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Time-on-task mediates the conscientiousness–performance relationship

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Abstract

The relationships between conscientiousness, time-on-task, and academic performance were investigated in a mediation model. When simple summated conscientiousness scores were analyzed, relationships with performance and time-on-task were not significant. When factor scores estimated in the context of a model assuming common method bias were analyzed, conscientiousness was a significant predictor of test performance, and time-on-task fully mediated the conscientiousness–performance relationship. The relationships held for conscientiousness alone and for conscientiousness controlling for cognitive ability.

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1. Introduction

Previous research has consistently shown conscientiousness to be both a singly valid and incrementally valid predictor of performance in a wide variety of occupational groups (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Mount & Barrick, 1998; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Conscientiousness also predicts performance in academic settings (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic &

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Furnham, 2003; Conard, 2004; Wolfe & Johnson, 1995). In spite of the large amount of research investigating the conscientiousness–performance relationship, “very little research has examined the mechanisms through which personality traits influence performance” (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002, p. 43). Although at least four mediating mechanisms have been proposed for the conscientiousness–performance relationship including self-efficacy (Chen, Casper, & Cortina, 2001; Klein & Lee, 2006), performance expectancy (Gellatly, 1996), accomplishment striving via striving for job performance (Barrick et al., 2002), and selective optimization with compensation (Bajor & Baltes, 2003) it is possible that there might be other mechanisms explaining the processes by which conscientiousness influences various job-related outcomes. One such process is time spent on planning for and attempting to accomplish the task at hand. Since there is evidence that such time is positively related to performance in a learning context (Vancouver & Kendall, 2006), it seems worthwhile to investigate time-on-task as a possible channel through which conscientiousness predicts performance.

Since training in organizations is often analogous or even identical to classroom education, the conscientiousness–performance relationship in academic settings is relevant to organizations. In particular, factors that lead to better training performance should be expected to be important for better job performance after training (e.g., Arthur, Bennett, Edens, & Bell, 2003). For these reasons, we investigated the efficacy of time-on-task as a mediator of the conscientiousness–performance relationship in an academic setting.

The positive linkage between conscientiousness and time-on-task can be drawn from two successful self-regulation theories: social cognitive (Bandura, 1991), and control theory (Powers, 1973). First, according to Bandura’s (1991) social cognitive theory of self-regulation, individuals are motivated by a self-regulatory mechanism which includes the judgment of one’s behavior in relation to personal standards and situational constraints. In the academic performance context, the self-regulation process will influence individuals’ proactive behavior of setting challenging goals and subsequently spending time studying in order to achieve desired goals. One meta-analytic estimate shows conscientiousness having an average correlation of .22 with both goal difficulty and performance motivation viewed under Bandura’s social cognitive theory (Judge & Ilies, 2002, Tables 1 and 2; pp. 801–802). Recently, researchers found that student homework and goal setting behavior were both positively related to conscientiousness – students scoring high on conscientiousness were found to spend more time doing their homework and to set harder

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Summated conscientiousness	4.75	0.86	(.79)					
2 Conscientiousness factor scores	−0.02	0.69	.76 ^b	(.86)				
3 Study time	3.28	0.69	.14	.20 ^a	(.79)			
4 Wonderlic	21.83	6.16	.02	.08	.21 ^a			
5 Test	76.25	15.21	.09	.20 ^a	.39 ^b	.45 ^b		
6 Method bias factor scores	0.00	0.13	.66	.12	.05	.01	−.03	(.92)

Values on diagonal are coefficient alpha values for summated scales, factor determinacies for factor scores.

^a $p < .05$.

^b $p < .001$.

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