



# The conscientious retiree: The relationship between conscientiousness, retirement, and volunteering



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## ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between conscientiousness, work status, and volunteering utilizing two large samples, the St. Louis Personality and Aging Network (SPAN) and the Health and Retirement Study (HRS). It was hypothesized that conscientious adults who were retired would be more likely to volunteer because, after retirement, they gain a substantial amount of free time, while losing an outlet for their industrious and achievement-striving tendencies. Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses revealed that conscientious, retired individuals were more likely to volunteer than conscientious, working individuals. Further analyses revealed that facets of conscientiousness provide differential information from the general trait. These findings indicate that volunteering during retirement fills an important niche for high-striving, conscientious individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

Conscientious individuals are industrious, responsible, goal-oriented and able to control their impulses (Mike, Harris, Roberts, & Jackson, *in press*). These traits are especially useful in achievement-orientated domains such as school and work, where conscientiousness individuals utilize their skills to excel. In school settings, conscientiousness predicts better academic performance, independently of intelligence (Bratko, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Saks, 2006; Nettle & Robins, 2007; Poropat, 2009) and is also related to higher satisfaction with school (Lounsbury, Saudargas, Gibson, & Leong, 2005). In the work force, highly conscientious individuals are, again, more successful—in terms of both job advancement as well as salary (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005; Roberts, Jackson, Duckworth, & Von Cullin, 2011). In addition, they tend to be more satisfied with their careers (Ng *et al.*, 2005).

The success of conscientious individuals in educational and occupational domains reflects the investment they put into their pursuits. They are more likely to work hard towards their goals, to work long hours, and to persist after failures or setbacks (Jackson *et al.*, 2010). In school, conscientious students have greater achievement motivations and put a greater amount of effort into

their work. (Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003a, 2003b; De Feyter, Caers, Vigna, & Berings, 2012; Nettle & Robins, 2007; Paunonen & Ashton, 2001; Richardson & Abraham, 2009; Trautwein, Lüdtke, Roberts, Schnyder, & Niggli, 2009). After leaving school, conscientious individuals reinvest their energies and motivation through increased involvement and commitment to their careers (Hudson, Roberts, & Lodi-Smith, 2012; Spurk & Abele, 2010). As a result they are more likely to work overtime, and volunteer to do extra work (Jackson *et al.*, 2010). Conscientious individuals are also more likely to agree with statements like they would continue to work even if they won the lottery (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffit, 2003), suggesting that highly conscientious individuals prefer having structured, goal-directed work to fill their time.

While the move from school to work is a natural transition where conscientious individuals can fruitfully redirect their industrious and high-achieving drives, their transition out of work and into retirement has been less explored (Löckenhoff, Terracciano, & Costa, 2009). What happens to highly conscientiousness individuals when they no longer have an achievement domain in which to invest? The current study proposes that volunteering serves as an outlet for conscientiousness individuals' preferences during the transition into retirement.

### 1.1. Conscientiousness and retirement

Retirement is a major life transition where individuals gain a substantial amount of free time, while potentially losing the meaning and purpose they derive from their work (Reis & Gold, 1993;

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Wang & Shi, 2013). For most, retirement is viewed positively—as a rewarding life stage where one is relieved from obligations and pressures and is free to pursue one's own interests (Rosenkoetter & Garris, 2001). Even so, retirement is a radical change from the career path, so much so that preretirement courses are offered to help those approaching retirement prepare for the transition (Reis & Gold, 1993; Rosenkoetter & Garris, 2001). And while most adjust to retirement with ease, not everyone experiences such a smooth transition. Issues with retirement may in part stem to the loss of challenge and purpose that is associated with one's career (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2008). Leaving a challenging job, for example, is related to less satisfaction in retirement (Van Solinge & Henkens, 2008). Though retired individuals do spend more time doing enjoyable activities compared to full-time employees, they also have less variety in their daily tasks, do less problem-solving, are less likely to learn new things, and have significantly fewer positive social interactions (Ross & Drentea, 1998). Some of these issues may be addressed by taking up new activities. For example, engaging in activities during retirement is linked to better physical and mental health, higher quality of life, and more successful aging (Kaskie, Imhof, Cavanaugh, & Culp, 2008; Potočník & Sonnentag, 2013; Wang & Shi, 2013). Volunteering specifically has been linked to a number of positive outcomes in retirement including lower rates of mortality, fewer illnesses, fewer functional impairments, and higher psychological well-being (Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999; Wang & Shi, 2013).

While engaging in activities seems to be beneficial to all retirees, it may be especially important for the highly conscientious, who likely desire more structured, goal-oriented activities with which to fill their time. In fact, conscientious individuals report having more aspirational motivations for retiring, such as wanting to pursue new opportunities and aspirations outside of work, versus retiring because they have reached the appropriate age or because they feel pressured to do so (Robinson, Demetre, & Corney, 2010). Some hypothesize that conscientiousness is related to proactive coping during retirement (Reis & Gold, 1993), and there is evidence that conscientious individuals do in fact cope better with retirement than those low on conscientiousness (MacLean, 1983; Robinson et al., 2010). Similarly to conscientious individuals' enjoyment of school and work, so too is conscientiousness related to greater enjoyment of retirement (MacLean, 1983) and greater overall life satisfaction during this time (Robinson et al., 2010).

## 1.2. Conscientiousness and volunteering

Few studies have investigated what aspirations conscientious individuals have or what activities they use to fill their newfound free time during retirement. Do conscientious individuals reroute their effort and motivations into new, meaningful activities? Though this time may be spent in a variety of ways (increasing time spent on leisure activities, pursuing hobbies, traveling, or spending time with friends and family) such activities may not completely fulfill underlying drives to set goals, work hard, and be successful. One activity, volunteering, can be thought to strongly resemble employment. Volunteering can be defined as the “long-term, planned, prosocial behaviors that benefit strangers and occur within an organizational setting” (Penner, 2002, p. 448). Often, volunteers have to commit to a certain number of hours and adhere to a schedule, they have projects and/or tasks they are accountable for, and, unlike many other hobbies, volunteering presents the opportunity to work for a larger cause (Waikayi, Fearon, Morris, & McLaughlin, 2012). As individuals' roles in work and family settings change, volunteering offers the additional benefit of providing a new role (civic engagement) and domain (one's community) to step into in order to help define one's identity as a retiree (Kaskie et al., 2008).

Volunteering is an activity that could plausibly smooth the transition from work to retirement. Indeed, some hypothesize that retirees will fill their newfound free time volunteering, and that volunteering may replace benefits previously derived from careers (Wilson, 2000). However, while retirees have increased time to volunteer compared to their working selves, retirement alone does not result in increased levels of volunteering (Caro & Bass, 1997; Herzog, Kahn, Morgan, Jackson, & Antonucci, 1989). Perhaps this lack of findings is due to the fact that not all individuals have high work drives or high need for achievement. Some people work hard their entire careers and anticipate a time when they no longer have pressing obligations. Instead, they look forward to relaxing on a sandy beach. Others, in contrast, may feel like a part of their identity is missing when not working towards higher-order goals and engaging in tasks to keep busy. Level of conscientiousness, therefore, may be a key component in who chooses to volunteer once retired.

The relationship between the Big Five personality traits and volunteering has not been researched extensively, and the relationship between conscientiousness and volunteering has been examined even less. Existing literature has primarily examined the roles of extraversion and agreeableness in volunteering, focusing on social and prosocial motivations (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005; Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). Extraversion's relationship with volunteering may be predominantly driven by involvement in clubs, organizations, or church due to high sociability and energy levels (Okun, Pugliese, & Rook, 2007). Volunteering also fits very naturally with the prosocial drives and motives of agreeable individuals (King, Jackson, Morrow-Howell, & Oltmanns, 2014), as volunteering organizations often aim to provide assistance to others (Wilson, 2000).

In addition to being motivated by prosocial values and social drives, people may volunteer to learn new skills, enhance their careers, or to focus on personal development (Clary & Snyder, 1999; Waikayi et al., 2012). As such, volunteering seems like a natural outlet for conscientious traits. Indeed, there is preliminary evidence to suggest that conscientiousness may play a role in whether individuals choose to volunteer. In a study that examined broad behaviors associated with conscientiousness, the highly conscientious reported being more likely to volunteer (Jackson et al., 2010). In another study that examined the relationship between extraversion, agreeableness, prosocial motives, and volunteering, conscientiousness was positively correlated with both prosocial motives and volunteering. However, these relationships were no longer significant in the final models that included all Big Five traits, motives, and gender (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & Guzman, 2005). This indicates that conscientiousness likely does influence volunteering, but that that relationship is not as straightforward as that of extraversion or agreeableness. Instead, conscientiousness' unique role may be better determined if one's circumstances, such as work status, are taken into account.

## 1.3. The facets of conscientiousness

Conscientiousness is a broad personality trait that consists of behaviors and motivations that generally relate to being responsible, organized, and hardworking (Mike, Harris, Roberts, & Jackson J.J., in press; Roberts, Jackson, Fayard, Edmonds, & Meints, 2009 (chap. 25)). However, the relative strength of each facet of conscientiousness may differ across individuals; someone may be very hardworking, but not very organized, or highly achievement striving, but not concerned about societal rules. As a result, it can be beneficial to investigate the effects of personality at a facet level (Jackson et al., 2009; Paunonen, 1998). For example, the lower order facets of achievement striving and self-discipline have been found to have strong relationships with academic success, while

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