Personality – Goals – Performance: The influence of the Big Five personality traits on goal-oriented achievement behaviour

Personality variables have been shown to consistently predict different indicators of occupational performance (e.g. Barrick, Mount & Strauss, 2001; Salgado, 2003). Especially, there is substantial evidence, that Neuroticism (negatively) and Conscientiousness (positively) are essentially related to various performance criteria. With theoretical developments on the construct level (for predictors and criteria), substantial progress was made within the applied research field of personnel selection to detect possible determinants of different aspects of work performance. But only few attempts were made to define and test the causal mechanisms behind these empirical correlations. When and how personality factors influence behaviour in an achievement situation is unclear to a wide degree. Whereas earlier research was not able to prove a clear relationship between stable personality factors and motivational process variables, recent studies illustrate, that different theoretical motivational models can account for the missing link between distal traits, proximal states and outcome variables within achievement situations (Judge & Ilies, 2002). The main goal of the present research lies on the successful integration of personality variables – Big Five and intelligence – into a comprehensive model of goal-oriented action, work motivation, and performance. The results within the fields of personality psychology and work and organizational behaviour were successfully combined by taking into consideration and further developing a mediation model, linking personality traits via motivational constructs to achievement behaviour.

Research was based on two different theoretical approaches. On one hand, important mediator and moderator variables for goals and performance from the goal setting theory (e.g. self-efficacy, personal (achievement) goals, goal commitment, effort / persistence; Locke & Latham, 1992, 2002) were operationalized. On the other hand, effects of the Big Five on performance were divided according to different phases of action (Rubicon model, Heckhausen, 2003), and integrated into a comprehensive model of individual differences, goal setting motivation, and performance. The influence of the Big Five personality factors on different motivational and volitional process variables within different phases of action was systematically investigated - independent from cognitive ability - within four correlative lab studies ($N_{Total} = 504$). Besides the domain Big Five factors, the influence of the hierarchical subfacets (NEO-PI-R, Costa & McCrae, 1995) on performance and goal attainment was tested. Focus was laid on the investigation of influences of stable personality factors on the achievement process while working on simple tasks (brainstorming, arithmetic task). Especially effects of Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and their subfacets were studied under different achievement conditions ("Do your best" instruction, participative goal-setting, assigned goals). The database was composed of a combination of different methods: Besides questionnaires, objective achievement data as well as ratings from third parties are available.

Hierarchical regressions and analysis based on path modeling prove that stable characteristics influence performance via state-like, motivational process variables. Beside task-specific self-efficacy and personal goals, findings support the postulated mediational role of goal commitment and endurance / persistence. Independent of the postulated model variables, there was neither a direct effect for intelligence, nor the Big Five domain or subfacets on performance or goal attainment. Effects vary in size and sign depending on the influence of the specific work setting and action phases. Postulated hypotheses could not be confirmed on all stages of the achievement process. Whereas the data provided evidence for the hypothized

positive effect of Conscientiousness (e.g. on performance gains, goal commitment) and negative effect of Neuroticism (e.g. on goal setting), the results show, that even within simple tasks, both positive and negative effects of those factors can occur. Under the condition of specific, high achievement goals, Neuroticism showed positive correlations to goal commitment, whereas high values on Conscientiousness were associated with a reduced task-specific self-efficacy. Explanations for the results can be found by analyzing the effects of the subfacets of each dimension, showing for example a negative performance effect of Order or Deliberation (Conscientiousness). Within regressions, single subfacets are able to account for almost the same amount of variance as the domain factors, or are able to explain substantial variance above them, respectively (e.g. Achievement Striving). Some of the factors interact significantly with the study setting to explain an essential amount of variance of the process variables (e.g. Neuroticism). The results for the remaining three factors are less clear. Whereas Openness to Experience was to some extent positively related to the height of self-set goals, the results simultaneously show a negative association to goal attainment. The other two factors of the Big Five model showed, only in combination with specific conditions (interaction with others), connections to some variables, but did not essentially influence performance. Based on the findings of the four studies, conclusions on direction or effect sizes of the Big Five on performance relevant variables should not generally be drawn, whereas the analyses of the subfacets according to the different action phases show important potentials for future research. Conclusions can be drawn for a model not only predicting but also explaining performance, integrating individual differences and central aspects of work motivation.

Key Words: Individual Differences, Big Five, Subfacets, Work Motivation, Goal-setting, Performance