

Culture-Specific Personality:

Conscientiousness Predicts Effortful Persistence among Caucasians, but not East Asians

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Does Conscientiousness Predict Persistence in All Cultures?

- Fundamental to personality theory is the notion that personality traits predict relevant behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Buss & Craik, 1983; Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006)
 - e.g., trait conscientiousness is associated with effort and persistence at achievement activities (Corker, Oswald, & Donnellan, 2012; Sansone, Wiebe, & Morgan, 1999)
- However, several studies suggest that personality may predict behavior less strongly in collectivistic cultures (e.g., East Asian), where individuals strive to conform to social context, than in individualistic cultures (e.g., North American) where internal thoughts and feelings guide behavior (Heine & Buchtel, 2009)
 - East Asians report greater flexibility in self-concept and traits across different situational and relationship contexts, compared to North Americans (English & Chen, 1997; Suh, 2002)
 - East Asians are more likely than North Americans to attribute an individual's behaviors to external, social forces (Morris & Peng, 1994; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002)
- Despite suggestive evidence for cultural variability in the predictive power of personality traits, no prior studies have directly addressed this issue
- Here, we provided the first empirical test of whether personality traits are less predictive of behavior among individuals from collectivistic cultures compared to those from individualistic cultures

Method

- Study 1: 155 undergraduates (63 Caucasian; 92 East Asian; M age = 20.76; SD = 4.05; 74% female) participated in a study ostensibly examining the relation between personality and cognitive ability
 - Participants first completed the Big 5 Inventory-Conscientiousness scale (α = .85; John & Srivastava, 1999)
 - Next, participants completed the O-Span working memory task, to induce depletion (Unsworth et al., 2005)
 - Finally, participants were given the opportunity to work on the Raven's Progressive Matrices (RPM) for as long as they wished; they were timed during this task
 - Dependent Variable: Number of minutes spent on the RPM, which was used as an index of task persistence, a behavior theoretically related to conscientiousness
- Study 2: 139 undergraduates (89 Caucasian; 50 East Asian; M age = 20.12; SD = 3.31; 84% female)
 - Direct replication of Study 1 (BFI conscientiousness α = .82)
 - One change was made from Study 1: Experimenter and participant ethnicity were matched, to ensure that effects did not vary depending on whether participants shared ethnicity with the experimenter

Persistence by Ethnicity: Minutes Spent on RPM

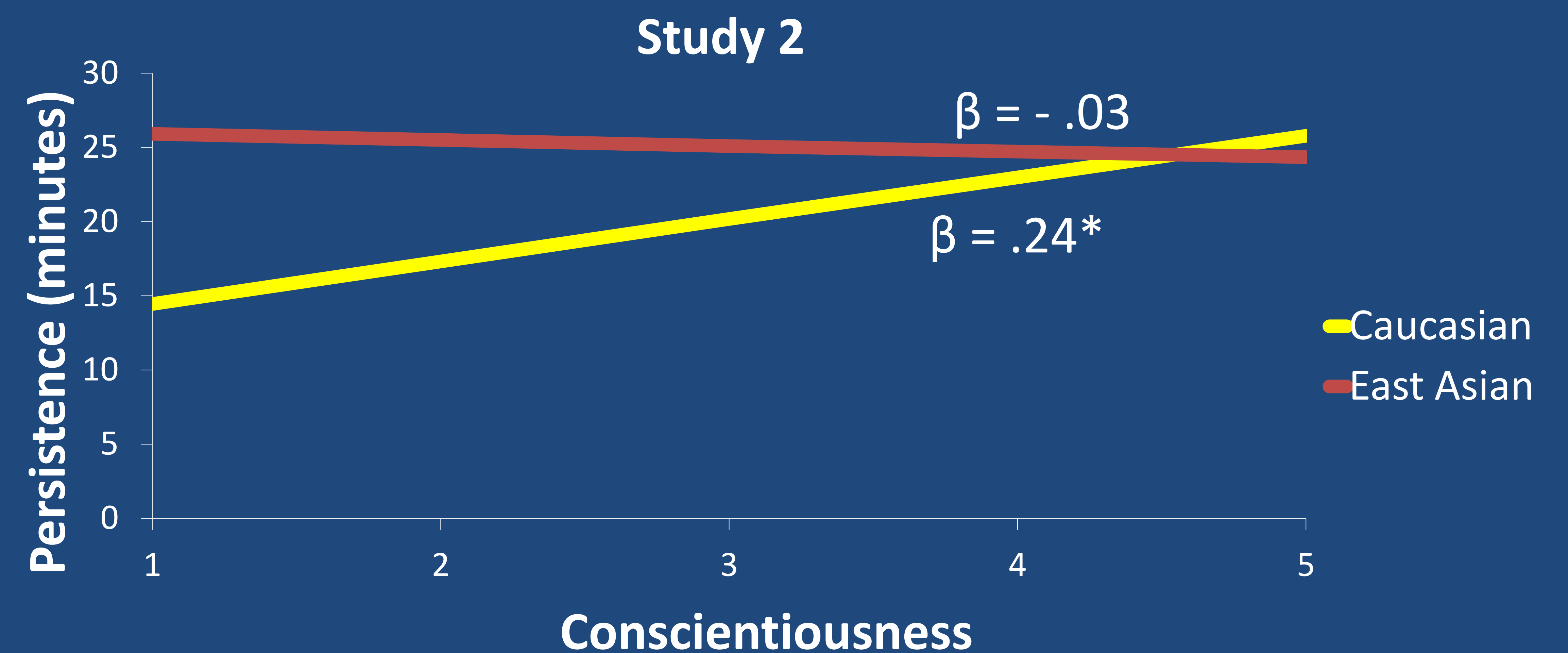
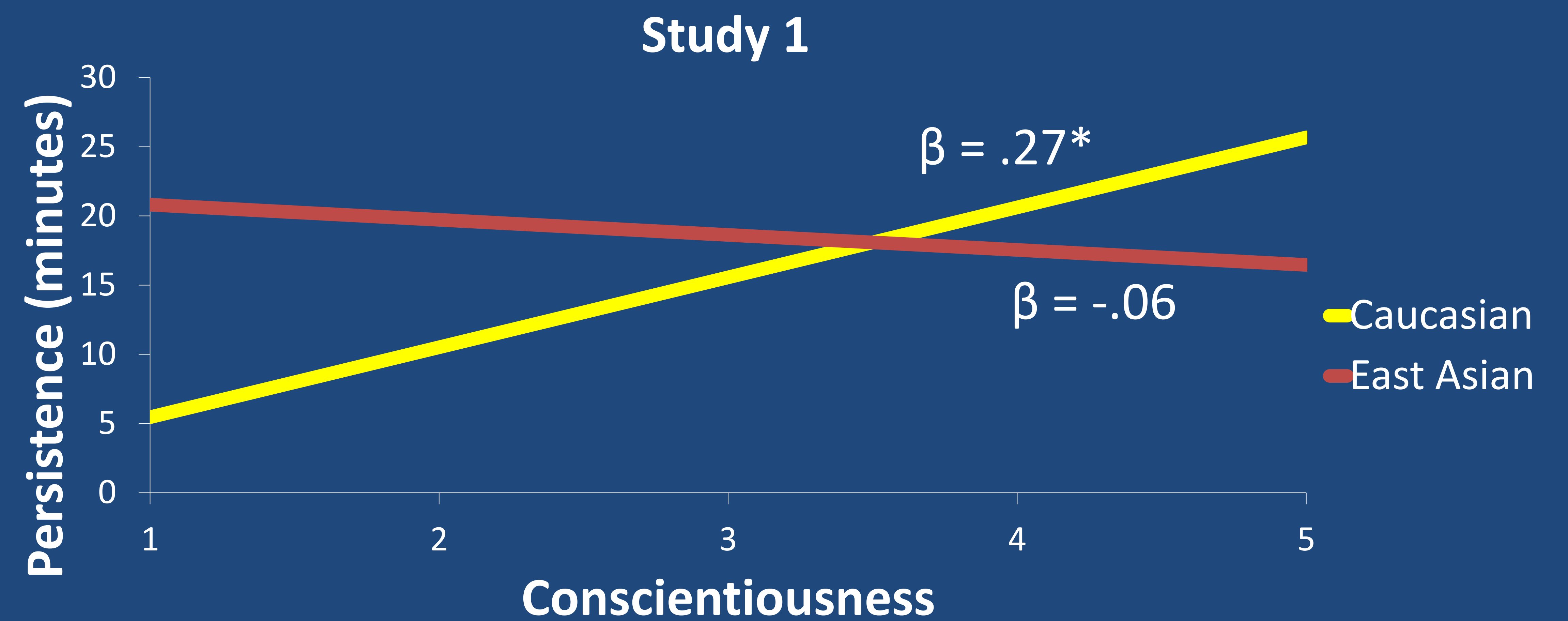
	Caucasians	East Asians
Study 1	$M = 18.22$; $SD = 12.71$	$M = 19.86$; $SD = 12.94$
Study 2	$M = 20.37$; $SD = 7.80$	$M = 22.52$; $SD = 6.15$

Study 1: No mean differences in persistence emerged between ethnicities, $t(153) = -.79, p = .43, d = .09$
 Study 2: East Asians showed marginally greater persistence than Caucasians, $t(137) = 1.64, p = .10, d = .29$

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Impact of Conscientiousness on Persistence by Ethnicity



Note: * $p < .05$

Study 1: Conscientiousness and ethnicity marginally interacted to predict persistence ($\beta = -.32, t(151) = -1.85, p = .066$)

Study 2: Conscientiousness and ethnicity interacted to predict persistence, though the interaction term did not reach statistical significance ($\beta = -.27, t(135) = -1.40, p = .16$)

Conclusions

- Personality may predict behavior less strongly among individuals from collectivistic cultures than among those from individualistic cultures
 - Across two studies, conscientiousness did not predict persistence among East Asians
 - In contrast, among Caucasians conscientiousness showed a moderate, positive, and statistically significant, relation with persistence, with effect sizes similar to those generally found between personality traits and a single instance of behavior (Fleeson & Gallagher, 2009)
- The link between personality traits and discrete behaviors may manifest only when individuals allow their actions to be guided by their own internal thoughts and feelings, rather than the social context
- Individualistic cultures may promote such internally driven behavior, whereas collectivistic cultures may foster a tendency to tailor one's behavior to fit situational demands or the needs and requirements of others, rendering internal traits less predictive
- Future research is needed to examine the contextual factors that predict persistence among individuals from collectivistic cultures