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## Situation contingent units of personality at work

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## ABSTRACT

Conscientiousness and neuroticism were studied as situation contingencies in a sample of 124 managers. Experience sampling measures of situational characteristics, state conscientiousness and state neuroticism were collected before, during and after the performance of a range of tasks completed in an executive training program of five 3-day sessions, conducted over two years. Six months following training, supervisor ratings of participants' job performance were also collected. For all variables the majority of variability was observed at the within-person level, justifying further analysis of within-person effects. Situation contingencies were operationalized as regression slopes calculated for each individual within an MLM analysis framework. The six situation contingencies considered in the current study varied between individuals. Three of the six situation contingencies were predictive of supervisor ratings of job performance providing first evidence of the predictive validity for situation contingencies. Combined with previous findings, the current study suggests that further research on situation contingencies and their effects is justified. Suggestions for the choice of situational properties and personality states, and practical applications of situation contingencies are discussed.

Research employing the trait approach, particularly the five-factor model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1992), has made many important contributions to our knowledge of the role of personality at work, including evidence for relationships between personality and job performance (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991), job satisfaction (e.g., Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002) and leadership (e.g., Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). In this research, traits are viewed as relatively invariant person factors that describe differences *between* people in their typical cognitive, affective and behavioural responses; an approach that effectively ignores variation in personality responses *within* individuals. Studies of within-person variation in personality responses ask (a) whether they are systematically related to the properties of situations rather than random, and (b) whether the measure of the situation contingency has any predictive value over and above that provided by traits.

Researchers have coined the term 'personality states' to refer to specific occurrences of cognitive, affective and behavioural responses in a particular context and moment in time that have similar content to the corresponding personality traits (Fleeson, 2001). Studies have established that personality states are systematically related to the properties of situations, and that the strength of that relationship varies between individuals. For example, Fleeson (2007) found that levels of displayed extraversion were contingent upon perceived friendliness of the situation, and that the responsiveness to situational friendliness varied across individuals, which was replicated by Huang and Ryan (2011).

Studies to date have established that situation contingencies are measurable and stable individual differences,<sup>1</sup> that can supplement the trait approach (Judge, Simon, Hurst, & Kelley, 2014; Minbashian et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> We have previously used the label 'task contingent unit' when referring to our operationalization of situation contingencies (e.g., Minbashian, Wood, & Beckmann, 2010). This was done to differentiate them from other domains of activity, such as the characteristics of social domains, which have been shown to evoke different contingent responses (see Fleeson, 2007). Tasks are a domain of activity that has been the subject of extensive research in psychology (Wood, Roberts, & Whelan, 2011), which can be used to inform the study of situation contingencies. In other areas of psychology, differentiation of tasks and situations is considered critical to understanding individual differences in performance (Beckmann, 2010; Beckmann, Birney, & Goode, 2017; Birney, Beckmann, & Seah, 2016; Wood, 1986). The label situation contingency is adopted here to align our terminology with that of the taxonomy of Shermann, et al. (2015). The reconciliation of domain based and taxonomic approaches to situations is an issue for later consideration.

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2010; Huang & Ryan, 2011; Berenson, Downey, Rafaeli, Coifman, & Paquin, 2011; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, 2015), but there are two important gaps in the research. First, there are no published studies that demonstrate the predictive validity of the contingent units for a performance criterion. Minbashian et al. (2010) showed that the situation contingencies for conscientiousness were correlated with performance on a laboratory task, but the task was completed before the measures of the situation contingencies. Huang and Bramble (2016) also found a relationship between situation contingencies of conscientiousness and training success, but contingent conscientiousness was assessed using a one-off between-person measure and not based on cross situational within-person variation. Second, in all studies but one (Fleeson & Law, 2015), data have been collected in field settings, with no control of the ranges of situations that participants were exposed to during data collection. This matters as variability (or the lack thereof) in the situations participants encounter might account for the observed between-person differences in the situation contingencies.

This study makes two contributions. First, it demonstrates the predictive validity of situation contingencies of personality for a real world measure of performance, i.e., supervisor ratings of job performance. A 6-month time lag between the predictor and criterion measures was chosen as it requires that the effects of contingent personality units be manifest over longer periods of time, similar to other traits. Many other studies have examined how situation contingencies are related to other variables (e.g., Minbashian et al., 2010; Pauletti, Cooper, & Perry, 2014; Sherman et al., 2015). However, to our knowledge, our paper is the first to report an association between a situation contingency and a lagged, field based performance measure. Second, through the use of common tasks in a laboratory setting, the study demonstrates that the measures of situational characteristics and personality states used to calculate the situation contingencies are not confounded with differences in the experiences of those participating in the study (see also Fleeson & Law, 2015; Sherman et al., 2015, p. 37). The current study controls for situations by collecting responses in a training program where participants were confronted with the same set of tasks of varying demands.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Theory and hypotheses development

In the Cognitive Affective Processing System framework (CAPS; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), personality is viewed as a connectionist framework of interconnected units of knowledge in which perceived situational characteristics are linked to cognitive, affective and behavioural responses (see Mischel & Shoda, 1995). These situation-response relationships are learned and stored in long-term memory in the form of “if this, then that” contingent units (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). In the CAPS framework, contingent units do not only refer to situation-response contingencies but also include contingent relationships between cognitive, affective and behavioural responses (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). For example, a person may routinely adjust their goals or feelings of efficacy in response to ups and downs in their emotional state, which may be the result of any number of different situational characteristics or intrapersonal factors.

CAPS is a meta-theoretical framework of basic principles for building domain-specific theories to be tested for predictive power (Mischel & Shoda, 1995, p. 16). The specific domain for the current study is that of tasks and the cognitive and emotional demands they place on individuals. Task demands refer to psychological characteristics of tasks, such as perceived difficulty, that are the product of the individual's encoding of objective task cues, such as dynamism or complexity (Mischel & Shoda,

1995; Rauthmann et al., 2014). We chose to focus on the conscientiousness and neuroticism responses to task demands because the associated traits are robust predictors of performance at work (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick & Mount, 2000; Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001) and, therefore, these responses provide strong tests of the additive value of situation contingencies in the prediction of performance.

### 1.1. The contingency of conscientiousness and neuroticism states on task demand

Within work environments, perceived level of task demand is a commonly encountered characteristic of tasks and is related to personality state indicators of conscientiousness, such as the levels and focus of effort, and neuroticism, such as stress and anxiety (Wood et al., 2011). Perceived task demand is generalizable because it is an experienced characteristic of all tasks, although the level varies as a function of task cues, such as complexity, novelty and structure, and person factors, such as experience, skill and self-efficacy (Wood, Beckmann, & Birney, 2009). Characteristics of task demands that have been shown to impact on resource allocations and emotional reactions are difficulty, urgency (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Minbashian et al., 2010) and importance (Gray & McNaughton, 2000). Individuals should display greater levels of conscientiousness and neuroticism when completing difficult, urgent and important tasks than when completing easy, non-urgent or unimportant tasks. State conscientiousness, for example, has been shown to increase as tasks become more demanding (Fleeson, 2007; Huang & Ryan, 2011; Minbashian et al., 2010), an effect that has not been observed with other situational characteristics such as the perceived friendliness of others (Fleeson, 2007).

*Conscientiousness* includes a range of motivational tendencies and behavioural responses that facilitate work performance, including orderliness, achievement orientation, goal striving and self-discipline (see Costa & McCrae, 1992; Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). As tasks become more demanding, the potential benefits of the task-facilitation properties of conscientiousness will also increase. However, as discussed later, individuals will vary in their responsiveness to task demands.

**Hypothesis 1a.** Within-person variability in state conscientiousness will be contingent on within-person variability in task demand; state conscientiousness will, on average, be higher when tasks are perceived as more demanding and lower when tasks are perceived as less demanding.

*Neuroticism* incorporates a range of negative emotions that have been shown to be responsive to changes in task demands (Suls & Martin, 2005). As tasks become more urgent, difficult and important, perceived workload and perceived pressure will increase, which are both positively related to negative emotional responses included in neuroticism, such as stress, frustration and anxiety (Cooper et al., 2001). Whilst individuals will vary in their emotional responsiveness to task demands, the average relationship is expected to be positive.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Within-person variability in state neuroticism will be contingent on within-person variability in task demand; state neuroticism will, on average, be higher when tasks are perceived as more demanding and lower when tasks are perceived as less demanding.

A situation contingency can only be considered a personality unit if individuals differ from each other in their responses to the same situational cues (Fleeson & Nofle, 2008). Previous research has established individual differences in contingent relationships between situational characteristics<sup>3</sup> and Big Five personality states (Fleeson, 2007;

<sup>2</sup> Note, that the process of centering scores reported in the analyses adjusts for between-person differences in the means of reported situation properties, but not for differences in their range or variability. The objective situational cues are the same for all participants. Between-person differences represent differences in the interpretations of situational demands, which is of main interest here.

<sup>3</sup> While other researchers have referred to psychological ‘properties’ of situations (e.g., Minbashian et al., 2010), we adopt the term ‘characteristics’ to align with recent taxonomies of situations (e.g., Rauthmann et al., 2014).

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