspective (Gray, 1970). From this view, the brain-behavioral systems underlying approach and avoidance behaviors serve as important basis for individuals' personality. The behavioral inhibition system (BIS) is sensitive to negative stimuli and this system inhibits behavior to protect individuals from negative or painful outcomes. BIS has been found to correlate with negative affect such as fear, anxiety and sadness (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1970). In comparison, the behavioral activation system (BAS) is sensitive to rewarding stimuli and fosters approach behaviors that dispose individuals to pursue and achieve goals. This system has been found to correlate with positive feelings such as hope, joy and happiness (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1970).

Although previous research has revealed significant relationships between BIS/BAS and the FFM (e.g., Segarra, Poy, López, & Moltó, 2014; Smits & Boeck, 2006), these two frameworks represent different perspectives on personality and make distinct contributions in explaining individual differences in social behavior (Elliot & Thrash, 2010). On one hand, BIS prompts negative affect and avoidance behavior, thus it may inhibit individuals' career exploration as a way to avoid the risks and negative consequences associated with the exploration process. On the other hand, BAS prompts positive affect and approach behavior, thus it may stimulate and sustain individuals' exploration behavior. Consequently, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 2.** Career exploration correlates negatively with BIS (H2a) and positively with BAS (H2b).

### 1.2. The mediation role of career adaptability

Based on career construction theory (Savickas, 2005, 2013), we also tested the mediation role of career adaptability for the relations between individual traits and career exploration behavior. On the one hand, career adaptability has its dispositional basis and has significant relationship with individual traits (Teixeira, Bardagi, Lassance, de Oliveira Magalhães, & Duarte, 2012; van Vianen, Klehe, Koen, & Dries, 2012). With regard to the big-five personality, previous research has demonstrated that career adaptability correlated positively with extroversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness (Teixeira et al., 2012; van Vianen et al., 2012). In addition, Teixeira et al. (2012) also reported a positive relationship between career adaptability and agreeableness and a negative relationship between career adaptability and neuroticism. In addition to the big-five personality, we propose that as BIS is associated with avoidance motivation (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), it may inhibit individuals' strengths in dealing with the challenging tasks of career development and decreases individuals' career adaptability. In contrast, BAS is associated with approach motivation (Elliot & Thrash, 2010), which may sustains individuals' abilities in coping with the uncertainties in their career development, and increases individuals' career adaptability. Consistent with these arguments (van Vianen et al., 2012) reported that career adaptability was positively related to promotion focus (an indicator of approach orientation) and negatively related to prevention focus (an indicator of avoidance orientation).

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