



## Personality and Workaholism



Sandy S. Jackson<sup>a</sup>, Man-Chung Fung<sup>b</sup>, Marie-Anne C. Moore<sup>c</sup>, Chris J. Jackson<sup>c,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Cymeon Pty Ltd, Australia

<sup>b</sup> City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

<sup>c</sup> University of New South Wales, Australia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 October 2015

Received in revised form 5 February 2016

Accepted 8 February 2016

Available online 27 February 2016

#### Keywords:

Workaholism

Addiction

Personality

RST

Revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

### ABSTRACT

This study examined how a range of contemporary models of personality were associated with Workaholism (Feeling driven to work and Enjoyment of work). Approach, avoidance, addictive personality, Agreeableness, Openness, and Conscientiousness were measured using instruments of the Big Five, Eysenck's biosocial model (1967), and two versions of Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory. Data were collected using online questionnaires in two studies. The first comprised 476 fulltime workers from Australia, while the second comprised 105 managers from the US. Results showed that approach pathways were associated with Enjoyment of work and avoidance pathways were generally associated with Feeling driven to work in fulltime workers only. Workaholism was not related to an addictive personality. The study provides a new understanding of how personality is associated with Workaholism. Managerial implications and differences in relations between personality and Workaholism in workers and managers are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The term 'workaholic' is becoming common in the increasingly rapidly changing world of work. The changing nature of careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), fading boundaries between work and life (Fletcher & Bailyn, 1996), and advances in technology allowing work outside traditional office hours and locations, contribute to the increase in work hours over the past two decades. Employees now have greater inducement and opportunity to work longer hours.

Workaholism is associated with positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and psychological well-being (e.g., Burke, 2001a) and negative outcomes such as poor work-life balance (Burke, 2001b), addiction and psychological distress (e.g., Schaufeli, Bakker, Van der Heijden, & Prins, 2009). Whilst there is relatively rich understanding of these outcomes, there has been less research on how Workaholism is influenced by personality. The aim of this study is therefore to investigate the personality traits associated with Workaholism. Moreover, our study will be of practical value because it will help managers identify occurrence of Workaholism from employee characteristics, enabling them to target interventions accordingly.

#### 1.1. Workaholism

"Workaholism" has been defined as a form of addiction, (Oates, 1971; Porter, 1996), a pathology (Fassel, 1990), a behavioral pattern

(Scott, Moore, & Miceli, 1997), and a set of attitudes about work (Spence & Robbins, 1992). Others tried to reconcile these differences by distinguishing between different types of Workaholism, such as the 'enthusiastic' and 'non-enthusiastic' workaholics (Andreassen, Hetland, & Pallesen, 2010). Given disagreements about definition, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are relatively few empirically validated instruments available to measure the construct (McMillan, O'Driscoll, Marsh, & Brady, 2001).

Currently, the most widely used instrument is the Workaholism battery (Spence & Robbins, 1992). A two-subscale solution has been endorsed in the literature (Kanai, Wakabayashi, & Fling, 1996; McMillan et al., 2001) that consists of two scales (Feeling driven to work and Work Enjoyment). Work Enjoyment concerns pursuit of work-related rewards (Spence & Robbins, 1992). Feeling driven to work concerns putting excess effort into work to avoid aversive consequences (e.g., loss of job) and is more strongly linked to stress than Work Enjoyment (Kanai et al., 1996).

There are theoretical reasons to believe that many personality models will be associated with Workaholism. Contemporary personality models often have a basis in 'approach and avoidance pathways' (e.g. Carver & White, 1994; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991; Elliot & Thrash, 2010). 'Approach' refers to a learnt motivation aimed at obtaining rewards. High sensitivity to rewards, in theory, leaves a person more motivated to pursue rewards in general, including those obtained from work, and is therefore likely to be associated with Work Enjoyment. 'Avoidance' refers to a learnt motivation to avoid aversive outcomes. High sensitivity to aversive outcomes is likely to make a person more motivated to engage in behavior perceived to help relieve them from dangers, and is thus likely linked to Feeling driven to work.

\* Corresponding author at: Australian Business School, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia.

E-mail address: [c.jackson@unsw.edu.au](mailto:c.jackson@unsw.edu.au) (C.J. Jackson).

## 1.2. Personality models

In the Big Five model of personality, Extraversion (being outgoing and energetic) and Neuroticism (nervous and insecure) are often treated as approach and avoidance pathways, respectively. Other scales in the Big Five, Conscientiousness (well-organized, responsible), Agreeableness (friendly and compassionate) and Openness (curious and inventive), are not explicitly linked to approach and avoidance pathways, but all five factors have been reported to be related to Workaholism. Burke, Matthiesen, and Pallesen (2006), for instance, found that Neuroticism was related to Feeling driven to work and Extraversion was related to Enjoyment of work. More recently, Andreassen et al. (2010) replicated these findings, further noting Conscientiousness was associated with both subscales of Workaholism. Moreover, they reported that Openness was related to Enjoyment of work, Neuroticism was negatively related to Enjoyment of work, and Agreeableness was negatively related to Feeling driven to work. Clark, Lelchok, and Taylor (2010) identified personality factors related to Workaholism outside of general personality models.

Although the Big Five has many advantages such as excellent psychometric properties, satisfactory understanding of its neurobiological basis remains elusive (Block, 1995) despite some enthusiasm (DeYoung, 2010). We therefore consider personality models which make stronger theoretical claims of a biological basis, including Gray's (1970) original reinforcement sensitivity theory (o-RST) and Gray and McNaughton's (2000) revised reinforcement sensitivity theory (r-RST). Such models have two advantages over personality models such as the Big Five (Furnham & Jackson, 2008): Firstly, biological models are theory-based and thereby offer explanations for the process by which personality contributes to behavior. Secondly, these models identify what interventions may have difficulty addressing, because biologically-based personality traits are likely to be relatively impervious to change.

Both of Gray's theories postulate three motivational systems, whose sensitivity determines an individual's personality. The Behavioral Approach System (BAS) concerns a tendency to approach rewards and is generally similar across o-RST and r-RST. We thus argue that o-BAS and r-BAS will both be positively associated with Work Enjoyment as people high in reward pursuit are likely to work hard and gain appropriate rewards to reinforce the behavior. We also suggest that the avoidance system, which concerns the sensitivity to aversive outcomes, will be related to Driven to Work, but the relationships are more complicated due to the conceptual differences between the o-RST and r-RST. In o-RST, the Behavior Inhibition System (o-BIS) confounds fear and anxiety, whereas in r-RST, the r-BIS is redefined such that it measures anxiety independently from fear. In r-RST, fear is measured as the Fight/Flight/Freezing system (r-FFFS): Fight is a vociferous defensive aggression to very proximal threat, whereas Freezing or Flight occurs in the presence of a more distal threat (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). The r-BIS represents anxiety and concerns the tendency to respond with escalating distress to situations that involve uncertainty and social evaluative judgments by others (Gray & McNaughton, 2000; Jackson, 2009; White & Depue, 1999). Moreover, anxiety is associated with narrowing of attention onto the threat such that there is likely to be an over-reaction to work related cues. Feeling driven to work involves much uncertainty, and is partly a function of social judgment (Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007). As a result, Workaholism is likely related to anxiety, and more likely to be measured by r-BIS rather than o-BIS since r-BIS is more clearly related to anxiety than o-BIS.

The above discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

- H1.** Extraversion and BAS will be positively associated with Enjoyment of work.
- H2.** Neuroticism and r-BIS will be positively associated with Feeling driven to work.

Since we have already discussed significant findings with the three other scales of the Big Five, we also hypothesize:

- H3.** Openness will be positively associated with Enjoyment of work.
- H4.** Conscientiousness will be positively associated with both subscales of Workaholism.
- H5.** Agreeableness will be negatively associated with Feeling driven to work.

## 1.3. Eysenck's Psychoticism

Workaholism has long been associated with addiction (Oates, 1971; Seybold & Salomone, 1994). Eysenck (1997) suggested that there is an 'addictive personality', associated with a type of person who will readily be addicted to certain types of reinforcing behaviors and continue to indulge in these behaviors even after the circumstances giving rise to them have changed. Following this, Eysenck (1997) identified Psychoticism (recklessness, disregard for common sense, and inappropriate emotional expression) as associated with drug dependency (Gossop, 1978; Teasdale, Seagraves, & Zacune, 1971). Both Workaholism and addiction to substances are linked to a person engaging in goal-oriented behavior (i.e., putting excess effort into work and abuse of the substance in question) leading to obsessive and harmful consequences. In such cases, the agent's inability to inhibit that behavior (i.e., which is an interpretation of Psychoticism; Eysenck, 1997) is implied. As a result, we hypothesize:

- H6.** Psychoticism will be positively associated with Workaholism

We test our hypotheses using two studies. In Study 1 we use workers and in Study 2 we use managers.

## 2. Study 1: Method

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 464 full-time workers, based in Australia. The sample included 55.3% male and 44.7% female, with mean age of 39.89 years, ranging from 18 to 69 years old, and a standard deviation of 13.24 years. The majority of the participants worked within the service sector (42.3%) and were employed in organizations containing over 100 employees (52%).

### 2.2. Measures and procedure

Data were collected using the YWeDo online cognitive laboratory (Jackson, 2008).

#### 2.2.1. Independent measures

*NEO-International Personality Item Pool (NEO-IPIP)* (Goldberg, 1999) measures the Five-Factor model of personality: (1) Neuroticism, (2) Extraversion, (3) Agreeableness, (4) Conscientiousness, and (5) Openness. The questionnaire includes 50 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree;  $\alpha$ s = .77 to .86).

*The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ-R)* (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991) measures three dimensions of personality based on Eysenck's (1967) biosocial model: (1) Extraversion (2) Neuroticism, and (3) Psychoticism (detached and dispassionate). The questionnaire includes 48 (yes/no) items ( $\alpha$ s = .87, .84, and .52 respectively). Social desirability is also included ( $\alpha$  = .68).

*BIS/BAS scales* (Carver & White, 1994) measures three components of the Behavioral activation system (o-BAS), including: (1) Drive, (2) Fun-seeking, and (3) Reward-responsiveness and the Behavioral inhibition system (o-BIS). The questionnaire includes 24 items rated on a four-point scale (1 = very true for me to 4 = very false for me;  $\alpha$ s = .74 to .82).

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