

5-2018

# Impact of Situational Factors on Attention to Detail

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**Impact of Situational Factors on Attention to Detail**

by

Catherine S. Hoepner

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in Industrial/Organizational Psychology

May, 2018

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### **Abstract**

The present study examined the ensuing person-situation debate. The independent variables included situational strength (strong versus weak), conscientiousness, and attention to detail. The dependent variable was performance on two different tasks, where good performance required high levels of thorough and focused behavior. This study sought to test the hypothesis that in strong situations there would be more uniform behaviors (less influence of personality) than in weak situations. It also examined the hypothesis that in a weak situation, narrow traits would be a stronger predictor of tasks performance than broad traits, but in a strong situation, there would not be a difference between broad and narrow traits. The hypothesis was not supported. Results of the study indicated that there were no significant main effects. The three-way interaction was not significant either. However, there was a significant two-way interaction of conscientious and the situation on the memo recall task performance. Specifically, participants with low levels of conscientiousness performed better when there were no consequences present. The findings are to be interpreted with caution as the sample size is too low to generalize.

*Keywords:* personality, situation, person situation debate, person situation interaction

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks so much my three committee members; Dr. Jody Illies, Dr. Daren Protolipac, and Dr. Dave Robinson. I truly appreciate all the time spent teaching, brainstorming with me, and giving invaluable feedback. The feedback and time spent was not only beneficial in completing my thesis but also in developing my research, statistical analysis, and writing skills. I would also like to thank my classmates, Julien, Kirsten, and Yang for their input on my thesis hypothesis and methodology. Your input helped to strengthen my thesis and I'm so grateful for your friendship. Thanks so much to my parents for the being two of the best people, I know as well as such great role models. You taught me the value in starting each day with a bowl of nails (and a Diet Dew). Lastly, special thanks to my sisters and brother-in-law (El, Bex, Jackie, Alaina, Tia, Taryn, and Zach). Even in the thick of thesis writing, finals, endless pages of reading, or whatever grad school threw my way, sisters and brother-in-law never failed to bring a smile to my face. I cannot thank you all enough.

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## Chapter I: Introduction and Review of Literature

Human behaviors and reactions to situational cues are unique to each individual. Some researchers posit that because of innate traits or predispositions, two individuals may respond to the same situation in very different ways (Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010; Mischel, 1968, 1977). Furthermore, traits give individuals guidance and influence how they respond. These behavioral reactions are thought to be consistent over time.

Alternatively, other researchers believe that there are situational factors and environments that tend to standardize reactions and/or behaviors displayed. In a situation that is deemed to be strong, individuals have clear and consistent environmental cues on how to behave. Conversely, weak situations lack clear and consistent environmental cues on how to behave, which creates a greater range of behavior displayed by individuals. These environmental and situational factors can be implicit, explicit, or nonexistent at all (Meyer et al., 2010). While individual differences are still important to take into consideration in the prediction of behavior and/or outcomes, it is also crucial to assess situational strength, including the levels of clarity, consistency, constraints, and consequences existing in each situation (Dalal & Meyer, 2012; Meyer et al., 2010).

Perhaps the most commonly cited example of the impact of situational factors and influence of environmental cues is the classic example of behavior displayed at a wedding versus behavior displayed at a funeral (Mischel & Shoda, 1995 as cited by Larsen & Buss, 2009). In both settings, there are clear and consistent cues for appropriate behavior. While at a wedding, individuals that attend may display greater levels of extraversion and appear more gregarious, whether or not they are extroverted or introverted. While, at a funeral, individuals

that attend may appear more introverted regardless if they truly are an introvert (Mischel & Shoda, 1995 as cited by Larsen & Buss, 2009).

Another example of how the concept of situational strength might be extended to a setting can be found when considering the role of bureaucracies. Individual differences can be impacted both purposefully and not purposefully by bureaucracies within an organization. Some perceive bureaucracies as constricting to behavior and decision making whereas others view bureaucracies as regulations to increase efficiency and a way of emphasizing the importance of accountability and authority. These variations in sentiment will not only lead to variations (or lack thereof) in behavior displayed but also variations in a person's fit within the organization (Meyer et al., 2010).

The impact of research on situational influences also spreads to research on the predictive validity of selection measures. Often, personality inventories are employed in assessment or selection of employees; however, personality inventories generally have low validity when predicting performance (Jeanneret & Silzer, 1998; Prien, Schippmann, & Prien, 2003; Pulakos, 2005). Some argue that the low validity could be attributed to various extraneous variables, with context or situation being a major extraneous variable (Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2012). The present study sought to examine the influence of situational consequences as posited by Meyer et al. (2010) on the personality-task performance relationship.

The present study pulls from principals of self-perception theory (Bem, 1965; Greenbert & Murphy, 2013) as further support for the hypothesis. Self-perception theory proposes that one learns about various internal states, such as emotions and attitudes, through observation of their actions and external factors present when those actions take place (Bem, 1965; Greenbert &

Murphy, 2013). This theory also posits that if there are internal uncertainties present, then one will rely more on external signals to guide behavior (Bem, 1965; Greenbert & Murphy, 2013). For example, if one is not clear on the requirements necessary of a task they may rely more on their personality to guide their behavior through the situation. Whereas, if expectations are made clear then they may rely more on the expectations to guide behavior. This research adds further support to this study and is related to the present study as when in strong situations participants may attribute their performance on the tasks to the cues present in the strong situation. Whereas, in the weak situation they may think more to experiences that they have had with displaying a certain personality trait or, perhaps, the tasks they participated in the experiment and attribute their feelings on a certain personality trait to that instead. Again, this adds further justification for the present study's hypothesis.

The present study also pulls from the foundational person-situation research conducted by Mischel. Mischel (1968) began to examine the person-situation interaction. Mischel (1968) found that self-reporting ratings on a personality inventory are valuable and alike if they are administered in similar settings or if participants have the same schema of what context they would behave in. However, when changes are made to the schema or setting there are also variations on the self-report inventories (Mischel, 1968). In later years, Mischel (1977) studied the notion of situational strength. A situation that elicits clear ideals for behavior and norms is deemed a strong situation (Mischel, 1977). He went on to argue that one can infer more information on behavior from assessing the interaction of personality and situational factors verses simply assessing main effects. Then Mischel (1981) expanded on his thoughts and noted that to decide on influence of the personality-situation interaction it is important to consider the

purpose for assessment and the level of specificity of the outcome. For example, an overarching measure of personality is valuable when examining measures of average personality displayed, however it will not be as helpful if you would like to gather situation specific information (Mischel, 1981). He argued in that case it would be more beneficial to examine personality through the lens of the most similar previous behavior (Mischel, 1981). Much of Mischel's work inspired the hypothesis of the present study.

The hypothesis in the present study predicts a three-way interaction between personality and situational consequences. Situational consequences were assessed as strong and weak consequences. Attention to detail (narrow) and conscientiousness (broad) were the personality measures used to test this hypothesis. The present study also seeks to test the notation that narrow traits will have a greater effect than broad traits when the dependent measure is a narrow or more specific measure. That said, there are two narrow dependent measures in the present study. The first is a Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) task where participants were asked to select if they recalled a word in a previously reviewed list. Some words were present on the list and some were not. The number of false memories was subtracted from accurate memories (Roediger & McDermott, 1995). The other dependent variable was a score on a quiz about a detailed memo.

### **Performance that Requires Highly Focused Behaviors**

One of the most commonly used dependent variables in the field of Industrial-Organizational Psychology is job performance. Successful performance in many jobs requires one to be thorough and focused and there are high consequences if those behaviors are not present. For example, the role of a surgeon and the role of a detective require great levels of

thorough and focused behaviors and the consequences the absence of these behaviors are severe (Meyer, Dalal, & Bonaccio, 2009). Another occupation that requires one to be thorough and focused would be that of an accountant. Successful performance in this role would be preparing an accurate, complete, and compliant financial report and adding accurate entries to the proper accounts. Key performance indicators for these tasks and for this role as a whole would be accuracy and detail (National Center for O\*NET Development, 2016).

Not only do situations and personality traits impact behavioral manifestations of personality, research has also demonstrated that the two have impact on performance (Dalal & Meyer, 2012; Meyer et al., 2010;). This leads into the next area of the present study, the influence of the situation. The present study examines performance on two different tasks that require high levels of thorough and focused behavior and variables that influence performance on those tasks. Since there is an ongoing debate on the relationship between performance and personality, this study seeks to examine this relationship and its role in successful job performance.

## **Personality**

Larson and Buss (2005) defined personality as the preserving psychological traits that impact the way one interacts and adjusts in various contexts. Further, Allport (1965) believed that personality is a predisposed trait that is constant throughout various occasions and contexts. He also argued that personality traits are the driving forces behind motivation, attitudes, personal characteristics, and behaviors. From the lens of an extreme trait theorist, one would posit that there is little to no variation in behavioral manifestations of personality across various situations. In other words, regardless of whether someone is at home, work, or school, their personality and

behaviors displayed should remain roughly the same (Larsen & Buss, 2009; Mischel, 1968, 1977). Although the more typical trait theorists still believe that personality is innate and consistent across time and situation, they have modified their position slightly. For instance, one update that has been made is the belief in aggregation or taking an average of the level of a personality trait displayed in various situations (Larsen & Buss, 2009; Mischel, 1968, 1977). Trait theorists would posit that personality traits are predisposed. In other words, someone may display extroversion because they are neurologically or psychologically wired to be more extroverted. That said, the level of traits displayed should be fairly consistent across measures as well as across contexts (Jeanerette & Silzer, 1998).

Applying the trait theory perspective to the workplace, personality is seen as a “will-do” competency. Personality is something that distinguishes between top talent that may have the same or similar cognitive abilities (Barrick & Mount, 2012; Prien et al., 2003). For example, certain personality traits may determine which people are willing to go beyond the basic requirements of their role or task (Barrick & Mount, 2012; Prien et al., 2003). Further, research demonstrates that when making hiring decisions and potentially working with an applicant, participants placed almost as large of an emphasis on personality characteristics (specifically conscientiousness) as they did on cognitive ability (Dunn, Mount, Barrick, & Ones, 1995). Dunn et al (1995) gave managers from various occupations the frame of reference of thinking of important job requirements and what characteristics would help the job applicants excel in that specific job. After this frame of reference, participants were asked the likelihood of the job applicant being recommended for hire, excelling on the job, being an employee with whom coworkers would enjoy working and performing counterproductive workplace behaviors.

Results of this study demonstrated that managers believe personality traits, specifically emotional stability ( $\beta = -.36$ ) and conscientiousness ( $\beta = -.25$ ), will predict if an employee will partake in counterproductive workplace behaviors. Results also demonstrated that managers not only value cognitive ability but also level of conscientiousness in hiring decisions (Dunn et al., 1995). While cognitive ability was still the highest-valued item, conscientiousness was placed very high.

Yet another example of the influence of personality perceptions in the workplace was demonstrated in Robertson, Gibbons, Baron, MacIver, and Nyfield (1999). The researchers examined the relationship between managerial competencies and personality traits and how they influenced ratings of proficiency and promotability. Results indicated that although conscientious individuals were seen as having the necessary competencies for successful performance in their current job, unconscientious individuals were actually seen as being more promotable. Although these findings differed from expectations, the researchers noted that the individuals in the study may have made a good initial impression, creating a halo effect, but eventually may have actually been a poor choice to be promoted. While personality still appeared to be important, impressions played an influential role as well (Robertson et al., 1999).

**The Big Five Model of personality.** Throughout history, personality researchers have studied not only how personality manifests into behavior but also have attempted to develop taxonomies for personality traits. However, it was not until Fiske's (1949) factor analytic study that a five-factor model came to be, though the structure of the five-factor personality model is somewhat different today. Fisk placed participants on teams of four. At various points of the day they were asked to report their personality and rate the personality traits that their team members

had displayed. Based on an analysis of these ratings, they identified a five-factor model that consisted of social adaptability, emotional control, conformity, inquiring intellect, and confident self-expression (Fiske, 1949).

Years later, Tupes and Christal (1961) posited a refined structure of the five-factor personality model. The researchers factor analyzed a number of different studies conducted that examined ratings of personality. Their analysis also demonstrated that a five-factor model holds steady across different populations of participants, contexts, raters, and familiarity with raters (Tupes & Christal, 1961). The refined model has been examined and analyzed by many researchers and shown consistent results (Borgatta 1964; Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1989; Larsen & Buss, 2003).

One of the most commonly referred to Five Factor Models is comprised of conscientiousness, extraversion, openness/intellect, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1989). To study this five-factor model, Costa and McCrae (1985) recruited participants that were part of a longitudinal study that assessed their mental and physical health, cognitive ability, and personality. To measure personality traits, the researchers had participants and their spouses' rate personality displayed. Results revealed that the Five Factor Model demonstrated consistency and agreement over time (Costa & McCrae, 1985).

**Broad versus narrow personality traits.** Although research has consistently demonstrated a five-factor model of personality, many argue that a five-factor model only scratches the surface of the intricacy of human behavior. Each of the factors, of course, is comprised of smaller facets or narrow traits (Jenkins & Griffith, 2004; Larsen & Buss, 2009). Some argue that the predictive validity between broad versus narrow traits and performance



depends on the broadness or narrowness of the trait being evaluated, and the type of performance being measured (e.g., Jenkins & Griffith, 2004). For instance, Jenkins and Griffith (2004) analyzed the job requirements of an accountant and then assessed broad and narrow personality traits that were likely related to performance as an accountant. They also had managers assess participants' performance in a number of different domains relevant to performance as an accountant. They then examined the trait-performance relationships. They concluded based on their results that it is not only important to examine narrow traits but also to match those traits to narrow performance indicators. Maybe most importantly, the authors found that if personality is matched to performance, narrow personality traits had better predictive validity than the more general or broad personality measures.

Tett, Steele, Beauregard (2003) found support for the enhanced validity when more precise personality measures are utilized. They did so by having participants partake in in-basket role play scenarios where they were asked to act as if they were a manager and identify various workplace issues from memos. Analysis demonstrated that it is important to take a deeper look at not only composite scores but also the narrow traits as analysis of the narrow traits revealed additional information about managerial behavior. For instance, the relationship between conscientiousness and performance as well as the relationship between agreeableness and performance were not always positive. In fact, paying too much attention to detail was negatively correlated with performance whereas productivity was the only facet of agreeableness that was positively correlated with performance (Tett et al., 2003).

On the other hand, authors also have suggested that broad traits hold greater potential for understanding the relations between personality traits and important behaviors common across

jobs and settings (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Specifically, Mount and Barrick (1995) found through meta-analytic procedures that conscientiousness is a valid predictor across many different occupational groups. Extraversion and openness were also found to be successful training proficiency predictors in numerous occupations.

Although many studies have favored broad traits for the strongest predictive power of general work performance, depending on the specificity of the criterion, task, or job, narrow conscientiousness traits can predict variance in performance beyond a broad measure of conscientiousness. In other words, the narrow traits of conscientiousness can account for more incremental variance with specific areas of performance than with overall performance (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006).

Regardless of the magnitude of the predictor-criterion relationship, it is challenging to label behaviors displayed using a broad trait. Someone may display some but not all the behaviors reflective of a broad trait, and it is easier to pinpoint specific behavior with narrow traits. In other words, narrow traits allow for easier identification of behavioral manifestations of personality. The strength of the association of narrow traits and performance or other criteria may vary depending on the nature or dimension of performance. All and all, if the goal in observing behavior is for a specific purpose, then a bulk of the research indicates that narrow trait measures are preferred (Dudley et al., 2006; Paunonen, Rothstein, & Jackson, 1999;). In particular, with closer examination of a study by Ones and Viswesvaran (1996), Paunonen, et al. (1999) found that there were a number of narrow personality traits that actually had higher predictive validity coefficients than the broad traits. This demonstrates further support of the value in assessing narrow traits (Dudley et al., 2006; Mershon & Gorsuch, 1988; Paunonen et al., 1999).

With the ongoing debate between broad and narrow personality traits in mind, the present study focuses in on conscientiousness and attention to detail. Kirton (1976) and Miron, Erez, and Naveh (2004) described one who has high attention to detail as someone who is extremely thorough in their work activities. Those with high attention to detail master each task and they painstakingly ensure that each detail of the task is completed accurately and with no errors. This is an important work style for the role of an executive assistant who is required to record and organize company memos and various other administrative documents accurately (National Center for O\*NET Development, 2017).

### **Situational Influences**

In addition to examining the differences between broad and narrow traits, researchers have also explored the manner in which the situation influences the relationship between these personality traits and performance. There have been three main lines of research that have explored this topic. One school of thought is that personality strength affects the consistency of behavior across various situations. Personality strength is thought to be a challenger of the situational strength theory (Dalal et al., 2015). The theory posits that certain personality traits are more likely to produce behavioral manifestations that are consistent across situations as compared to other traits. For instance, a study by Ten Berge and De Raad (2002) found that extraversion, autonomy, and emotional stability have little variation from situation to situation, suggesting these are strong personality traits. It should be noted that trait strength diverges from the typical definition of a personality trait in that trait strength is not a scaled value but addresses stability in internal cues across various situations (Dalal et al., 2015; Ten Berge & De Raad, 2002). Strength is also not a continuum. Strength reflects the reliable display of traits in various

situations. In other words, lacking personality strength is not synonymous with “less” of a trait or a lower score on a trait measure; rather, it simply means that there is a greater amount of variability in behavior reflective of that trait across situations (Dalal et al., 2015; Scheufele & Shah, 2000 as cited in Dalal et al., 2015).

Not only has personality strength or the consistency of personality from situation to situation been studied but also the concept of situational choice. Situational choice posits that personality may be consistent from situation to situation because people choose situations that align with their personality. In an effort to demonstrate this idea of situation choice, Diener, Larsen, and Emmons (1984) had participants wear watches that alarmed two times each day for a number of weeks. Every time the alarm sounded, a participant would fill out a survey, reporting the type of situation they were in, as well as their mood. The researchers found that participants were often found in situations that matched their self-reported personality. For instance, results demonstrated that participants with greater levels of orderliness and need for mental structure gravitated more towards structured situations and shied away from novel situations. In another study that revealed that personality influences situational preferences, Fleeson, Malanos, and Achille (2002) randomly placed participants into different situations where they were instructed to act introverted or extraverted. Results of the study indicated that when participants were first told to act in a way that was consistent with their personality (e.g., introverts were first placed in an introverted condition), they displayed a greater level of positive affect than if they were placed in a non-matching situation. These results showed that both situational and dispositional factors play important roles in behavioral manifestations of personality traits and positive affect (Fleeson et al., 2002).

Finally, the third and maybe most researched nature of the personality/situation relationship reflects the argument that what may be most important in understanding the consistency of personality across situations is not the impact of personality strength and situation chose, rather, it is the strength of the situation itself. While a trait theorist would argue that behavior is idiosyncratic and consistent across time and situation, as noted above, others would argue that situational factors influence behavioral consistency. For example, a trait theorist would argue that conscientiousness always gives individuals a leg up on the competition, whereas a situationist would posit that conscientious individuals may not outperform non- conscientious individuals in all situations. This debate stems all the way back to Hartshorne and May's (1928) study on honesty displayed by children attending summer camp. Behavior was observed during different games as well as during an exam. The authors could not discern a consistent pattern across the situations, suggesting that the situation had an influence on honesty behavior (Hartshorne & May 1928 as cited by Larson & Buss, 2009).

In later years, Mischel (1968) compiled a number of different studies that demonstrated the low predictive validity of personality measures. Although, he did see the importance in personality, the measures often had low predictive validity. Instead of adopting one side or the other, Mischel (1977) argued that behavior displayed is a product of both personality and the situation. The strength or the specificity of the situation influences behavior displayed as well. The relationship can be thought of as an interaction between a person and their environment (Larsen & Buss, 2009; Mischel 1977).

In later years, Shoda, Mischel, and Wright (1994) began using if-then statements to demonstrate the interactive relationship between personality and situational forces. In their study,

the researchers observed the consistency of behavior displayed across time and situation by children at a summer camp (Shoda et al., 1994). In order to make sound inferences about predispositions and behavior displayed, participants encountered various scenarios that may evoke certain reactions multiple times. While they found that yes, people may be predisposed to behave a certain way, certain behavior is only evoked in certain circumstances (Shoda et al., 1994).

In a workplace example, Lowman (1998) reported that when examining introversion and extraversion, they did not find the results that they anticipated. The authors originally anticipate that most of the people sampled were in professions that matched their personality tendencies. Instead, the researchers found that a large number of people in professions originally identified to be more extraverted were actually introverts and vice versa. This finding indicates that across professions, one may see a wide variety of personality traits (Lowman, 1998). It also alludes that there may be something else in one's environment that has a greater impact on behavior.

Although, the theory of situational strength has been around for long time, in recent years there has been a push for a more solidified conceptualization of this theory. Research in this area has been difficult because there has not been a taxonomy or universal conceptualization of situational strength. One notable recent advancement to this end has been Meyer et al. (2010), who proposed a four-facet situation strength taxonomy: constraints, clarity, consequences, and consistency. Meyer et al. (2010), pulling from Peters, Chassie, Lindholm, O'Connor, and Kline's (1982) defined situational constraint as the level of freedom one has within their job or environment, either to make decisions or to perform actions. Constraints can potentially restrict the drive and ability of employees. For instance, a job with a micromanaging boss would be an

example of a strong situation whereas a job with a boss that is out of the office a lot or one who does not have a great deal of communication with their employees would be an example of a weak situation. Yet another example would be the idea of bureaucracies within an organization (Meyer et al., 2010), where more bureaucracy would result in a more constrained situation.

Clarity involves the level of understanding of one's job responsibilities and how clear job-related information is from outside sources. Clarity could come from clear expectations in a job description, clear role responsibilities, or clear information from a manager. When expectations and roles/ responsibilities are specifically outlined, there should be little behavioral variation (Meyer et al., 2010). Consequences demonstrate the impact of decisions and incentivize mindful decision-making. With greater consequences for behavior or performance, there should be less variation in behavior, weakening the relationship between personality measures and various outcomes such as performance (Meyer et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2010). Consistency is operationalized as the extent to which external or behavioral cues are similar or dissimilar across sources. An example of high consistency would be multiple leaders sharing a message that is consistent across each of them and throughout a period of time or the extent to which companywide policies are in agreement (Meyer et al., 2010). As mentioned by Meyer et al. (2010), Mischel (1973) referred to consistency as uniform behavioral and action expectancies. The present study focused on this situational facet of consequences as in many jobs the impact of not performing in a thorough or focused manner (the specific aspect of performance being measured in this study) can be high (Meyer et al., 2009).

**Consequences.** Consequences are a facet of situation strength posited by Meyer et al. (2010). Through O\*Net searches, Meyer et al. (2009) identified occupations such as “surgeons,”

and “first-line supervisors/ managers of police and detectives,” to be high in situational constraints whereas occupations such as “telemarketers,” and “tour guides” to be low in situational consequences (Meyer et al., 2009, p. 1088). Through meta-analysis, Meyer et al. (2009) then found statistically significant interactions between conscientiousness and situational consequences for both task performance and overall performance. For occupations with a low level of constraint, the relationship between performance and conscientiousness was stronger than for occupations with a high level of constraint (Meyer et al., 2009).

Dalal and Meyer (2012) recounted a common area in which situational consequences are strong, workplace safety. The authors speculated that if employees are aware that their decisions and actions impact the safety of others as well as themselves, they will typically act with a high level of conscientiousness regardless of their actual level of conscientiousness. If actions do not have this type of impact or consequence associated with them, then behavior should be guided more by personality (Dalal & Meyer, 2012). Correlational analysis has also demonstrated that consequences are significantly positively related to production responsibility in a work environment. Increased production responsibility should be accompanied by increased consequences and therefore decreased impact of personality (Meyer et al., 2014).

**Summary of situational strength taxonomy.** According to Dalal and Meyer (2012), the situational strength facets present in different work scenarios will likely vary. Some work contexts may have an overlap of a number of the different situational strength facets whereas other work contexts may have none at all. For instance, a CEO has high consequences for their behavior but few constraints in that they are required to use a great deal of discretion in their everyday role and responsibilities (Dalal & Meyer, 2012). Correlational analysis has also



demonstrated that consistency is significantly negatively related to role conflict in a work environment (Meyer et al., 2014). In other words, there should be a reduction in role conflict when there is increased consistency present in the environment.

In a series of four studies Meyer et al. (2014) found support for Meyer et al.'s (2010) four-factor situation strength structure through factor analytic procedures. In the first study, the researchers constructed a pool of questions that included scenarios relating to either situational constraints, consistency, consequences, or clarity. In the next study, Meyer et al. (2014) finalized which questions would be used on the situational facet instrument and determine the reliability and validity of the instrument. Not only did the researchers assess the structure via factor analysis, but they also assessed the associations of the constructs with work-related constructs that were hypothesized to be similar (convergent validity) and constructs that were considered to be dissimilar (discriminant validity). Results indicated that although some of the situational factors (clarity and consistency) were highly related to one another, the four-factor model still showed the strongest factor analytic and psychometric properties.

Through a third study, Meyer et al. (2014) assessed if ratings of various situational scenarios would be influenced by personality displayed. They found that the personality ratings were consistent and had agreement in the strong situations but varied significantly in consistency and agreement in the weak situations. This indicates that the situation played an influential role. The final study within this article examined the interactive effects of personality (agreeableness and extraversion) and situational strength on organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and counterproductive workplace behavior (CPWB). The researchers found that the level of situational strength perceived moderated the conscientiousness-OCB, conscientiousness- CPWB,

agreeableness-OCB, and agreeableness CPWB relationships. Specifically, it was found that personality traits were more related to the criteria in weak situations than in the strong situations. In other words, personality was a better predictor in weak situations than in strong (Meyer et al., 2014).

Aforementioned, one of the greatest limitations of research in the area of situational strength is there is only several experimental studies. A literature review by Cooper and Withey (2009) as well as countless literature searches conducted for the present study revealed that there were only a handful of studies that used a direct manipulation of situation strength. There were, however, a number of studies that used the survey/correlational method or situational judgement assessments. With such different research designs and without much experimental research, it difficult to make strong causal conclusions regarding the effects of situational strength.

One of the few studies to use the experimental method was an early study assessing situational strength conducted by Mischel, Ebbesen, and Zeiss (1973). Participants in this study were given a test and then were given feedback on their test performance (manipulated as success or failure). The control group was just given instructions but never had to take the actual test. Mischel et al. (1973) conducted behavioral observations to assess the impact of positive and negative performance feedback. The researchers found that when feedback varied, so did participants' positive selective attention. Specifically, when participants believed that both their test performance was successful and there were no further tests, they focused more on the positive feedback and less on the negative feedback (i.e., assets vs. liabilities). However, the authors found no statistically significant difference between control and the test group that received negative feedback in amount of focus on assets and liabilities. The weak correlations in

the success condition reflect more uniform behavior, with less variability in behavioral manifestations. Whereas, the stronger correlations in the control and failure conditions reflect more variability in behavioral manifestations. Although, the findings were not exactly as expected, the authors noted that the manipulation in the failure condition could be strengthened. The significant findings indicate that situational factors influence behavior displayed (Mischel et al., 1973).

Monson, Hesley, and Chernick (1982) followed with an experimental design similar to Mischel et al. (1973) where they examined introversion and extraversion. The researchers asked participants to report level of introversion/extraversion. After they finished the inventory, they spent seven minutes in a room by themselves where they had the option to talk into an intercom or not. This was one measure of the behavioral manifestation of introversion/extraversion. The other measure that would reflect introversion/ extraversion was collected in forced introversion/extraversion scenarios where each participant was left in a room with two confederates. The confederates lightly reinforced introversion or extraversion behaviors by either encouraging or discouraging conversation. The forced extraversion/introversion scenario was a strong situation whereas the first measure of extraversion/introversion behavior (talking into the intercom) was considered a weak situation because there were no guidelines or situational cues available for participants to know how to act (Monson et al., 1982).

Monson et al. (1982) found that in the weak situation, there was more variation in behavior than in the strong situation. In other words, self-reported extraverts had a greater likelihood of talking into the intercom than did self-reported introverts. On the contrary, in the forced introversion/ extraversion or strong situation, there was less variation in behavior

displayed by self-reported introverts and self-reported extraverts. These results reflect the influence of situational cues on behavior manifestations of introversion and extraversion (Monson et al., 1982).

In a second study, Monson et al. (1982) sought to examine if the study's one results generalized across various situations. The other goal of the second study was to explore if multiple-act criteria had a stronger validity coefficient. Participants were presented with a number of different scenarios to assess introversion and extroversion behavior. Participants' primary roles were to rate the likelihood that they would display higher levels of introverted or extroverted behaviors in these various scenarios. Monetary incentives and grades on a paper were used as situational consequence pressures. The authors found that participants had the highest probability of displaying extraverted behaviors in the strong situation where there were pressures to act extraverted. Following the same thread, participants had the smallest probability of displaying extraverted behaviors in the weak situation where there were not pressures to act extroverted (Monson et al, 1982).

In another experimental study, Withey, Gellatly, and Annett (2005) assessed the impact of situational strength and emotional stability on effort exertion. Specifically, they wanted to examine if strong situational constraints influenced the likelihood of problem-solving versus giving up and leaving an issue and if the effect of emotional stability on performance was moderated by situation strength. In the strong situation scenario, participants were primed through instructions to respond with dissatisfaction in the workplace. The researchers expected this to influence the level of effort exerted on problem-solving activities. The weak situation had no situational constraints or cues presents, the message was very ambiguous, and the message

also made it seem as if changes were next to impossible so continuing in the problem-solving activity was not worth the time and effort. To assess effort versus leaving to avoid problem-solving, participants rated the likelihood they would try to solve the problem. Results indicated that there was little variability in effort exerted in the strong situation among different levels of emotional stability. Whereas, in the weak situation, there was significant variation in effort exerted among different levels of emotional stability. Specifically, those high in emotional stability exerted more effort than those low in emotional stability (Withey et al., 2005).

Finally, Beaty, Cleveland, and Murphy (2001) conducted a lab study that examined the impact of situational strength on task and contextual performance. The researchers split participants into four different conditions that contained scenarios that either emphasized (strong situation) or made no mention (weak situation) of the importance of task or contextual performance behavior. They did this by priming participants through instructions. Then they had participants fill out a questionnaire assessing the likelihood of partaking in contextual performance. They also had participants fill out a personality inventory. Results supported the hypothesis that personality and contextual performance would be related and would be affected by situational strength. Specifically, the researchers found that within the weak situations, the correlations between the big five personality traits of neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness and contextual and task performance were stronger. However, in the strong situation, the correlations were weaker (Beaty et al., 2001).

Beaty et al. (2001) conducted a second study that applied the experimental study to the field. Participants completed a personality inventory and then assessed the importance their managers placed on contextual and task performance work activities. Contextual and task

performance were combined and analyzed as job performance as a whole. Results of correlational and regression analysis in the second study replicated their lab study, which added further support to their hypotheses. Specifically, when considering strong situations, personality accounted for less variability in job performance than when considering weak situations (Beatty et al., 2001).

### **The Present Study**

Pulling from previous literature on situational strength, and personality, this study explored the age-old person-situation debate. Specifically, using an experimental design, this study examined the interaction between situation strength and personality by using the consequences situational variable from Meyer et al.'s (2009) taxonomy and the narrow personality trait of detail orientation and the broad personality trait of conscientiousness. It is proposed that situational strength plays a paramount role in determining the ability of personality to influence behaviors displayed (Mischel, 1973, 1977; Shaffer & Postlethwaite, 2012). This study adds to the sparse experimental studies and quantitative literature on situational strength. It also added to our understanding of the benefits of narrow versus broad personality constructs.

### **Hypothesis**

The present study predicts a three-way interaction between attention to detail, conscientiousness, and situation on performance. Specifically, In an absence of situational consequences, performance on a task that requires one to be thorough and focused will depend more on personality whereas in the presence of situational consequences, performance will be less dependent on personality. This effect will be more pronounced when the personality

predictor is attention to detail (narrow trait) as opposed to conscientiousness (broad trait). In other words, the more specific the greater the magnitude of the effect.

## Chapter II: Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from a Midwestern University's Psychology and Nursing departments. For involvement in the study, they had the opportunity to receive extra credit and/ or were entered a drawing to win one of three \$25.00 Amazon gift cards. In the present study, 49 participants partook in the experiment, but one was removed as they did not complete the demographic survey or personality inventories for a total sample size of 48. Of the 48 participants, 22 were undergraduate psychology students, 9 were undergraduate nursing students, 15 participants were from various other undergraduate programs, and 2 were from other graduate programs. The average age of the sample was ( $M = 21.15$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ). Within the participant pool, 2 participants were PSEO students, 12 participants were first-year undergraduate students, 11 participants were second-year undergraduate students, 15 participants were third-year undergraduate students, 5 participants were fourth-year undergraduate students, 1 undergraduate participant was above their fourth year, 2 participants were graduate students. Of the 49 participants, 41 participants received extra credit, 6 did not, and one did not report if they did or did not receive extra credit.

The current research was a between-subjects design with strong and weak (control) situation conditions. Participants were only allowed to participate in one of the conditions. Sample size was 48 participants (one was removed as they did not complete the demographic survey or personality inventories).



## **Situational Strength Manipulation**

**Situational consequences.** In the present study, the situational strength facet of situational consequences was manipulated. Consequences demonstrate the impact of organizational rewards and punishments on decision-making and behavior displayed (Meyer et al., 2009, Meyer et al., 2010). With that in mind, in the strong situational consequences scenario, participants were informed that there were consequences for minimal performance. In the weak situation, participants were informed that there were no consequences for performance. There were two different tasks in the experiment. The instructions were manipulated to either have consequences present or not. For the DRM task, participants in the strong situation were told that their performance may impact the level of extra credit that they receive. Whereas, the weak just gave the generic directions with no consequences present. For the memo recall task, participants in the strong situation were asked to put themselves in the shoes of an executive assistant who was not only tasked with helping the CEO prepare for an important meeting, but that their job was also on the line and as a single parent they really needed their job. Whereas, in the weak situation, participants were given generic instructions (Please refer to Appendix A and B for comprehensive instructions).

Validity of the situational consequences manipulation was assessed through pilot studies. Another test of validity was present in the actual study through additional manipulation checks after the participant completed the study (see Appendix D).

## Measures Included in All Studies

**Attention to detail.** Attention to detail was used as the narrow personality trait predictor. Attention to detail was assessed via self-report with items from the 45 Preliminary IPIP Scales Measuring the 45 AB5C Facets (see Appendix E). According to the IPIP Scales Measuring the 45 AB5C Facets answer key the facet of organization is a fairly consistent measure ( $\alpha = .78$ ). The questions were rated on a scale of 1-5 (1 = *low*, 5 = *high*). This questionnaire was made up of 12 questions (Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992). In the present study, the internal consistency was found to be  $\alpha = .89$ .

**Conscientiousness.** Conscientiousness was measured as the broad personality trait. Each participant rated the level of behavior displayed in the task on a scale of 1-5 (1 = *low*, 5 = *high*). Items were taken from the IPIP-NEO-120. The conscientiousness scale consisted of 24 items (see Appendix F). According to Johnson (2014), the IPIP-NEO-120, conscientiousness scale has fairly strong psychometric properties ( $\alpha = .85$ ). In the present study, the internal consistency was found to be  $\alpha = .89$ .

## Demographic/Control Survey

Age, gender, major, GPA, ACT/ SAT, if the participant received extra credit, what department the participant was recruited from, level of computer efficacy, and year in school were be collected in a brief survey to be used as possible control variables (see Appendix G). Level of computer efficacy was measured using a modified version of the Murphy, Coover, and Owen (1989) survey. The survey consists of 13 items rated on a scale of 1-5 (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*). This measure was used to control for perceived level of computer skill (see Appendix H). In the present study, the internal consistency was found to be  $\alpha = .91$ .

### **Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) Task**

The Deese-Roediger-McDermott (DRM) Task was used as one of the dependent variables in this experiment. It measures the frequency of false memories. This dependent measure assesses false memories and the type of semantic memory participants are utilizing. If participants are operating off of gist memory, they are thought to be bigger picture thinkers. So, they may recall a word that is not actually in the list but is defined by the list (Pardilla-Delgado & Payne, 2017). For example, participants studied a list of words relevant to bread such as flour, rye, loaf, and jam but the word bread was not included as part of the list. If they incorrectly reported that they remembered the word “bread” being on the list, this was considered a false memory. If the participant correctly remembered the word “flour” being on the list, this was considered a true memory. How accurate a participant performed on this task was calculated by subtracting the false memories from the true memories. A negative score may be an indication that participants just hit random keys. Someone that recalls specific words accurately is considered to be more thorough and focused in their performance and would be said to have greater attention to detail (Roediger & McDermott, 1995).

### **Memo Quiz**

A brief seven question multiple-choice quiz was used to assess recall of information included in a memo that participants were asked to read. This quiz was a second dependent variable in the study. The quiz and memo were developed by the principal researcher. The memo was a meeting invite, created to include vivid details about a company that was having an important meeting that could be very impactful to the company, and the quiz asked about these vivid details. Specifically, the recall quiz had seven questions regarding specific times, dates, and

adjectives (see Appendix C). Validation of the quiz was assessed by fellow graduate students who reviewed the memo and provided feedback about where or not the quiz accurately reflected knowledge of the memo.

### **Pilot Research**

A pilot study was conducted to assess the strength and effectiveness of the manipulations. Participants for the pilot study were recruited from Introductory Psychology classes at a Midwestern University where extra credit was offered for research participation. Pilot test participants partook in the experiment. Then, they filled out a questionnaire with a manipulation check to assess the strength of the situation manipulation. Mean differences were examined to see if the strong and weak situations were perceived correctly. There were differences between the strong and the weak situation in the pilot test's manipulation check for both the memo ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ;  $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ , respectively) and the DRM task ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ;  $M = 1.58$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ , respectively). A higher score on the manipulation check indicates that a participant perceived there to be more severe consequences present. Since the experimental group had higher means the principal researcher continued to collect data without alterations.

During the pilot tests before the official pilot tests, length of time needed to complete the task was assessed and participant feedback was gathered orally. Time given in to read the memo was reduced from four minutes to a minute and a half with feedback gathered from graduate students who read the memo before the official pilots and experiment started.

### **Procedure**

To avoid carryover effects, the proposed study used a between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to either a strong or weak situational condition. Participants

in the strong condition received instructions with situational consequences present. Those in the weak situation received generic instructions without situational consequences present (see Appendix A and Appendix B). For example, those in the strong condition were told that their extra credit may be impacted by their level of performance at the end of their instructions, whereas those in the condition received the generic instructions. For the recall task participants in the strong conditions were asked to put themselves in the shoes of an executive assistant whose job may be on the line depending on performance. Participants completed the study one at a time in a laboratory setting. All participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent, outlining their rights as a participant and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point.

After the informed consent was signed, participants completed the DRM activity. The DRM activity was created in E-prime computer program. Data for the DRM task was collected and remained confidential in E-prime as well. The data in E-prime was linked to the other data gathered by use of a random case number. Name and other identifying information was not collected. In this activity, they were asked to study a list of words. Then they were prompted with a word and asked to recall if they had seen the word or not. Instructions for the activity and presentation of those instructions varied based on condition (see Appendix A). Those in the strong condition received instructions that encouraged them to pay close attention to detail as their level of extra credit may be impacted by their performance on the task. Once data was extracted from E-prime, the principal researcher exported it into excel and created an accuracy score. The accuracy was calculated by subtracting the number of false memories from the number of correct memories. The accuracy on this task was one of the dependent variables of the study.

Next, participants were asked to assume the role of an administrative assistant. The current study's first experimental task utilized an executive assistant task where participants were required to recall details from a meeting memo from memory. This task was chosen because according to O\*Net, attention to detail, one of the main predictors in this study, is a critical work style of an executive assistant (National Center for O\*NET Development, 2017). This detail-oriented work includes maintaining and preparing records, contracts, and other detailed reports. Participants were told that they were working for a company that recently was not performing well. In the strong situation, participants were told that the company had been performing poorly but also that they were a single parent that really needed the money. In the weak condition participants were just told that they needed to help the CEO by preparing the company memo. Participants were given one minute and thirty seconds to read instructions and a brief memo. The memo was a meeting invite that described in detail the time, location, exterior of the building, and weather of the meeting. Then, participants were asked to recall details from the memo by taking a brief quiz (see Appendix B). Participant's performance in this task was the number of questions they correctly answered. This was the other dependent variable in the study.

After completion of the recall tasks, participants filled out the demographic survey, attention to detail measure, and the conscientiousness measure (counterbalanced). Finally, they responded to the demographic survey, which also included the manipulation check questionnaire (see Appendix B).

After the experiment ended, participants were asked to read a short debriefing statement giving additional information about the study (see Appendix H). Participants were allowed to take a copy of the debriefing statement. Lastly, participants had the chance to sign up to win one

of three \$25.00 Amazon gift cards. Emails for the gift card drawing were collected after the participant completed the experiment. This email list was kept separate from other study information on a sheet of paper that the principal researcher shredded after the experiment ended to ensure confidentiality. After the experiment ended the principle researcher used google random number generator to select three participants at random participants for the Amazon gift card.

### **Analysis**

SPSS was used to analyze the data from the present study. Descriptive statistics and frequencies were run on the data to obtain means, standard deviations, correlations, and frequencies. Cronbach's alpha was run to assess the internal consistency of the predictor variables. Correlations were run to assess the direction and magnitude of the relationships among variables as well as to check for multicollinearity (Anastasi & Urbana, 1997; Keith, 2014). Hypothesis 1 was tested using moderated multiple regression. The present study used moderated multiple regression instead of an ANCOVA as research has demonstrated that dichotomizing predictor variables results in a reduction of statistical power (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991).

Hypothesis testing was completed using moderated multiple regression with three predictors: (a) attention to detail, (b) conscientiousness, and (c) situation strength. Each dependent measure was analyzed separately. Conscientiousness and attention to detail scores were centered (Aiken et al., 1991) and the situation variable was dummy coded. Interaction terms (three two-way and one three-way) were created by multiplying the predictors together. In Step 1, control variables were entered into the regression. Next, in Step 2, the centered predictors and the dummy coded situation strength predictor were entered. In Step 3, the two-way

interaction terms were entered into the equation. Finally, the three-way interaction term was entered in Step 4.



## Chapter III: Results

### Internal Consistency Estimates

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of scaled scores. Results demonstrated that the consciousness scale had strong reliability, the attention to detail scale had strong reliability, the computer efficacy scale had strong reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ , respectively).

### Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics and correlations among continuous predictors and control variables as well as the dependent measures. There were nine significant correlations. Conscientiousness and attention to detail were significantly correlated ( $r = .70$ ,  $p < .05$ ). In other words, in this sample with high levels of conscientiousness, attention to detail should be high as well. Conscientiousness and situation strength were significantly correlated ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that in strong situations there were participants with higher levels of conscientiousness. Situation and attention to detail were significantly correlated ( $r = .30$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that in strong situations there were participants with higher levels of attention to detail. This was an interesting finding as participants were randomly assigned to each condition by using excel random number that chose either a 1 or a 2 (Weak or Strong condition). Scores on the recall quiz and attention to detail were significantly correlated ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that those with higher levels of attention to detail recalled more information, as would be expected. Scores on the recall quiz and computer efficacy were significantly correlated ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, the recall task was not computer-based, so this relationship may be spurious. Because the control variables were not related to the dependent variables (except for

computer efficacy and recall), they were not included in the hypothesis testing analyses in order to conserve statistical power.

Table 1

*Study Means, Standard Deviations, Reliabilities, and Correlations (n = .48)*

| Variables                | Correlations and alphas |      |       |      |      |      |     |      |       |       |       |     |  |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|------|-------|------|------|------|-----|------|-------|-------|-------|-----|--|
|                          | Mean                    | SD   | 1     | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5   | 6    | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10  |  |
| 1. Age                   | 21.15                   | 2.73 | -     |      |      |      |     |      |       |       |       |     |  |
| 2. Year in school        | 2.28                    | 1.22 | .66*  | -    |      |      |     |      |       |       |       |     |  |
| 3. High School GPA       | 3.30                    | 0.53 | -.49* | -.19 | -    |      |     |      |       |       |       |     |  |
| 4. College GPA           | 3.29                    | 0.49 | -.16  | -.09 | .30* | -    |     |      |       |       |       |     |  |
| 5. ACT                   | 23.01                   | 3.36 | .15   | -.06 | .42* | .31  | -   |      |       |       |       |     |  |
| 6. Situation             | -                       | -    | .02   | -.06 | -.11 | -.11 | .02 | -    |       |       |       |     |  |
| 7. Computer efficacy     | 3.99                    | 0.81 | .25   | .16  | -.06 | -.06 | .06 | -.09 | (.91) |       |       |     |  |
| 8. Attention to detail   | 3.89                    | 0.55 | .13   | -.05 | -.05 | .21  | .10 | .30* | .07   | (.89) |       |     |  |
| 9. Conscientiousness     | 3.82                    | 0.60 | .20   | .08  | .14  | .14  | .06 | .37* | .15   | .70*  | (.89) |     |  |
| 10. Performance (DRM)    | 0.29                    | 0.29 | -.27  | -.11 | .27  | .03  | .27 | -.03 | .07   | .00   | .07   | -   |  |
| 11. Performance (Recall) | 5.38                    | 1.59 | -.19  | -.59 | .33  | .30  | .02 | -.64 | .32*  | .32*  | .08   | .03 |  |

Values in parentheses are reliability coefficients. \* $p < .05$  (2-tailed)

### Analysis of Performance on the Memo Recall Task

In step one of moderated hierarchical regression analyzing performance on the recall task, the centered conscientiousness variable, the centered attention to detail variable, and the dummy coded situational strength variable (weak = 0, strong = 1) were entered. There were no significant main effects in this model ( $R^2 = .16$ ,  $F(3, 44) = 2.70$ , *ns*, conscientiousness  $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $t(44) = 1.26$ , *ns*; attention to detail  $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(44) = 1.02$ , *ns*; situational strength  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(44) = -1.39$ , *ns*).

In the second step of the regression, the two-way interaction terms were entered. Model two was significant as a whole ( $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(6, 41) = 2.72$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), but the two-way interactions did not account for a significant amount of variance in recall above and beyond the main effects ( $\Delta R^2 = .09$ ,  $F(3, 41) = 2.47$ , *ns*). However, the interaction of conscientiousness and situation strength was significant ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $t(41) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ , see Table 2, interaction is discussed below).

In the last step of the regression the three-way interaction term was added to the model and did not account for unique variance above and beyond the main effects and two-way interactions ( $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $F(1, 40) = 0.28$ , *ns*). However, model three as a whole was significant ( $R^2 = .29$ ,  $F(7, 40) = 2.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The only significant effect was the interaction of conscientiousness and situation strength ( $\beta = 0.69$ ,  $t(40) = 2.54$ ,  $p < .05$ , see Figure 1). However, the interaction was not in the anticipated direction. Participants with low levels of conscientiousness performed worse when situational consequences were present than in the absence of situational consequences. Conversely, participants with high levels of conscientiousness performed better when situational consequences were present than when no

situational consequences were present. Though the remainder of the main effects and interactions did not offer significant contributions to the prediction of performance on the memo quiz (see Table 2), the interaction of attention to detail and situation strength might be worth exploring in future research (see Figure 2).

### **Analysis of Performance on the DRM (False Memory) Task**

In step one of moderated hierarchical regression analyzing performance on the DRM task, the centered conscientiousness and attention to detail variables and the dummy coded situational strength variable (weak = 0, strong = 1) were entered first ( $R^2 = .004$ ,  $F(3, 44) = 0.06$ , *ns*). There were no significant main effects of conscientiousness, attention to detail, or situational strength ( $\beta = -0.07$ ,  $t(44) = -0.33$ , *ns*,  $\beta = .06$ ,  $t(44) = 0.29$ , *ns*,  $\beta = -0.05$ ,  $t(44) = -0.17$ , *ns*, respectively, see Table 3). In the next step of the regression, the three two-way interaction terms were entered ( $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(6, 41) = 0.83$ , *ns*). None of the two-way interactions were statistically significant. In the last step of the regression, the three-way interaction term was added to the model and was found to not be statistically significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .001$ ,  $F(7, 40) = 0.40$ , *ns*). These findings did not support the study predictions.

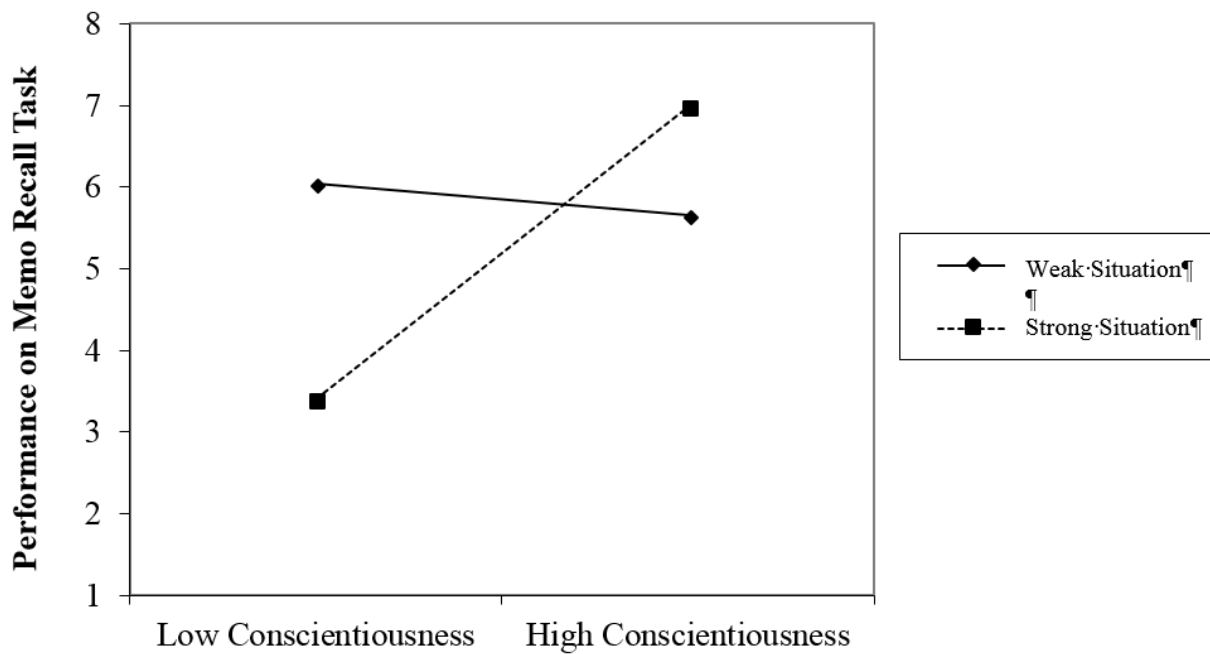


Figure 1. The Interaction of Situation and Conscientiousness on Performance

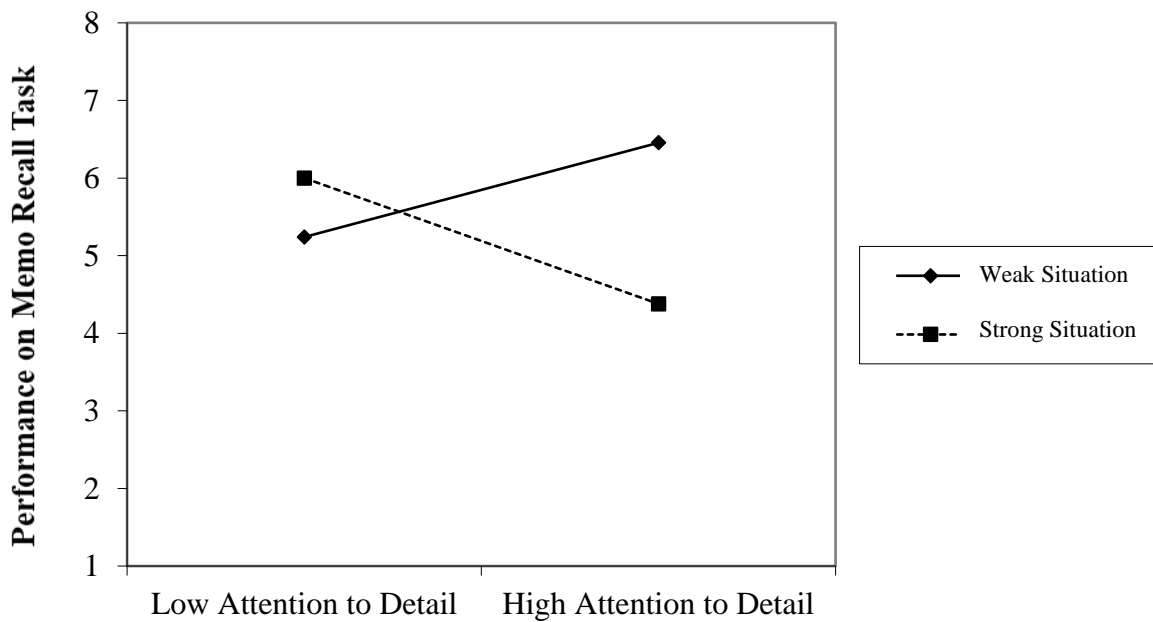


Figure 2. The Interaction of Situation and Attention to Detail on Performance

Table 2

*Summary of Moderated Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Task Performance (Memo Quiz) (n = 48)*

| Variable  | Model 1  |             |         | Model 2  |             |         | Model 3  |             |         |
|---|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
|   | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
| Situation   | -0.65    | 0.47        | -0.21   | -0.79    | 0.46        | -0.25   | -0.65    | 0.53        | -0.21   |
| Conscientiousness   | 0.73     | 0.58        | 0.25    | -0.44    | 0.73        | -0.15   | -0.32    | 0.77        | -0.11   |
| Attention to Detail                                       | 0.53     | 0.52        | 0.20    | 0.98     | 0.56        | 0.37    | 0.99     | 0.56        | 0.38    |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Situation                        |          |             |         | -2.34    | 1.21        | -0.47   | -2.32    | 1.22        | -0.47   |
| Conscientiousness X<br>Situation                          |          |             |         | 3.54     | 1.38        | 0.69*   | 3.55     | 1.39        | 0.69*   |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Conscientiousness X              |          |             |         | -1.21    | 0.79        | -0.26   | -0.94    | 0.95        | -0.20   |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Situation X<br>Conscientiousness |          |             |         |          |             |         | -0.93    | 1.74        | -0.11   |
| $R^2$   | .16      |             |         | .29      |             |         | .29      |             |         |
| Change in $R^2$   |          |             |         | .13      |             |         | .01      |             |         |

*Note:* Attention to Detail and Conscientiousness were centered at their means. Situation was Dummy coded. \* $p < .05$ .

Table 3

*Summary of Moderated Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Deese-Roediger-McDermott Task Performance (n = 48)*

| Variable  | Model 1  |             |         | Model 2  |             |         | Model 3  |             |         |
|---|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|---------|
|   | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | $\beta$ |
| Situation   | -0.02    | 0.09        | -0.03   | -0.04    | 0.09        | -0.08   | -0.05    | 0.11        | -0.09   |
| Conscientiousness   | -0.04    | 0.11        | -0.07   | -0.19    | 0.15        | -0.37   | -0.20    | 0.16        | -0.39   |
| Attention to Detail                                       | 0.03     | 0.10        | 0.06    | 0.03     | 0.12        | 0.07    | 0.03     | 0.12        | 0.07    |
| Conscientiousness X<br>Situation                          |          |             |         | 0.37     | 0.28        | 0.40    | 0.37     | 0.29        | 0.40    |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Situation                        |          |             |         | -0.06    | 0.25        | -0.06   | -0.06    | 0.25        | -0.07   |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Conscientiousness                |          |             |         | -0.19    | 0.16        | -0.23   | -0.22    | 0.20        | -0.26   |
| Attention to Detail X<br>Situation X<br>Conscientiousness |          |             |         |          |             |         | 0.07     | 0.36        | 0.05    |
| $R^2$   | .004     |             |         | .06      |             |         | .07      |             |         |
| Change in $R^2$   |          |             |         | .06      |             |         | .001     |             |         |

*Note:* Attention to Detail and Conscientiousness were centered at their means. Situation was Dummy coded. \* $p < .05$ .



## Chapter IV: Discussion

Results did not support the hypothesis that the situation would moderate the relationship between personality and performance (it was predicted that personality would predict better in weak situations). There was a moderating effect of situation on the conscientiousness-performance relationship however it was not in the anticipated direction. Specifically, when consequences were low in the recall performance task, there was not better prediction with high levels of conscientiousness or attention to detail. Although, interesting these findings could potentially be a type one error as many analyses were conducted and this was the only significant finding. In addition, there were no significant interactions or main effects when predicting performance on the false memory task. Although there was a significant interaction between conscientiousness and situational strength when analyzing recall performance, this result should be taken with caution due to low sample size and instability in the prediction. There were also high correlations between the attention to detail variable and the conscientiousness variable ( $r = .70$ ), which also would cause the results to be unstable. Conscientiousness and performance and attention to detail and performance were not significantly correlated nor were situation strength and performance. In addition, it should be noted that when the control variables were included in the analyses, the interaction between conscientiousness and situational strength was not significant. The control variables were not included due to a significant reduction in power in that the number of participants available to analyze shrunk by 50% due to a lack of responses to some demographic questions. Although results do not support the original hypothesis, they do suggest some interesting avenues for future research.

## **Interpretations**

Although not consistent with what was predicted, the significant interaction between conscientiousness and situation strength could potentially be due to those with low levels of conscientiousness not wanting to follow the rules. Perhaps when consequences or more strict guidelines were present, they became more defiant resulting in a decrease in performance. Or perhaps, those participants that were low in conscientiousness were also low in the conscientiousness narrow trait of deliberateness and when they realized that there were consequences present for the executive assistant, it caused them to behave less deliberately and just jump into the quiz. Another possible explanation is that participants that had low levels of conscientiousness were low in the narrow conscientiousness trait of self-efficacy and the additional pressure of having a consequence present hindered their confidence in completing the quiz. Should these results be replicated with a large enough sample to generalize, the finding that there was not much difference between those with high levels of conscientiousness in the different situations, it could offer support to the notion that personality is stable across situations, at least when considering performance on this recall task.

Though results when the Deese-Roediger-McDermott task was the dependent variable did not support the hypothesis that does not necessarily indicate that situation factors and personality do not interact. This may be an indication that other facets of the situation have a significant interaction with personality in affecting performance on this type of activity. Research has found consequences demonstrate the impact of mindful decisions making (Meyer et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2010). Research also demonstrated that with greater consequences of performance, there should be less variation in behavior. When consequences are present, the

relationship between personality measures and various outcomes such as performance are weakened. The relationship is more commonly seen to have an influence on managerial performance (Meyer et al., 2009; Meyer et al., 2010). Perhaps performance on the tasks used in this study may have been more influenced by another situational factor such as the level of situational constraints. As cited by Meyer et al. (2010), Peters et al. (1982) defined situational constraint as the level of freedom one has within their job or environment, either to make decisions or to perform actions. It is often operationalized as the extent to which external or behavioral cues are similar or dissimilar across sources. For example, if there are clear and consistent instructions in multiple places and from multiple sources.

Another possible explanation is that when working on tasks that require attention to detail, performance consequences actually hinder performance. The DRM task was a cognitive psychology test, and the lack of significant findings could be due to anxiety. Research has demonstrated that high a level of test anxiety is related to lower test scores (Cassady, 2001; Johnson, 2014). Additionally, the task was not a true performance task in the typical sense. It was more of a cognitive ability or memory test. Participants with higher memory or higher cognitive ability may have performed better regardless of the condition they were assigned to or regardless of their level of conscientiousness and attention to detail. Schmidt and Hunter (1998) demonstrated that conscientiousness has utility in predicting job performance, however general mental ability or cognitive ability has greater utility than personality measures. The results of the meta-analysis also indicated that when combined with a cognitive ability test, personality inventories did not demonstrate as much increased gains as other tests, such as integrity tests and work samples (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). As mentioned earlier in the discussion, the principal

investigator attempted to account for this through use of ACT, SAT, College GPA, and High School GPA. However, these control variables were not used in the analysis as there was a low response rate on the demographic and these variables were not significantly related to the dependent variables.

Yet another potential explanation for the insignificant findings is that the manipulations were not strong enough. For instance, the strong situation instructions for the memo task had participants putting themselves in the shoes of an executive assistant whose performance is critically important. Perhaps, this manipulation was not realistic enough and participants did not really try to put themselves in the shoes of the assistant. Also, for the DRM task, participants were told that they may lose some of their extra-credit as a consequence of poor performance. During the debriefing, a handful of participants reported that they knew their extra credit was not going to be taken away. Perhaps this was not realistic enough of a manipulation. Similar to the insignificant findings in Mischel et al. (1973), the lack of significant effects could be due to the strength of the manipulation. Future research could look into strengthening the manipulation. Yet, when assessed for group differences, participants in the strong situation had higher average scores than those in the weak situation for both the recall task ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ;  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ , respectively) and the DRM task ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ;  $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ , respectively). These findings indicate that participants in the strong situation found there to be higher levels of consequence present than those in the weak situation.

Other situational factors that may have influenced the results could be time of day that participants took the test. Experiments ran from 9am-5pm each day of the week. Depending on the time of the day participants may have felt fatigued or hungry. However, this is likely not the

case because there was a fairly even distribution of time of day the participants partook in the study. Another possible reason for the lack of significant findings is that some of the participants may not have performed to the best of their ability because they were just participating for extra credit and for the gift card drawing. This is thought to be seen if participants receive a negative DRM score, which would indicate that they had more false memories than accurate memories. Approximately, 14.58% of participants had negative scores (more false memories than accurate memories) and 4.20% of participants had the same amount of false and accurate memories. In addition, although the timing of the memo task was assessed through two rounds of pilot testing, there could potentially be performance differences in the consequence condition because, though the memo was the same in both conditions, the instructions were three sentences longer in the strong situation condition. Possibly, those in the weak condition had more time to review the memo before the memo quiz task as they had less content to review.

Lastly, the results did not support the hypothesis that narrow traits would be better predictors than broad traits in weak situations. Perhaps, the tasks were too broad and did not require as high a level of attention to detail as expected. As mentioned earlier in the paper, previous research has found higher levels of predictive validity when the broad or narrowness of a trait matches the broad or narrowness of the task (Dudley et al., 2006; Jenkins & Griffith, 2004). Although, in this study neither conscientiousness (broad) nor attention to detail (narrow) were found to be significant predictors of task performance, future research should be conducted to examine this relationship further. Further research should continue to be conducted because some but not all of the facets of conscientiousness may be relevant to the task (Dudley et al., 2006; Paunonen et al., 1999). For example, Tett et al. (2003) found that performance can be

negatively impacted by levels of attention to detail being too high. With that in mind, as well as previous literature indicating higher predictive ability with narrow traits, this distinction is important to continue to study (Dudley et al., 2006; Mershon & Gorsuch, 1988; Paunonen et al., 1999).

### **Limitations**

One major limitation of the present study was the small sample size. Despite recruitment efforts, not many participants signed up and many did not show up to the experiment. The small sample size had a negative impact on the statistical power of the moderated multiple regression analysis. Due to the insufficient sample size and insignificant findings, the results cannot be generalized (Keith, 2014).

Another limitation of the study is that both tasks, although rudimentary, relied heavily on memory. Porcelli et al. (2008) found that there were impacts to performance based on how much working memory was needed to perform.

It is very difficult to observe conscientiousness and the narrow traits of conscientiousness in an experimental setting. That in mind, perhaps the tasks were not an adequate measure of task performance that required participants to be thorough and focused. Future research could work to refine these tasks.

Yet another limitation of the study is the nature of the sample. The sample consisted of mainly undergraduate college students (one recent graduate and one MBA student). They were not actual employees that were performing a real on-the-job task. If this was an actual job situation, participants may have responded differently to the situational consequences.

Multicollinearity was another issue encountered in the present study. The independent variables of attention to detail and conscientiousness were very highly correlated (.70). This causes instability in the prediction and can decrease the unique effect of each independent variable on the dependent variables (Keith, 2014).

In the present study, other analyses were explored, but results were not significant. First, factorial ANOVAs were conducted by dichotomizing the independent variables. Second, in an effort to obtain more statistical power, separate moderated regressions were run testing the two-way interactions of personality (conscientiousness and attention to detail) with situational strength. None of these additional analyses produced significant results. Except for significant main effects of attention to detail and conscientiousness when analyzing the recall task.

### **Future Research**

As aforementioned, although the present study did not find an interaction between the person and the situation that does not mean that one does not exist. Not only should the study be replicated with a larger sample size it should also examine the different situational strength facets identified by Meyer et al (2010) and Dalal & Meyer (2012) as well as situational facts purposed by other theorists. Examining various situational facets would help to build upon the person-situation literature as well as identify which situational factors have the most influence on various types of behaviors. It would be interesting to examine various jobs with different levels of various situational facets present and examine the influence of these situational factors on performance and various other work outcomes. Similar to research conducted by Meyer et al. (2009) that identified various occupations with high levels of consequences, future research could explore many other situational facets and work outcomes as well.

Another area for future research could be exploring not only how people react differently to different situational factors but also across different contexts. For example, what does personality tell us about behavior at work, school, and home? Is it consistent or does it vary depending on the context? Then, how is that influenced by the various situational factors. As mentioned earlier, Diener et al. (1984) explored if there was congruence between personality and situational preferences. If future research explores this idea further and finds an interaction between personality and the situation on performance, it would be interesting to examine behavior further to see if there is more burnout occurring in those that are acting against their personality type.

If this study is replicated in the future, the order of the procedures could be altered. Specifically, the personality questionnaires and DRM tasks could be alternated. This would help to rule out any the potential that participants in the strong situation may have been primed to act with more attention to detail or conscientiousness as well as respond to the personality questionnaires to reflect higher levels of attention to detail and conscientiousness.

## **Conclusion**

In brief, though there were several limitations of the present study, future experimental research on the topic is encouraged as there is not a wealth of experimental research exploring the interaction between personality and situational strength (Mischel et al., 1973). True experimental research is needed to infer casual relationships about the impact of personality and situations on performance. It is encouraged to conduct further research to determine when personality or when the situation may be more telling as both give valuable insight into how someone may behave.



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## **Appendix A: DRM Instructions**

### **DRM Instructions (Weak Situation):**

You will be presented with a list of 16 words to study. Each word will be displayed on the computer screen for one second. After reviewing the lists, words will appear on the screen one at a time. Your task will be to select if the word on the screen was in the list you reviewed or not. You will be asked to do this activity 12 times.

### **DRM Instructions (Strong Situation):**

You will be presented with a list of 16 words to study. Each word will be displayed on the computer screen for one second. After reviewing the lists, words will appear on the screen one at a time. Your task will be to select if the word on the screen was in the list you reviewed or not. You will be asked to do this activity 12 times.

Please note that your performance on this task (your ability to correctly remember whether or not the words appeared in the original lists) will impact the amount of extra credit you receive or your chance to win a free gift card. Specifically, if you do not remember correctly, the amount of extra credit you receive or the probability that you will win a gift card will decrease.

## **Appendix B: Instructions for and Memo for Recall Task**

**Strong Instructions:** You are working as an assistant to the CEO of a major corporation located in St. Cloud, MN. In recent months, the corporation has not been performing very well. The CEO is meeting with key stakeholders tomorrow. The meeting will be located in the SCSU Welcome Center located just off of campus on 5th avenue. At this meeting, the CEO will try to get buy in on a new project. If the meeting goes well, this could be a huge project for the company and may save them financially. If the meeting does not go well, the CEO will likely lose their job, which means you will lose your job also. As a single parent that needs to pay for daycare and various other costs, you really need this job, so this meeting is critically important to you.

You need to help the CEO prepare for this meeting by answering a quiz about the memo that will be given to you shortly. You will have 1.5 minutes to review the memo before completing the quiz from memory– you will not be able to refer back to it. Remember, your job is one the line, so the consequences of performing poorly on this task are high.

**Weak Instructions:** You are working as an assistant to the CEO of a major corporation located in St. Cloud, MN. In recent months, the corporation has not been performing very well. The CEO is meeting with key stakeholders tomorrow. The meeting will be located in the SCSU Welcome Center located just off of campus on 5th avenue. At this meeting, the CEO will try to get buy in on a new project. If the meeting goes well, this could be a huge project for the company.

You need to help the CEO prepare for this meeting by answering a quiz about the memo that will be given to you shortly. You will have 1.5 minutes to review the memo before

completing the quiz from memory– you will not be able to refer back to it. Remember, your job is one the line, so the consequences of performing poorly on this task are high.

### Appendix C: Memo Recall Quiz

Please answer the following questions about the memo you just read. Circle your answer to each question and let the experimenter know when you are finished.

What branch of the company is hosting the meeting?

- Midwestern Wisconsin
- Minnesota
- Midwestern Minnesota
- Central

What conference room is the meeting scheduled in?

- Mississippi River Conference Room
- Welcome Center Conference Room 124
- Bald Eagle Conference Room
- Atwood Conference Room 234

What material is the SCSU Welcome Center exterior made from?

- Stucco
- Brick
- Limestone
- Wood

What color is the conference room door?

- Navy blue
- Ruby red

Forest green

Royal Blue

What time is lunch served?

Noon

12:30pm

11:30am

11:00am

When does the meeting end?

2:00pm

11:00 am

12:00 pm (noon)

1:00 pm

3:00 pm

What is the forecasted weather?

Snowy

Rainy

Warm

Breezy

### **Appendix D: Manipulation Check Questions**

Please respond to the questions below using the following response scale:

1. Do not agree at all
2. Agree a little
3. Somewhat agree
4. Agree mostly
5. Completely agree

There were potentially very negative consequences for the administrative assistant for performing poorly when preparing the memo

The consequences if the memo was typed poorly could have been costly for this company.

The consequences for the administrative assistant for performing poorly on the memo typing task were small

I was worried about losing my extra credit / possibility to win a gift card due to my performance on the word recall activity.

I was told that I my performance on the word recall activity might affect the amount of extra credit I received or the probability that I might win a gift card for participating in this study.

**Appendix E: Attention to Detail Items**

1. Pay attention to details.
2. Complete tasks successfully
3. Have an eye for detail.
4. Demand quality.
5. Set high standards for myself and others.
6. Make well-considered decisions.
7. Follow through on my commitments.
8. Detect mistakes.
9. Think ahead.
10. Seldom notice details.
11. Put little time and effort into my work.
12. Don't pay attention.

**Appendix F: Conscientiousness Items**

1. Complete tasks successfully.
2. Excel in what I do.
3. Handle tasks smoothly.
4. Know how to get things done.
5. Like to tidy up.
6. Often forget to put things back in their proper place.
7. Leave a mess in my room.
8. Leave my belongings around.
9. Keep my promises.
10. Tell the truth.
11. Break rules.
12. Break my promises.
13. Do more than what's expected of me.
14. Work hard.
15. Put little time and effort into my work.
16. Do just enough work to get by.
17. Am always prepared.
18. Carry out my plans.
19. Waste my time.
20. Have difficulty starting tasks.
21. Jump into things without thinking.



22. Make rash decisions.

23. Rush into things.

24. Act without thinking.

**Appendix G: Demographic Survey**

1. How old are you?
2. What is your major?
3. What year are you at SCSU?
4. What is your current college GPA?
5. What was your High School GPA?
6. What score did you receive on the ACT? (mark NA if not applicable)
7. What score did you receive on the SAT? (mark NA if not applicable)
8. Do you get extra credit for participating in the experiment?
9. Is English your first language?

**Appendix H: Computer Self-Efficacy Scale**

1. I feel confident entering and saving data (numbers or words) into a computer file.
2. I feel confident understanding terms/words relating to computer software.
3. I feel confident storing software correctly.
4. I feel confident escaping/exiting from a program or software.
5. I feel confident making selections from an on screen menu.
6. I feel confident copying an individual file.
7. I feel confident using the computer to write a letter or essay.
8. I feel confident moving the cursor around the monitor screen.
9. I feel confident using the computer to organize information.
10. I feel confident using a printer to make a “hardcopy” of my work.
11. I feel confident getting rid of files when they are no longer needed.
12. I feel confident using the user’s guide when help is needed.
13. I feel confident adding and deleting information from a data file.

## **Appendix I: Debriefing Statement**

Thank you for your participation in this study! This study examined the influence of various situational forces and personality characteristics on behaviors displayed. It also examined the relationship between personality and performance and if this relationship was consistent across situations.

### **Deception**

As part of this study, you may have been told that you could lose extra-credit points or lose the possibility to win a gift card. However, this was not true. Regardless of your performance during the experiment, your compensation for participation (extra-credit points or potential to win a gift card) will not be affected.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any additional questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask the researcher at this time or to reach out to the researchers at a later time: Catherine Hoepner at [choepner@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:choepner@stcloudstate.edu) or Dr. Jody Illies at [jjillies@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jjillies@stcloudstate.edu)