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Personality correlates of workaholism [☆]

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship of personality factors with three workaholism components identified by Spence and Robbins (1992). Six personality factors were considered: The Big Five (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness to new experience) and Generalized self-efficacy. Data were collected from 496 health care employees (mostly nurses) in Norway using questionnaires. Personality factors were significantly related to all three workaholism components (Work involvement, Feeling driven to work, Joy in work) controlling for both personal demographic and work situation characteristics. Generalized self-efficacy was positively related to all three workaholism components, Extraversion was positively related to both Work involvement and Joy in work while Neuroticism was positively related to Feeling driven to work.

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1. Introduction

Although the popular press has paid considerable attention to workaholism (Fassel, 1990; Garfield, 1987; Kiechel, 1989a, 1989b; Killinger, 1991; Klaft & Kleiner, 1988; Machlowitz, 1980; Spruel, 1987; Waddell, 1993) relatively little research has been undertaken to further our understanding of it. Most writing has been anecdotal and clinical (Fassel, 1990; Killinger, 1991; Oates, 1971; Schaeff & Fassel, 1988). Basic questions of definition and measurement are just beginning to be addressed (Scott, Moore, & Miceli, 1997).

It should come as no surprise then that opinions, observations, and conclusions about workaholism are both varied and conflicting. Some writers view workaholism positively from an organizational perspective (Korn, Pratt, & Lambrou, 1987; Machlowitz, 1980; Sprankle & Ebel, 1987). Machlowitz (1980) conducted a qualitative interview study of 100 workaholics and found them to be very satisfied and productive. Others view workaholism negatively (Killinger, 1991; Oates, 1971; Porter, 2001; Schaeff & Fassel, 1988). These writers equate workaholism with other addictions, and depict workaholics as unhappy, obsessive, tragic figures who were not performing their jobs well and were creating difficulties for their co-workers (Naughton, 1987; Oates, 1971; Porter, 1996). The former would advocate the encouragement of workaholism; the latter would discourage it.

A compelling case could be made for devoting more research attention to workaholism (Burke, 2000a; McMillan, O'Driscoll, & Burke, 2003). The concept has received considerable attention in the popular press. There have also been suggestions that workaholism may be increasing in North America (Fassel, 1990; McMillan et al., 2003; Schor, 1991). In addition it is not clear whether workaholism has positive or negative organizational consequences (Killinger, 1991; Machlowitz, 1980). There is also debate on the association of workaholic behaviors with a variety of personal well-being indicators such as psychological and physical health and self-esteem (Burke, 2000b, 2001b; McMillan, Brady, O'Driscoll, & Marsh, 2002). Finally, different types of workaholic behavior patterns likely exist, each having unique antecedents and outcomes (Scott et al., 1997). The question of whether workaholism can, or should be reduced, has also been raised (Killinger, 1991; Porter, 1996; Seybold & Salomone, 1994).

A number of antecedents of workaholism have been examined in previous investigations (see Burke, 2000a; McMillan et al., 2003, for reviews). These include personal demographic characteristics (Burke, 1999a; Spence & Robbins, 1992), work situation characteristics (Burke, 1999a; Spence & Robbins, 1992), feelings of inadequacy and needs to prove oneself (Burke, 1999b; Robinson, 1998), and workplace values (Burke, 2001a; Schaeff & Fassel, 1988). Personal demographic and work situation characteristics have generally shown no relationship with workaholism.

1.1. *Theories of workaholism*

McMillan, O'Driscoll, Marsh, and Brady (2001) and McMillan et al. (2003) review what might be loosely termed theories of workaholism. Most workaholism research has used a variety of approaches on an ad hoc basis with little reference to any corresponding theory. They consider addiction models, learning theory, trait-and personality-based frameworks, cognitive models and family-systems theory.

Trait theory views workaholism as a stable pattern of behavior that is dispositional in nature though it may be heightened in particular situations. Obsessiveness, compulsiveness and high energy, for example, have been correlated with workaholism (Clark, Livesley, Schroeder, & Irish, 1996; McMillan et al., 2002; Spence & Robbins, 1992). More general personality theories tend to view workaholism as a dysfunctional aspect of personality. Clark et al. (1996) report that workaholism may be significantly and positively related to Conscientiousness. Thus workaholism may in fact be a lower order trait that is related in a hierarchical way to higher order personality factors. There is some support for the usefulness of trait and personality theories in explaining workaholism (Eysenck, 1997; McMillan et al., 2003).

1.2. *Personality and workaholism*

The relationship of workaholism, an individual difference variable, to a broader theoretical context, personality, is just beginning to be explored. Most researchers view workaholism as a stable individual difference variable (McMillan et al., 2003; Robinson, 1998; Spence & Robbins, 1992).

1.2.1. *The Big Five*

There is accumulating evidence that almost all personality measures can be subsumed in the Big Five: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990). Three of these factors (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness) seem particularly relevant to work experiences and career success (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick & Ryan, 2003).

Judge, Higgins, Thoreson, and Barrick (1999) consider characteristics of the Big Five Personality factors as follows.

Neuroticism is associated with instability, stress proneness, personal insecurity and depression (a lack of positive psychological adjustment and emotional stability). Individuals scoring higher on Neuroticism are more likely to experience negative moods and physical symptoms, to be more strongly affected by negative life events, and to have their negative moods last longer.

Extraversion is associated with sociability, dominance, ambitiousness, and assertiveness. Extraversion is likely related to positive emotions, having more friends, and taking on leadership roles.

Conscientiousness is typically related to job performance. It is associated with persistence, dependability and being organized.

Agreeableness is related to being cooperative, caring and likeable.

Openness to experience is associated with being intellectual, imaginative and non-conforming.

Barrick and Ryan (2003) review research evidence showing that Neuroticism is negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to perfectionism. In addition, Extraversion has been shown to be positively related with job satisfaction, while Neuroticism was found to be negatively associated with extrinsic career success. Neuroticism was also found to be associated with low performance, lower pay and fewer promotions. Conscientiousness was shown to be associated with an achievement orientation and extrinsic career success, with job performances serving as a mediator variable.

Judge et al. (1999) examined the relationship of the Big Five and general mental ability and career success. Two aspects of career success were considered: intrinsic (job satisfaction) and extrinsic (income, occupational status). Conscientiousness positively predicted intrinsic and extrinsic career

success; Neuroticism negatively predicted extrinsic success; and general mental ability positively predicted extrinsic career success. Personality was related to career success controlling for general mental ability. Adult measures of the Big Five more strongly predicted career success than did childhood measures, but both contributed unique variance in explaining career success.

1.3. Generalized self-efficacy

Considerable research has also been devoted to examining the effects of self-efficacy in the workplace (Schwarzer, 1992). Individuals scoring higher on Generalized self-efficacy report greater commitment to their work and more satisfaction from their work. One might make the case that self-efficacy would be positively related to particular components of workaholism and workaholism types. Generalized self-efficacy has also been considered as a stable individual difference variable.

1.4. Purpose of the study

This research adds to our understanding of the potential role of personality factors in explaining workaholism in organizations. Spence and Robbins (1992) derive three workaholism components on the basis of an extensive literature review: Work involvement, Feeling driven to work because of internal pressures and Work enjoyment. This study specifically examines the relationship of the personality factors described above (the Big Five, Generalized self-efficacy) with each of these three workaholism components. Based on previous findings (Barrick & Ryan, 2003), it is likely that the personality factors would have different relationships with the components, some positive and some negative.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Data were collected from a heterogeneous sample of 496 nursing home employees in Norway using anonymous questionnaires. Respondents worked in one of five facilities of a single provider of nursing care. Clients in these units had severe health problems with most residents having a life expectancy of less than three years. Nursing is generally seen as a stressful, occupation (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). A total of 1022 questionnaires were distributed yielding a response rate of about 50% when questionnaires returned because the respondent was on sick leave or had quit were eliminated.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Questionnaires were distributed to employees using internal mail. Respondents were not aware of the purpose of the research, the study being introduced as an investigation of factors associated with job satisfaction.

2.2. Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The sample was predominantly female (89%), married (68%), most had children (74%), had five or fewer years of unit tenure (59%),

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of sample

	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	39	8.1
Female	442	89.1
<i>Age</i>		
25 or less	76	16.4
26–35	81	17.5
36–45	98	21.2
46–55	146	31.5
56 or older	62	13.4
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	326	68.2
Divorced	48	10.0
Widowed	8	1.7
Single	96	20.1
<i>Children</i>		
Yes	346	73.8
No	123	26.2
<i>Number of children</i>		
1	52	14.9
2	146	42.2
3	107	30.8
4 or more	42	12.1
<i>Job</i>		
Nurse	67	14.1
Asst. nurse	175	35.3
Nurse helper	112	23.5
Administrative	35	7.4
Other	87	18.3
<i>Unit tenure</i>		
1 year or less	92	19.5
2–5	168	35.6
6–10	98	20.7
10 or more	114	24.2
<i>Work status</i>		
25% or less	52	11.3
26–50%	102	22.0
51–75%	98	21.3
75–100%	209	45.3
<i>Shift type</i>		
Days	121	25.4
Day/Night	285	29.9
Night	49	10.3

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

	N	%
Day/Eve/Night	15	3.2
Eve/Night	6	1.3
<i>Leader</i>		
No	324	69.1
Shift	67	14.3
Unit	59	12.6
Department	19	4.1

fell between 36 and 55 years of age (53%), worked half time or more (71%), had no leadership responsibilities (69%), worked both day and night shifts (60%), and were in nursing roles (75%).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Workaholism components

Spence and Robbins (1992) derive three workaholism components on the basis of an extensive literature review: Work involvement, Feeling driven to work and Work enjoyment. Their measures were used in this study.

Work involvement ($\alpha = .46$) had eight items (e.g., “I get bored and restless on vacations when I haven’t anything productive to do”).

Feeling driven to work ($\alpha = .82$) had seven items (e.g., “I often feel that there’s something inside me that drives me to work hard”).

Work enjoyment ($\alpha = .78$) had seven items (e.g., “My job is more like fun than work”). Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree).

2.4. Personality factors

Five personality factors were measured by scales developed by Costa and McCrae (1992) and translated into Norwegian. Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Neuroticism was measured by 12 items ($\alpha = .82$). One item was “I feel inferior to others”.

Extraversion was also measured by 12 items ($\alpha = .7$). An item was “I like to have a lot of people around me”.

Openness to new experiences was measured by 12 items ($\alpha = .62$). One item was “I am intrigued by the patterns I find in art and nature”.

Agreeableness was assessed by 12 items ($\alpha = .65$). An item was “I try to be courteous to everyone I meet”.

Conscientiousness was also measured by 12 items ($\alpha = .71$). One item was “I keep my belongings clean and neat”.

General self-efficacy was measured by a ten item scale ($\alpha = .85$) developed by Schwarzer (1992). Respondents indicated on a four-point scale (1 = not at all true, 4 = very true) how true each item was. One item was “I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough”.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, sample sizes and intercorrelations among all substantive variables used in the study. Eight of the ten correlations (80%) between the Big Five measures were significantly different from zero ($p < .05$). Neuroticism was negatively correlated with the four other Big Five measures; the other four significant correlations between the other four factors were positive. Four of the Big Five measures were significantly correlated with the measures of General Self-Efficacy Extraversion was negatively correlated while the other three (Extraversion, Openness, Conscientiousness) were positively correlated with this measure. Only one of the three correlations between the three workaholism components reached statistical significance; respondents scoring higher on Feeling driven also scored higher on Joy in work ($r = .15, p < .01$). Finally, about one third of the correlations between the Big Five factors and the measure of Self-efficacy with the three workaholism components were significantly different from zero ($p < .05$).

3.2. Regression analyses

Hierarchical regression analyses were undertaken in which the three workaholism components (Work involvement, Feeling driven to work, Joy in work) were regressed on the six personality factors (Big Five, Generalized self-efficacy). Predictor variables were entered in blocks. The first block ($N = 4$) consisted of personal demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, marital status). The second block of predictors ($N = 3$) comprised work situation characteristics (e.g., unit tenure, work status, full vs. part-time). The third and final block were the personality factors ($N = 6$). The first two blocks of predictors served as control variables before considering the relationship of the personality factors and the workaholism components. When a block of predictors accounted for a

Table 2
Descriptive statistics^a

Variables	Mean	SD	N	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Neuroticism	19.0	6.86	474	-.42***	-.10*	-.25***	-.29***	-.43***	-.01	.36***	-.06
2. Extraversion	32.0	5.70	474	-	.16***	.45***	.47***	.36***	-.00	-.04	.21***
3. Openness	25.3	4.97	473	-	-	.04	-.01	.20**	-.08	-.08	.11*
4. Agreeableness	36.4	4.22	476	-	-	-	.40***	.06	-.04	-.14*	.25***
5. Conscientiousness	34.5	4.58	475	-	-	-	-	.25***	-.02	.02	.07
6. Self-efficacy	29.6	3.62	460	-	-	-	-	-	-.01	-.01	.27***
7. Work involvement	24.4	4.35	470	-	-	-	-	-	-	.07	.01
8. Feeling driven	22.3	6.15	471	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.15***
9. Joy in work	20.3	4.82	472	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

^a N range from 452 to 475.

significant amount or increment in explained variance on a particular workaholism component ($p < .05$) individual predictors within these blocks having independent and significant relationships with the workaholism component ($p < .05$) were identified. The following comments are offered in summary. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

3.2.1. Work involvement

Two blocks of predictors accounted for significant amounts of increments in explained variance on Work involvement (personal demographics, personality factors). Men scored higher on Work involvement than did women. Respondents scoring higher on Extraversion and respondents scoring higher on Generalized self-efficacy, indicated higher levels of Work involvement.

3.2.2. Feeling driven to work

Only one block of predictors accounted for a significant amount or increment in explained variance on Feeling driven to work (Personality factors). Respondents scoring higher on Neuroticism, those scoring higher on self-efficacy, those scoring *lower* on Openness to new experience, and those scoring higher on Conscientiousness, also reported higher levels of Feeling driven to work.

Table 3
Personality Factors and Workaholism Components

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
<i>Work Involvement (N = 384)</i>				
<i>Personal demographics</i>	.16	.03	.03	.05
Gender (–.15)				
<i>Situational characteristics</i>	.18	.03	.00	NS
<i>Personality factors</i>	.32	.10	.07	.001
Extraversion (.18)				
Self-efficacy (.13)				
<i>Feeling Driven (N = 384)</i>				
<i>Personal demographics</i>	.11	.01	.01	NS
<i>Situational characteristics</i>	.14	.02	.01	NS
<i>Personality factors</i>	.47	.22	.20	.001
Neuroticism (.50)				
Self-efficacy (.18)				
Openness (–.12)				
Conscientious (.13)				
<i>Joy in Work (N = 383)</i>				
<i>Personal demographics</i>	.06	.00	.00	NS
<i>Situational characteristics</i>	.13	.02	.02	NS
<i>Personality factors</i>	.33	.11	.09	.001
Self-efficacy (.23)				
Extraversion (.18)				

^a Only β_s achieving statistical significance ($p < .05$) are shown in the table.

3.2.3. Joy in work

Personality factors accounted for a significant increment in explained variance on Joy in work. Respondents scoring higher on self-efficacy, and those scoring higher on Extraversion also reported more Joy in work.

Four additional observations are worth noting. First, personal demographic and work situation characteristics generally showed no relationship with the workaholism components. Second, personality factors were significantly related with all three workaholism components. Third, Generalized self-efficacy was related to all three workaholism components, while Extraversion was related to two of the three (Work involvement, Joy in work). Fourth, Neuroticism had the strongest relationship of any personality factor with a workaholism component (Feeling driven to work, $\beta = .50$).

4. Discussion

This research examined the role of personality factors in predicting three workaholism components identified by Spence and Robbins (1992) that have become the most widely-used measures of workaholism (see McMillan et al., 2003). There has been a renewed interest in the effects of personality variables in the workplace over the past decade, perhaps best represented in studies of the Big Five personality factors.

This investigation replicated several previous studies in showing that personal demographic and work situation characteristics were generally independent of workaholism measures (see Burke, 2000a; McMillan et al., 2003 for reviews). In addition, the findings based on the personality measures show that both self-efficacy and some of the Big five factors were related to important work behaviors in this case, the three workaholism components. The inclusion of these personality measures in future research on workaholism appears warranted.

Other research using the Spence and Robbins workaholism components has found that Work enjoyment is positively related to positive affect while Feeling driven is positively related to negative affect. In addition, studies of Canadian MBA graduates and Australian psychologists (see Burke, 1999b; Burke, Oberklaid, & Burgess, 2004) have reported that Feeling driven was significantly and positively related with beliefs and fears reflecting more negative motivations and perceptions of their broader environment (e.g., a need to prove oneself, rewards are in short supply, nice guys finish last).

Five theoretical models to explain workaholism have been identified: addiction, learning, trait and personality, cognitive and family-systems. Unfortunately none of these theories has been examined sufficiently to either accept, modify, combine or dismiss them. Very little research has been to specifically address them; most of these theories are also complex and difficult to test.

McMillan et al. (2001, 2003) conclude that trait or personality theory has received the most empirical support while learning theory likely has the greatest scientific utility. The findings of this investigation suggest that workaholism is best explained as a personal trait that *may* be activated and supported by experiences and events in one's environment, the workplace likely being the most important setting.

This preliminary study begins to address the personality-workaholism link. Others (Clark et al., 1996; McMillan et al., 2001) have suggested such relationships. It is important that future research

replicate the findings reported here. In addition, future research might include other measures of workaholism (e.g., Robinson, 1998), other measures of personality (e.g., locus of control, perfectionism), and efforts to consider workaholism as a mediator of personality and both work and well-being outcomes.

4.1. Limitations of the study

Some limitations of the study need to be noted to help put the findings in a larger context. First, all data were collected using questionnaires opening up the possibility of response set consistencies. Second, some of the measures had levels of reliability that fell below the generally accepted value of .70. The Work involvement measure has been found to have acceptable levels of internal consistency reliability in North American samples but lower levels of reliability in non-North American samples suggesting that the items in this measure that was developed in the United States likely mean different things in non-North American countries. The reliabilities of Feeling driven to work and Joy in work have been acceptably high in all countries using the original Spence and Robbins measures. Third, the data was collected at one point in time making it impossible to address issues of causality. Fourth, it is not clear the extent to which these findings would generalize to other occupational groups in other countries.

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