



Trait, state, and task-contingent conscientiousness: Influence on learning and transfer[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Personality psychology has primarily been concerned with personality traits, but the emphasis on traits ignores momentary expression of personality traits in a given situation and individuals' dynamic contingent response to situations. Integrating trait, process, and contingent approaches to personality, we examined the roles of trait, state, and task-contingent conscientiousness in learning and transfer. Personality and test data were collected from 109 individuals who participated in a learner-controlled computer-based training program. As hypothesized, trait conscientiousness predicted state conscientiousness during training, which in turn predicted self-regulatory processes and learning outcomes. Meanwhile, task-contingent conscientiousness did not predict state conscientiousness during training, when the learning task was relatively easy. More importantly, task-contingent conscientiousness exerted a direct effect on transfer, when task demands became exceedingly difficult and dynamic. The present findings not only provide input for training design and intervention, but also highlight the potential of further investigating contingent units of personality.

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1. Introduction

Trainee personality is an important antecedent to learning and subsequent transfer of learning (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume, Ford, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010). The existing literature on trainee personality has focused on personality traits, i.e., the consistent pattern of behavior an individual tends to display across various situations (Tellegen, 1991). However, behavior can be situational specific, rendering global personality traits suboptimal predictors of specific behaviors (Mischel, 1968). The study of trainee personality may benefit from considering dynamic personality constructs, including personality states (i.e., momentary states classified in personality terms; Fleeson, 2001) and situation-contingent personality (i.e., typical response to a certain situational characteristic, classified in personality terms; Fleeson, 2007). Focusing on conscientiousness as a relevant personality domain, we integrate state conscientiousness and task-contingent conscientiousness (Huang

& Ryan, 2011; Minbashian, Wood, & Beckmann, 2010) in the training context.

This paper makes three contributions to the literature. First, unlike past studies that examined within-person variability of personality states using experience sampling methodology (e.g., Fleeson, 2001), we model state conscientiousness as a between-person process variable in the learning context. Specifically, we identify state conscientiousness during training as a proximal manifestation of trait conscientiousness that influences trainees' self-regulation and subsequent performance.

Second, we propose the direct influence of task-contingent conscientiousness on transfer performance on a dynamic, challenging task, thus extending Minbashian et al.'s (2010) pioneering work that focused on adaptive performance as the outcome. Our study not only broadens the criterion space for task-contingent conscientiousness, but also points to situational contingencies (Fleeson, 2007) as a venue for personality research.

Third, from a methodological perspective, we investigate the feasibility of assessing task-contingent conscientiousness using a self-report measure, thereby moving beyond past effort to examine the contingency between task demand and state conscientiousness through repeated sampling of events (Huang & Ryan, 2011; Minbashian et al., 2010). Although still in need of further validation, our approach can both reduce participant burden in responding and

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the intensity of data collection, thus providing a convenient tool for personality psychologists to assess this relatively new construct.

1.1. Conscientiousness, training, and transfer

Trait conscientiousness captures individuals' tendency to be dependable, organized, hardworking, and achievement-striving across various situations (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1992). Several reviews (e.g. Blume et al., 2010, Wilson, Huang, & Kraiger, 2013) have identified trait conscientiousness as a distal predictor to learning and subsequent transfer. However, the trait approach's emphasis on individuals' typical behavioral tendencies ignores situational variations in behavior (Mischel, 1968). In particular, individuals differ on how they respond to specific situational cues – the “if (situation) then (behavior)” within-person behavioral signatures (Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

Recent advances on such dynamic aspects of conscientiousness provide promising venues for training researchers to consider. Fleeson (2001) conceptualized a personality trait as a frequency distribution of personality states on the same domain. Instead of assessing global, general behavioral tendencies, he measured individuals' momentary states using personality terms. Subsequent research has not only documented significant within-person variation of personality states across situations, but also demonstrated that how an individual's personality states fluctuate with changes in situational cues resembles stable individual difference (Fleeson, 2001, 2007; Huang & Ryan, 2011). Using experience sampling methodology, Minbashian et al. (2010) captured *task-contingent conscientiousness* as the degree to which individuals tend to elevate their state conscientiousness in response to challenging tasks and demonstrated task-contingent conscientiousness as a predictor of adaptive performance.

Answering calls to consider the learner as dynamic beings that actively respond to training and transfer situations (Ford & Oswald, 2003), we involve both state and task-contingent conscientiousness in the study of learning and transfer. Fig. 1 presents our proposed model. We note that constructs and linkages on the right hand side of the model, including the self-regulatory mechanisms (Sitzmann & Ely, 2011), training outcomes (Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993), and transfer (Huang, Blume, Ford, & Baldwin, 2015), have largely been supported (e.g. Bell & Kozlowski, 2008, Ford, Smith, Weissbein, Gully, & Salas, 1998). Thus, we focus our hypotheses on the roles of trait, state, and task-contingent conscientiousness.

First, we expect the distal trait conscientiousness to influence state conscientiousness in the training context. As a stable characteristic of the person, trait conscientiousness captures the person's typical level of conscientious behavior (DeYoung, 2015; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). Experience sample research has demonstrated a positive linkage between trait conscientiousness and the average of state conscientiousness across various situations (e.g. Fleeson, 2001, Huang & Ryan, 2011).

That is, state conscientiousness serves as enactment of trait conscientiousness in individual situations (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). The training context is characterized by ample opportunities to explore, learn, and rehearse, especially in a learner-controlled environment. Thus, based on the trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), the task cues in the training context call for the activation of conscientiousness, allowing dispositionally conscientious trainees to be organized, hardworking, and detailed-oriented *while they are learning*. Meanwhile, the situation is not so strong as to diminish individual difference (see Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010).

Hypothesis 1 : Trait conscientiousness will positively predict state conscientiousness during learner-controlled training.

Task-contingent conscientiousness, in contrast, may not exert significant impact on state conscientiousness during training. Task-contingent conscientiousness captures an individual's tendency to increase his/her state conscientiousness to deal with exceedingly difficult tasks. A training program designed to facilitate and support learning may not present a high degree of difficulty for trainees to need to elevate their state conscientiousness. Thus, we did not propose a specific hypothesis regarding the effect of task-contingent conscientiousness on state conscientiousness during training.

Next, we propose the role of state conscientiousness as an antecedent to self-regulation during training. Recent research has identified state analogs of trait variables as proximal predictors of learning processes and outcomes; such learning states include state goal orientation (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008) and state attribution (Weissbein, Huang, Ford, & Schmidt, 2011). State conscientiousness represents another key learning state that affects how trainees allocate their cognitive and motivational resources during training. As a result, state conscientiousness during training will positively predict trainees' self-regulatory processes during training, specifically *attention* (i.e., sustaining mental focus during training, Sitzmann & Ely, 2011) and *effort* (i.e., devoting time to learning, Sitzmann & Ely, 2011).

Hypothesis 2 : State conscientiousness will predict (a) attention and (b) effort during learner-controlled training.

Finally, we expect task-contingent conscientiousness to exert a direct effect on transfer in a difficult task environment. We focused on the generalization dimension of transfer (Blume et al., 2010), specifically the degree to which trainees can apply the knowledge and skills acquired from a learning environment to a complex, dynamic performance context. The dynamic coupling between task difficulty/challenge and state conscientiousness captured in task-contingent conscientiousness determines that the “if (difficult task), then (work harder)” behavioral pattern will be triggered when the situational cue of difficult task is present. As noted, we did not expect task-contingent conscientiousness to affect state conscientiousness during training when the learning task

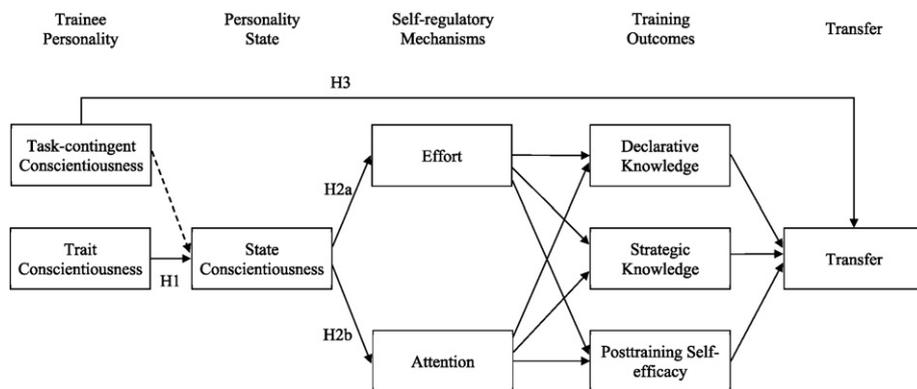


Fig. 1. Proposed research model and specific hypotheses.

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