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# Occupational stress, coping and strain: The combined/interactive effect of the Big Five traits

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## Abstract

Past research on personality and the occupational stressor–strain relationship has examined traits independently (nomothetic approach) rather than interactively (idiographic approach). The current research examined the combined/interactive effect of the Big Five traits in predicting stress, coping, and strain among 211 managers. Low Neuroticism with high Extraversion and high Conscientiousness predicted lower stressor exposure, physical ill health and job dissatisfaction, whereas high Neuroticism–low Conscientiousness predicted higher stressor exposure, dysfunctional coping, physical ill health and job dissatisfaction, and lower problem-focused coping. In addition, there was some evidence for a high Neuroticism–low Agreeableness interaction in the prediction of job dissatisfaction. Nomothetic and idiographic approaches should be integrated in future research to advance a more complete understanding of the role of personality in occupational stress and strain.

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## 1. Introduction

Occupational stress is a serious issue for the employee, organization and community alike. The magnitude and subsequent cost of the problem is immense, and its toll on health and well being is on the increase (Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003). However, a consistent conclusion in the literature is that the relationship between stressor exposure per se and strain typically does not exceed 0.30, a moderate association that may conceal a stronger relationship for a certain ‘at risk’ group (Cohen & Edwards, 1989). Accordingly, the role of individual differences has become important, with most research emphasizing personality traits or coping as a vulnerability/resistance factor (Wiebe & Smith, 1997). Personality is perhaps the more pervasive, in that it may influence stressor exposure, cognitive appraisal, coping, physiological reactivity and susceptibility to stress-related illness and disease (Code & Langan-Fox, 2001).

The current research investigated the combined/interactive role of traits in the occupational stressor–strain relationship among managers. Traits were measured based on the Five Factor Model (FFM) and thus focused on higher-level factors (Extraversion, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness) as opposed to lower-level sub-traits. The independent role of the ‘Big Five’ traits in the stressor–strain relationship is reviewed below, followed by a discussion of their possible combined/interactive effect.

## 2. Traits and the stressor–strain relationship: nomothetic and idiographic domains

Personality psychology is defined by two ‘domains’: the nomothetic approach, from the Greek word *nomos*, meaning ‘the search for lawfulness’, and the *idiographic* approach, from the Latin word *idoma*, meaning ‘individuality’, and *graph*, meaning ‘to write down or record’ (Winter, 1996). In the nomothetic approach, personality is studied at a global level, the purpose being to identify the dimensions along which people differ (Winter, 1996). For example, the FFM is concerned with the number of traits that can be distinguished, the distribution of traits in the general population, and the extent to which traits are universal cross-culturally (Thorne, 1995). Within this approach, personality is defined with reference to a person’s standing on various dimensions, usually compared against general population ‘norms’. In contrast, the idiographic approach is concerned with the organization and structure of personality at the individual level, the purpose being to describe and predict behavior based on the interaction of personality elements *within* the person, rather than to separate various dimensions from one another (Epstein, 1994).

Past research on the role of personality in the occupational stressor–strain relationship has examined traits independently, precluding consideration of the multi-dimensional, interactive nature of personality championed by the idiographic approach. Most research has been conducted within constructs, with little attempt to forge a link between constructs (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). Thus, it is unclear whether particular traits act independently, interactively, or redundantly with other traits in the occupational stressor–strain relationship (Korotkov & Hannah, 2004). Single trait models are likely to inflate or mask the true effect of traits on illness (Korotkov & Hannah, 2004). Thus, it is important to clarify the combined/interactive contribution of traits to the

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