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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An Exploratory Study of the Relationship Between the Big-Five Personality Dimensions and Political Skills with Military Staff Members' Perceived Performance

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The purpose was to explore the relationship and mediation effects between the Big Five personality dimensions, and political skill with military staff members' perceived performance. The sample included 185 Armed Forces International staff members from several military education facilities. The results indicated that the PSI and several personality dimensions were positively correlated with individuals' perceived performance. In addition, the personality dimension Conscientiousness acted as a statistically significant mediator between an individual's use of political skills and their perceived performance. Practical considerations and future research directions are suggested.

Keywords: personality; political skill; organization; influence; social psychology; military

Introduction

Performance is a constant focus for organizations, both for private and government sectors. The military is no exception, especially when an individual's performance can be linked to the life and limb of oneself or others in dangerous contexts. Therefore, both team and individuals' performance is examined, scrutinized and continuously developed in order to increase overall staff effectivity. Hard factors such as routines, training exercises and procedures have traditionally been focused upon for military performance development; however, an increased interest on soft factors such as leadership styles, interpersonal skills, social effectivity and personality has become increasingly important (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Bartone, Eid, Johnsen, Larberg, & Snook, 2009; Laker & Powell, 2011; Ohlsson, Hedlund, & Larsson, 2016).

Traditionally speaking, military organizations often have a reputation of being bureaucratic in nature, which are organized through rank and hierarchy (Alvinius, Kylin, Starrin, & Larsson, 2014; Andrzejewski, 1954; Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006). Higher level military staffs, however, have a more unique composition in comparison to this traditional set-up. Hittle and DeWitt (2012) note that higher-level military staffs are comprised of smaller teams which include staff members that encompass specialty skill-sets in order to reach greater results than one individual could do on their own. Given the military's traditional power hierarchy, yet the compositional differences of high-level military staffs, this study was interested to see what covert (personality) and overt (political skill) soft factors played a role in individuals' work performance.

Theoretical foundations and hypothesis development

Hogan and Shelton (1998) propose that an individual's personality alone cannot instigate social influence. They claim that personality combined with social skills is what determines success in influencing others. According to trait activation theory, an individual's ability for social influence processes is only possible to the extent that the environment allows (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Thus, the success of an individual's influencing capability is more dependent of a combination of several factors rather than one alone.

Behavior Influencers. From a social psychology theoretical standpoint, soft influences originate from factors within the individual attempting to influence, such as expertise and credibility, whereas hard influences are usually externally derived from existing social power structures (Koslowsky, Schwarzwald, & Ashuri, 2001; Cialdine & Goldstein, 2004). The military organization is generally driven from well organized, distinct power sources arranged through overt hierarchy. However, it has been shown that soft influencing tactics, through the use of political skill is also active within military organizations (Ohlsson, Hedlund, & Larsson, 2016).

Ferris et al. (2005) developed the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) to measure an individual's social effectiveness in the

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work place and it includes four distinct social interaction dimensions: networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. This concept is built upon Mintzberg's (1983) earlier concept of "political skill", referring to an individual's ability to persuade, influence and control others in order to be effective. Although political skill may seem similar to social skill, Blass and Ferris (2007) point out that the distinction lies in political skill's ability to go beyond the basic parameters of the competency in communication, ease and comfort that social skill entails to an individual managing his/her interactions with others in a way that leads to organizational goal accomplishment (Blass & Ferris, 2007; Perrewe, Young, & Blass, 2002). Specific to performance, PSI has been demonstrated as a robust predictor of work outcomes, including job performance (Ferris et al., 2007). It has, however, been pointed out that the use of political skill in varying job contexts is important to study further in order to gain a better understanding (Blickle et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002).

Trait Influencers. An increased confidence of measuring personality was gained in the 1990's as the five-factor model of personality was created and determined to be a robust measure of personality (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; John, 1990), which was later adopted for recruitment and selection in varying occupations (Barrack & Mount, 1991). The Big Five dimensions include: (a) Extraversion vs. Introversion (e.g., sociable, talkative and assertive), (b) Agreeableness vs. Antagonism (e.g., good-natured, cooperative and trusting), (c) Conscientiousness vs. Lack of direction (e.g., responsible, dependable, persistent and achievement oriented), (d) Neuroticism vs. Emotional Stability (viewed from the negative pole; tense, insecure, and nervous), and (e) Openness vs. Closedness to experience (e.g., imaginative, artistically sensitive, and intellectual) (John & Srivastava, 1999; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000).

Several studies have linked certain personality dimensions with performance, predominantly Conscientiousness (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000) and Emotion Stability (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Ohlsson, Hedlund, & Larsson, 2016), which have found to be consistent across most job occupations. However, some argue that personality and performance should be studied in various career fields rather than focusing on performance in general (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). For example, Bartone et al. (2009) found that military leadership performance is predicted by Extraversion and the hardiness factor while performing in training camps.

A few studies have also shown positive correlations between political skills and the Big Five personality dimensions (Ferris et al., 1999), specifically Extraversion ($r = .28$, $p < .01$) and Conscientiousness ($r = .25$, $p < .01$). In a military staff setting, Ohlsson, Hedlund, and Larsson (2016) examined the relationship between personality dimensions, political skills and team performance, linking Emotional stability and political skill as statistically significant, yet limited, predictors of team performance. However, their results may be considered limited due to their use of a single-item measure for the Big-Five personality dimensions (SIMP; Woods & Hampson, 2005), which may not capture the true range of the dimensions and may lead to an increase in both Type 1 and Type 2 error rates (Credè, Harms, Niehorster, & Gaye-Valentine, 2012). Further, their study focused on perceived *team* performance, leaving little insight to contributors of individual's perceived performance in the military.

To our knowledge, individual's innate personality dimensions in combination with overt influencing behavioral factors, such as an individual's use of political skills, have not been combined for analysis on individual's perceived performance in a military setting. Drawing on the limited previous research found in varying organizational contexts our research aimed to examine the relationships between individuals' use of political skills and personality dimensions, as well as how these sets of conditions are associated with individual's perceived staff performance in a military context. Based on previous research, the following predictions were tested:

- H1: There will be positive, statistically significant bivariate correlations and relationships between the PSI scale and the Big-Five personality model dimensions Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Emotional stability; on the one hand with individual's perceived performance on the other.
- H2: The Big-Five personality dimensions Conscientiousness, Extraversion and Emotional stability (respectively) will significantly mediate the effect of political skills on perceived performance.

Method

Participants

The study employed a cross-sectional research design. International military personnel that were planning on attending a multinational staff exercise that was run by the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) and the Swedish Defence University (SDU), were contacted for participation for the study in the summer of 2015. After the primary data collection, a complementary data collection was taken place to recruit more American participants through a contact at the US Air Force Academy in order to gain a broader perspective than the primarily European one, which was already obtained.

The participants were made up of a convenience sample from different military educational institutes (Swedish Defence University, Norwegian Defence University, Baltic Defence College and US Air Force Academy). A total of 230 military personnel were invited to participate and the final sample consisted of 185 participants (80% return rate). All of the invited participants from Sweden, Norway and the Baltic Defence University chose to participate and approximately one third of the American group participated.

The final participation group consisted of which 45 (24.2%) were from the Baltic Defence College (including military personnel from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), 63 (33.9%) were from the Norwegian Defence College, 45 (24.2%) were from the Swedish Defence University and 25 (13.4%) were from the US Air Force Academy, and 7 (3.8%) were labeled as "other", which were from countries

that did not have enough participants to equate to a group, including the Czech Germany, Poland Ukraine, The Netherlands and Czech Republic who were attending one of the Colleges at the time (Baltic Defence). The majority were male (167, 89.8%), leaving only 18 female participants (9.7%). Nearly half (86, 46.2%) were in the Army, 40 were in the Navy (21.5%), 47 were in the Air Force (25.3%), and 12 classified themselves as Coast Guard or Special Forces (6.5%).

Ethics

All informants were treated in accordance with human research principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2000). All participants filled out the questionnaire voluntarily and received no compensation for their involvement. A consent statement was written on the cover letter of the questionnaire giving informed consent for participation in the study as well as a promise from the researchers for confidentiality of personal information provided. Additionally, they were informed orally when the study was explained to them.

Measures

Given that the sample group was multinational with English as the working language, the scales were given in their native form- English.

Personal variables. These included the following demographic factors: gender, age, formal education, military service, military rank, serving country, years of service and military position.

Political skill. This was measured through the Political Skill Inventory (PSI) (Ferris et al., 2005) which is comprised of 18 items. Participants responded to on a 7-point Likert scale, 1 representing the lowest (strongly disagree) and 7 the highest (strongly agree) on how often they participated in various influencing behavior at the work place. As mentioned in the introduction, these items are categorized into four dimensions: (1) networking ability, (2) apparent sincerity, (3) social astuteness, and (4) interpersonal influence. The scale also offers a total score reflecting an individual's political skill ability and is often operationalized as so in the literature (e.g., Blickle et al., 2008; Huang, Frideger, & Pearce, 2013; Shi, Johnson, Liu, & Wang, 2013). Our analysis also used the total scale score, which had a Cronbach's α of .83.

Personality. This was measured through the Big Five Inventory (BFI) (John & Srivastava, 1999), which is a 44-item inventory that measures an individual on the Big Five Factors (dimensions) of personality (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability, and Openness). The scale is measure on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing the lowest (strongly disagree) and 5 the highest (strongly agree). The scale's validity is well-established (John & Srivastava, 1999). In the present study, the Cronbach alphas were .82, .72, .76, .77 and .80, respectively.

Perceived performance. Participants responded to on a 5-point Likert scale question rating the performance perception of oneself in their role. A score of 1 represented the lowest quality of performance and 5 the highest quality of performance. This was measured through the following question: (1) How would you rate the quality of your own performance of your job responsibilities in general staff work?

Data Analyses

Reliability, descriptive and correlation analyses were performed. Prior to conducting further analyses, the data were screened for skew and kurtosis and found to be within acceptable limits. In addition, we performed mediation analyses (Model 4) testing each the personality dimensions (respectively) that were found to be statistically significantly correlated with performance as mediators between PSI on performance using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012). Compared to an ordinary multiple regression analysis, mediation analysis provides a more sophisticated conceptual and statistical model of the relationships between a predictor variable, a mediator and an outcome measure (Hayes, 2013). Statistical significance was assumed at $p < .05$. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 24 (IBM Corporation, 2016).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations

The first step in testing the hypothesized variables association with performance was to test the variables intercorrelations. **Table 1** reports the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of the study variables. Beginning with the means, the table shows that several of the scales are fairly well centered around the scale or dimension's midpoint. However, the majority of the scales and/or scale dimensions were somewhat positively skewed, including Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Openness in the BFI, and the PSI and perceived performance.

As predicted (H1), the PSI total score had a positive statically significant correlation with individual's perceived performance. Next, the Big-Five personality dimensions, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness and Emotional stability showed positive statistically significant correlations with individuals' perceived performance. Agreeableness showed no significant association on perceived performance. In sum, as predicted, the Big-Five personality dimensions of Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional stability showed positive statistically significantly correlations with performance and Agreeableness did not; however the unexpected variable of Openness was also positively statistically significantly correlated to performance. Also as anticipated, PSI was statistically significantly correlated with perceived performance.

Mediation Analyses

Mediation analyses were conducted testing the indirect influencing intentions of the personality dimensions that were found to be statistically significantly correlated to an individual's perceived performance (Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Openness and Emotion stability, respectively) on the PSI's effect on an individual's perceived performance. The only personality dimension that indicated sig-

Table 1: Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations of big-five personality dimensions, political skills total score and perceived performance ($n = 185$).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	*M*	*SD*
1. Extraversion[a]	–							3.48	.63
2. Agreeableness[a]	.12	–						3.93	.47
3. Conscientiousness[a]	.29**	.37**	–					3.97	.49
4. Openness[a]	.35**	–.00	.14	–				3.46	.55
5. Neuroticism[a]	–.19*	–.26**	–.42**	–.09	–			2.17	.53
6. PSI total score[b]	.59**	.15*	.26**	.38**	–.17*	–		5.05	.84
7. Perceived performance[a]	.31**	.02	.27**	.25**	–.18*	.42**	–	3.99	.58

$p < .01$** $p < .05$*.

[a] Scale scores could range from 1 (lowest degree) to 5 (highest degree).

[b] Scale scores could range from 1 (least favorable) to 7 (most favorable).

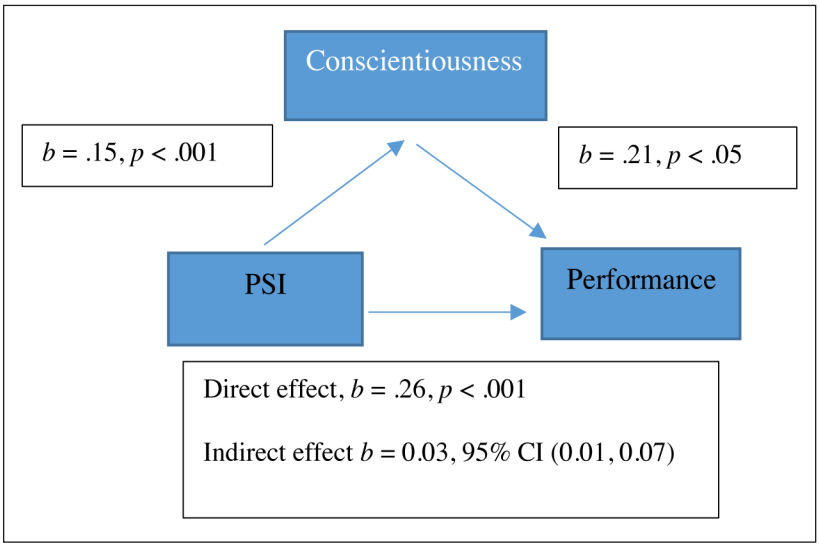

Figure 1: A figure representing the mediating effect of Conscientiousness between PSI and perceived performance. Conscientiousness could account for up to 10% of the total effect, $P_m = .10$.

nificant indirect influencing mediating abilities towards PSI's effect on perceived performance was Conscientiousness ($b = 0.029$, BCa (.007, .073). A model of Conscientiousness' mediating effect between PSI's relationship on performance can be seen in **Figure 1**.

A bias-correlated bootstrap confidence interval (Hayes, 2013) was used for the analysis. The indirect effect (ab = 0.03), based on 5,000 bootstrap samples, was entirely above zero (0.007 to 0.073). There was also evidence that the use of political skills influenced an individual's perceived performance ($\acute{c} = 0.26$, $p = <.001$). In sum, hypothesis 2 can be said to have received limited support since only Conscientiousness was found to be a significant positive mediator on PSI's effect on performance.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine the association and relationship (H1) and finally, mediation effects (H2) between individuals' use of political skill and the Big Five personality model dimensions: (1) Extraversion, (2) Conscientiousness, and (3) Emotional stability, with individuals' perceived performance in military staff work. These hypotheses were generated based upon previous research and then tested using a cross-sectional design method on multinational military staff personnel.

Beginning with H1, the findings indicated that the hypothesis is partially supported since all of the Big-Five personality dimensions hypothesized were in fact positively associated with individuals' perceived performance with the unexpected addition of Openness. These findings give further confirmation of the association of Conscientiousness and Emotional stability, which has previously been associated with performance across varying occupational groups (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Salgado, 1997; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). This study contributes by giving a better understanding of other Big-Five personality dimensions that may be specific to a military setting, namely Extraversion and Openness. Extraversion was previously found to be associated with the PSI, which in turn was associated with team performance in a military staff work (Ohlsson, Hedlund, & Larsson, 2016), and now it has also been demonstrated to be associated with

individuals' performance as well. Of specific interest is that Extraversion indicated a relatively high correlation to PSI in the current sample (.59), in comparison to Ferris et al. (1999) study (.29). This gives implications that extravert qualities of military personnel are more strongly correlated with the use of political skills in staff work than other civilian professions. This could be possibly explained by the continuous change in work environments nationally and internationally that military staffs are subjected to. Most military staff positions serve at a specific post between 1 to max 3 years with the need to start new working relationships and networks constantly in order to complete and maximize their job roles. This strengthens Bartone et al. (2009) finding of the importance of Extraversion in military staff exercises, however, it points out that it is also an important personality dimension for the staff members to exhibit, not only the leaders.

Additionally, Openness was a newfound association with performance and could be of interest in further research given that military staff work in specialty teams and need to be cognitively flexible to the opposing ideas of other team members to reach collective goals.

As expected, PSI was associated with individuals' perceived performance, and in fact, was the strongest correlated variable, demonstrating its link to performance even in hierarchical organizations, such as the military. Thus, illuminating the importance of soft factors such networking, apparent sincerity, social astuteness and interpersonal influence on individuals' perceived personal work performance in military settings. These findings give a new perspective to the old perception of giving, receiving and following orders in a chain of command fashion in military work.

Moving to H2, the only personality dimension that was found to be a significant mediator between PSI and perceived performance was the BFI dimension, Conscientiousness. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the hypothesis was only partially supported since Extraversion and Openness were not found to be statically significant mediators. Given that the personality dimension, Conscientiousness includes factors such as achievement striving, competence, deliberation, dutifulness, order and self-discipline (Costa & McCraie, 1992), it is no surprise that the many of the military participants scored high in these values, given the military's focus on self-discipline and order following and that these innate personality factors further explain an individual's use of political skills to achieve work performance goals.

Our results confirm the current knowledge of Conscientiousness strong correlation to performance in various working contexts (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Salgado, 1997) and adds that it can also act as a mediator between other interacting variables towards performance. In this case, Conscientiousness adds an additional dimension of how an individual's use of PSI effects performance, thus giving us a deeper understanding of the interaction of personality, social influence on performance in a given context. This further elaborates on the trait activation theory (Tett & Bernett, 2003) and Hogan and Shelton's (1998) personality and social skills interaction theory of explaining the social influencing process (Tett & Burnett, 2003) and further confirming that social effectiveness is often used in the military working environment despite its hierarchical structure (Ohlsson, Hedlund, & Larsson, 2016). In conclusion, high levels of conscientiousness were found to be associated with higher reported levels of political skills, with the latter also associated with perceived performance.

In light of the mediation results, one can begin to see that the associations between the PSI and performance can be seen as indirect effects of more innate and consistent traits (such as personality), and in this particular case, Conscientiousness. The five-factor model is based upon trait theory, in that an individual can be characterized by individual differences that are stable over time, consistent across situations and that involve patterns of thought, affect, and behavior (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1984; McCrae & Costa, 1996, 1999). The results are notable because they indicate that political skills exerts some of its influence on perceived performance via the personality dimension conscientiousness. Further, it explains how this convenience sample has a similar trait-behavior connection in relation to their perceived performance. The observed effect size is considered small, however, this is consistent with most social science research (Wilson, O'Connor, Lawton, Hill, & Roberts, 2016).

Despite the study's contributions, there are several limitations that should be recognized. The first weakness being that the recruitment of the study was done so through contacts at the varying educational institutes and was thus limited to specific groups of individuals who were requested to participate. Therefore the reflections of the participants may be more homogenous than would be reflected in a randomized military sample.

Second, performance was measured through a single item question. A more robust performance measure may have indicated different results or captured different nuances of performance that were not captured here. This includes further delineation of performance into categories such as task performance (measuring tasks that contribute to the organizations technical core), contextual performance (tasks that shape the organizational, social and psychological context in which task performance occurs) and counterproductive behavior (sabotage, withdrawal, etc.) (Penney, David, & Witt, 2011; Rotundo & Sachett, 2002).

Lastly, the questionnaires were given in their native form, English, to multinational staff workers, therefore there may have been language barriers interpreting and responding to the questions. Given the study limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution.

In sum, regarding theoretical conclusions, the results indicated that the PSI and all personality dimensions except for Agreeableness were positively correlated with individuals' perceived performance. In addition, the personality dimension Conscientiousness acted as a statistically significant mediator between an individual's use of political skills and their perceived performance. This study analyzed total Conscientiousness. Future research efforts could focus on more specific facets of Conscientiousness

(Industriousness, Order, Responsibility, etc.), with PSI and performance to have a deeper understanding of the role Conscientiousness plays in mediating the relationship between PSI and performance.

Turning to practical conclusions, the study's findings have practical considerations for military educational settings, by showing the possible benefit of teaching social effectiveness in educational settings for further performance improvements. Given that military staffs work in team settings with collective goals and specialization competencies, individuals' ability to influence others in order to reach goals is an important skill to have. The connection of specific personality dimensions associated with military staff performance may help with military staff recruitment and the ability to train individuals in political skills may help military staff workers in their daily work routines. These gains could naturally be at the cost of others. Therefore, the teaching of social effectiveness should be balanced with ethical considerations. The balance of social effectiveness, the needs of the organization and respecting the needs of individuals, are valid and important concerns for the future of ethical leadership research.

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Competing Interests

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