



Extraversion and job performance: How context relevance and bandwidth specificity create a non-linear, positive, and asymptotic relationship



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ABSTRACT

The personality factor of extraversion has been associated with performance in some occupations (e.g., sales), and it has been one of the most consistent personality predictors of leadership. Recent research indicates that extraversion could have a non-linear relation with performance. At the same time, many researchers have contended that scholars should utilize measures of personality narrower than factors and that the bandwidth and relevance of personality should fit both the criterion and the context of a study. We argue and find that by examining an aspect of extraversion (i.e., social potency) in a particular vocational context (i.e., enterprising job demands), non-linear, asymptotic (diminishing marginal benefits) effects will be demonstrated on a relevant type of performance (i.e., enterprising job performance). We review implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

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For many years, vocational researchers have argued for and found linear relations between personality and performance, and some scholars have even suggested that some traits (e.g., conscientiousness) have entirely consistent effects on job performance (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). However, recently, it has been contended that vocational and organizational research should include greater specificity (Edwards & Berry, 2010) and that every relationship may have context-specific curvilinearity (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Similarly, the assumption of personality's linear relationship with outcomes has been questioned (see Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), and some recent research results (e.g., Grant, 2013) have led to questions about the uniformly linear nature of extraversion's effects on job performance.

We concur with prior research that the extraversion–performance relationship is not monotonically linear. However, by measuring a personality factor, studies potentially included portions of the domain that were imprecise and either unrelated to and/or inversely related to the criterion and/or the situation (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013), leading to an inverted U-shaped result. We believe that the aim of scholars should be to match the bandwidth and relevance of personality to its criterion and context (see for reviews Judge, Rodell, Klinger, Simon, & Crawford, 2013; Oswald, Hough, & Ock, 2013), and recent research has indicated that personality exists not just at the domain and facet levels, but also at a level in between the two, labeled an *aspect* (e.g., DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007; Jang, Livesley, Angleitner, Reimann, & Vernon, 2002; Judge et al., 2013).

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Our study examines the relationship between an aspect of extraversion (i.e., social potency; Depue & Collins, 1999) and a type of performance that is related to leadership (i.e., enterprising job performance) in the context of enterprising job demands. We assess a bandwidth-appropriate and context-relevant aspect of extraversion, and we argue that, assuming a positive personality–performance relationship, an asymptotic (i.e., diminishing marginal benefits) relationship should be demonstrated between personality and other-rated performance in such a situation. The diminishingly positive relationship between a narrow aspect of extraversion and narrow performance would not become negative, because employees are not engaging in personality expressions irrelevant or detrimental to performance in that context.

1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

1.1. Enterprising job performance

Holland's (1973) occupational classification system describes the structure of six different work environments, arguing that individuals are attracted to occupation types that satisfy their needs. One of these types is *enterprising*, which includes entrepreneur, lobbyist, salesperson, and executive careers, as examples. Enterprising jobs emphasize the employee's abilities to lead others in goal attainment, verbally persuade, and handle ambiguity. Of the six occupational groups, the enterprising group was one of the two largest groups in the U.S. in the year 2000, and it was projected to have the second largest rate of growth of the six occupations (Reardon, Bullock, & Meyer, 2007). Considering that many jobs categorized as not primarily enterprising (e.g., engineers; Huang & Pearce, 2013) still have features of enterprising occupations (e.g., project management), we do not limit our context, and thus our generalizability, to enterprising occupations. Instead, we examine the enterprising job performance of persons across occupations.

Enterprising interests have been linked to having a motivation to lead (Chan, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2000). Understandably, enterprising occupational interests also are associated with career success, as enterprising types represent a large portion of the high-ranking members of organizations (Hogan & Hogan, 1991). Moreover, enterprising interests have been related to both internal (to the organization) and external job changes, indicating a link between such jobs and professional ambition (Wille, De Fruyt, & Feys, 2010). Additionally, one study found that, out of the six occupational interests, enterprising was one of the only two that positively associated with income when controlling for the other occupational categories (Huang & Pearce, 2013). These findings support not only the theoretical relevance of our research, but also the practical importance of enterprising interests and abilities to employees and organizations.

To more strongly create our context, we assess the moderating effect of the social potency aspect of extraversion on enterprising performance as it relates to the enterprising job demands placed on the individual. As can be inferred from the characterization of an enterprising occupation, enterprising job demands are expectations of active leadership and motivation, effective verbal expression and persuasion, supervision, selling, and the like. Prior research has demonstrated that enterprising job demands moderated the political skill–job performance relationship (Blickle et al., 2009, 2012). As noted by Robie and Ryan (1999), context effects can allow for non-linear relationships through their influence on the situation. We argue that placing high enterprising job demands on a person could direct behavior, permitting non-linear effects. Given our criterion of enterprising job performance, it is fitting to examine its relationship with extraversion within the context of enterprising job demands, because one of the strongest relationships between the FFM and Holland's (1973) types is that between extraversion and enterprising ($\rho = .41$, Barrick, Mount, & Gupta, 2003). We believe that prior theoretical and empirical work indicates possible non-linearity in extraversion's relationship with job performance.

1.2. Non-linearity in the extraversion–performance relationship: job context & multifaceted personality

Personality theorists have begun to suggest that the function of each trait depends on many factors and that traits may have non-linear relations with performance (e.g., Penney, David, & Witt, 2011; Tett & Burnett, 2003). It has been speculated that personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness; Murphy & Dziewieczynski, 2005) have non-linear, inverted-U shaped relationships with performance. Some results have demonstrated this curvilinearity when examining FFM dimension–performance associations (e.g., Grant, 2013), including those with extraversion. For example, Barry and Stewart (1997) found that teams having 20 to 40% high-extraversion members had greater performance than teams with fewer or more of the highly extraverted. However, one could question whether certain features of the context and the bandwidth of the examined personality trait influence this relationship.

Scholars have argued that the context of vocational and organizational behavior can influence the relationships between predictors and criteria (e.g., Griffin, 2007; Johns, 2006), and the Trait Activation Theory proposes that a personality trait remains dormant unless provoked to action by a situation relevant to that trait (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Situations can differ from one to another in many ways, but the behavioral expression of a trait will be comparable across situations to the extent that the trait-relevant cues are similar in each context. Many studies have supported the importance of context to personality's relationship with performance (e.g., Blickle et al., 2013; Kell, Rittmayer, Crook, & Motowidlo, 2010; Tett & Christiansen, 2007). Expectations on employees of enterprising behaviors (i.e., enterprising job demands) and the evaluations of those behaviors (i.e., enterprising job performance) form the context of our study.

In addition to a situational moderator, it is possible that *facets* of a personality factor are more consistently non-linear than the factor (see Robie & Ryan, 1999) and/or that the inflection point for the non-linear relationships with performance differs from one facet to another (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). Thus, the use of a factor scale rather than a narrower measure could prevent the discovery of the correct nonlinear relationship when examining personality's influence on outcomes (Paunonen & Nicol, 2001). However, unlike

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