



Exploring mechanisms in the personality–performance relationship: Mediating roles of self-management and situational constraints

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Abstract

Conscientiousness and neuroticism, self-management practices, and perceived situational constraints were integrated into a model that predicts efficacy and performance. The model was tested using structural equation modeling with a sample of 228 undergraduate students. The results indicated that individual differences exist in self-management practices and perceptions of situational constraints, and that both self-management practices and perceived situational constraints have partial mediating effects on the relationship of personality to self-efficacy and performance.

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1. Introduction

A myriad of past research has explored the relationships between dispositional characteristics, motivation, and performance. Over the past decade, the dispositional approach to understanding

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motivational and performance outcomes has received a great deal of interest and support (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; House, Shane, & Harold, 1996; Judge & Ilies, 2002). Several meta-analyses have provided strong evidence for the relationships between personality and job performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001) and between personality and motivation (Judge & Ilies, 2002).

With support for such relationships now established, little is known regarding the mechanisms that may underlie these established relationships (Barrick et al., 2001). In other words, now that we have evidence for which individual differences may impact performance, more information is needed regarding how such differences impact motivation and performance (Kanfer, 1991; Weiss & Adler, 1984). This study investigates two possible mediating mechanisms that may be at work in the relationships between personality, motivation, and performance: self-management and perceived situational constraints.

2. Overview of mediating mechanisms

Theoretically, the paths from personality traits to self-management and perceived situational constraints are suggested by social cognitive theory (SCT; Bandura, 1986). A central tenant of SCT is that cognitive processes play an important role in human functioning. Individuals are proactively and reactively involved in their development, and purposefully seek to shape their environment. We propose that the cognitive processes associated with specific personality traits influences both the proactive behavior of self-management as well as the reactive perception of environmental constraints, both of which, in turn, affect motivation and performance.

Self-management is defined as “a set of behavioral and cognitive strategies that assist individuals in structuring their environment (at work or elsewhere), establishing self-motivation, and facilitating behaviors appropriate for obtaining performance standards” (Frayne & Geringer, 2000, p. 361). Research in self-management has recently increased due to its practical usefulness (Uhl-Bien & Graen, 1998). Initial research suggests that persistent individual differences in the tendency to self-manage do exist, but remain relatively unexplored (Markham & Markham, 1995; Morossanova, 2003). Peters and O’Connor (1980) suggest that the relationship between individual differences and outcomes (such as motivation and performance) may be masked by situational constraints (Peters, Chassie, Lindholm, O’Connor, & Kline, 1982; Phillips & Freedman, 1984), or environmental features that can limit the extent to which personal attributes translate into behavior and performance (Adkins & Naumann, 2001; Peters, O’Connor, & Euhlberg, 1985). Past research has found situational constraints to be negatively related to motivation (Mathieu, Tanenbaum, & Salas, 1992; Peters et al., 1982), as well as performance (Klein & Kim, 1998; Peters et al., 1985).

While other studies have examined objective measures of situational constraints, we argue that the variable of interest in this study is an individual’s perceptions of situational constraints, rather than objective measures of situational constraints. Bandura (1997) states, “. . . people’s level of motivation. . . and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true” (p. 2). Although prior research has speculated that individual differences are likely to bias perceptual measures of constraints (Adkins & Naumann, 2001), to our knowledge, this question has yet to be empirically tested in terms of the impact of personality on perceptions of situational constraints.

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