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Research Paper

Mediating Role of Executive Function in the Relationship Between Conscientiousness and Procrastination

Narayani Srivastava[1]*, Anil Kumar Yadav[2]

ABSTRACT

Conscientiousness is often regarded as a safeguard against procrastination, depicted by discipline, and goal-directed behavior. Executive functioning, including cognitive processes like planning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, are central for self-regulation and task handling. Existing research suggests that individuals high in conscientiousness usually demonstrate better executive functioning. But, very few studies have analyzed the mediating effects of executive functioning between conscientiousness and procrastination. The goal of the present study is precisely that. The study utilized correlational design with a sample of 110 university students, between the age range of 18 to 27. The Conscientiousness-specific items of the Big-5 Inventory Short Form were used to measure conscientiousness, the Short Executive Function Scale by Justin E. Karr was used to measure executive functioning, and Lay Procrastination Scale was used to measure procrastination. Statistical analysis indicated that conscientiousness was positively correlated with higher executive functioning and negatively correlated with procrastination. Executive functioning was, also, negatively correlated with procrastination. Furthermore, mediation analysis using regression-based path modeling demonstrated that conscientiousness significantly predicted higher executive function and lower procrastination. Executive function also remained a significant negative predictor of procrastination when both variables were entered simultaneously as predictors. Bootstrapped analyses confirmed a significant indirect effect of conscientiousness on procrastination through executive function. But since the direct effect remained significant but diminished, this is an indication of partial mediation. The results accentuate the role of executing functioning as a crucial cognitive pathway bridging the gap between conscientiousness and procrastination, and suggesting that strengthening executive skills may help reduce procrastination, particularly among individuals with lower conscientiousness.

Keywords: *Executive Function, Conscientiousness, Procrastination*

Procrastination has been conceptualized as a conscious delay of an intended course of action despite anticipating negative consequences, symptomatic of a breakdown in self-regulatory processes. Trait procrastination, defined as the chronic tendency to postpone goal-directed behaviour (Lay, 1986), has been constantly related to detrimental psychological, academic, occupational outcomes. Empirical studies indicate that

[1]Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India
[2]Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India
*Corresponding Author

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procrastination predicts poorer academic performance, sleep irregularities, elevated stress-levels and diminished well-being. Estimates suggest that a majority of students, especially university students, regularly engage in academic procrastination, and hence finding out its dispositional and cognitive determinants remains a central area of concern in personality and educational psychology.

Conscientiousness has emerged as one of the most robust predictors of procrastination. Conscientiousness, a key dimension of the Five-Factor Model, reflects self-discipline, organization, goal orientation, and persistence. Individuals high in conscientiousness typically exhibit efficient time management, task initiation, and sustained effort, whereas individuals low in this dimension are more prone to impulsivity, disorganization, and delay. Although the negative relationship between the two factors has been well established, the underlying cognitive mechanisms through which conscientiousness exercises its influence require further examination.

Executive Functioning (EF) refers to an array of higher-order cognitive processes like planning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility which are crucial for purposive behavior and self-regulation. In theory, individuals high in conscientiousness display more efficient executive functioning, which in turn reduces their tendency to procrastinate. On the other hand, deficits in executive functioning impairs planning and other higher-order cognitive processes, increasing the risk of procrastinative behaviour. Even though increasing evidence links both conscientiousness and procrastination to executive function, only a few studies have directly examined EF as a mediating mechanism between these two constructs.

Conscientiousness and Procrastination

The negative relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination is well documented. Lee, D. et al. (2006) reported that conscientiousness significantly predicts lower levels of trait procrastination. Scher, S. J. and Osterman (2002) observed a strong inverse relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination among school-aged children, suggesting an overlap between low conscientiousness and procrastinative tendencies. Lay, C. H. (1997, 1998) demonstrated that trait procrastination is negatively correlated with certain aspects of conscientiousness. Morris, P. E. and Fritz (2015) discovered that conscientiousness and procrastination significantly predict coursework performance, with stronger effects observed for coursework than examinations. Sparfeldt, J. R. and Schwabe (2024) demonstrated that academic procrastination plays a mediating role in the relationship between conscientiousness and academic achievement, highlighting the utility of conscientiousness in academic contexts. Research has also explored indirect pathways. Singh, S. and Bala (2020) reported that self-efficacy mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination. Similarly, Bäulke, L. et al. (2019) found that motivational regulation mediates the relationship between conscientiousness and academic procrastination. All of these findings indicates to the idea that conscientiousness affects procrastination through an intermediary self-regulatory mechanisms.

Executive Function and Procrastination

Executive functioning incorporates higher-order cognitive processes primarily attributed to the frontal brain networks, enabling planning, working memory, inhibition and cognitive flexibility. According to the Unity-Diversity Model proposed by Miyake, A. et al. (2000), executive function consists of separable but related components—working memory updating, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility—which collectively support complex

goal-directed behaviour. Empirical evidence links abnormalities in executive functioning to procrastination. Gustavson, D. E. et al. (2015) demonstrated that procrastination is negatively associated with executive functioning abilities and shares genetic underpinnings with goal-management deficits. Nesayan, A. et al. (2022) reported that students with lower executive functioning scores display significantly higher academic procrastination. Cherrier, S. et al. (2023) demonstrated that an educational neuroscience intervention targeting executive planning reduced procrastinative behaviour and improved planning abilities among university students. Together, these findings suggest that deficits in executive functioning adversely affects time management, task initiation, and sustained attention, thereby enabling procrastinative behaviour.

Conscientiousness and Executive Function

Conscientiousness, in theory is closely associated with executive functioning. Individuals high in conscientiousness display better organization, discipline, perseverance—which reflect the effective functioning of the executive processes. Executive processes such as inhibitory control enables individuals to counteract immediate temptations, organize task sequence and goals, all of which are also reflective of high conscientiousness. Procrastination can be seen as conflict a between prefrontal cortical systems responsible for long-term planning and limbic systems associated with immediate reward processing. As stated earlier, individuals who are high in conscientiousness may possess more efficient executive regulation, facilitating task-consistent behaviour and reducing delay tendencies. Conversely, lower conscientiousness could be associated with weaker executive control, increasing susceptibility to distraction and avoidance. Although prior studies have pointed to the effects of mediating factors like self-efficacy and motivational regulation in the conscientiousness–procrastination link, limited research has been done on executive function as a direct mediating mechanism. Evidence from related areas suggests its plausibility. For example, Wang, Y. et al. (2026) found that executive function mediates relationships between trait procrastination and sleep quality. Chong, Y. et al. (2025) demonstrated that procrastination acts as a mediator in the relationship between executive function and depressive symptoms, highlighting EF's central role in self-regulatory cascades. By integrating personality and cognitive frameworks, it is theoretically cohesive to posit that conscientiousness affects executive function capacity, which in turn affects procrastination. Individuals high in conscientiousness may exhibit better planning, stronger inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, hence reducing the likelihood of voluntary delay. Conversely, lower conscientiousness may hinder executive coordination, leading to poorer goal management and higher procrastinative behaviour.

Present Study

Based on these existing findings that (a) conscientiousness negatively predicts procrastination and (b) executive function deficits are associated with higher procrastination, the present study proposes a mediation model whereby executive function explains the mechanism linking conscientiousness to procrastination. By examining this framework, the study aims to broaden the theoretical understanding of procrastination as a function of both dispositional traits and cognitive control processes, and to help create intervention strategies focusing on executive skills to mitigate procrastinative behaviour. Thus, the present study aims to examine the mediating role of executive functioning in the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination among students.

Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination.
2. To assess the relationship between conscientiousness and executive function.
3. To assess the relationship between executive function and procrastination.
4. To determine whether executive functioning plays a mediating role in the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination.

Hypotheses

- **H_1.** Conscientiousness will be significantly negatively associated with procrastination, implying that individuals with higher conscientiousness are expected to report lower levels of procrastination.
- **H_2.** Conscientiousness will be significantly positively associated with executive function,
  implying that higher conscientiousness is related to better executive functioning.
- **H_3.** Executive function will be significantly negatively associated with procrastination,
  implying that better executive functioning is likely to relate to lower procrastination.
- **H_4.** Executive function will significantly mediate the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination, implying that conscientiousness is expected to reduce procrastination indirectly through its positive influence on executive function.

METHOD

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 110 university students aged between 18-27 years who were enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate programs at Banaras Hindu University. The participants provided their informed consent to participate. Demographic information such as age, gender, and academic level was collected for descriptive purposes.

Tools

1. **Conscientiousness domain of Big Five Inventory-2 Short Form (BFI-2-S)-** Conscientiousness was measured using the Conscientiousness domain of the Big Five Inventory–2 Short Form (BFI-2-S) was developed by Soto & John in 2017. This domain is comprised of six items (Items 3R, 8R, 13, 18, 23, 28R) assessing traits such as organization, diligence, responsibility, and goal-directedness. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). Reverse-keyed items were recoded prior to analysis. Domain scores were computed by averaging item responses. Higher scores indicate higher levels of conscientiousness. The BFI-2-S has demonstrated acceptable reliability and validity across diverse samples.
2. **Lay Procrastination Scale-** Procrastination was assessed using the Lay Procrastination Scale (LPS) developed by Lay (1986). The scale consists of 20 items assessing trait procrastination, defined as the tendency to delay necessary tasks. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Extremely uncharacteristic) to 5 (Extremely characteristic). Ten items (Items 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 18, 20) were reverse-keyed and recoded before computing total scores. Higher total scores reflect greater procrastinative behaviour. The LPS demonstrates good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of .82 (Lay, 1986) and test–retest reliability

of .80 (Ferrari, 1989). Although some researchers have proposed multidimensional structures, the present study used the overall scale score consistent with the original conceptualization of trait procrastination.

3. **Short Executive Function Scale-** Executive functioning was measured through the Short Executive Function Scale developed by Justin E. Karr (2024). The scale consists of 15 items assessing everyday executive functioning across five domains: Planning (Items 1, 6, 11), Inhibition (Items 2, 7, 12), Working Memory (Items 3, 8, 13), Shifting (Items 4, 9, 14), and Emotional Control (Items 5, 10, 15). Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Very true) to 3 (Not true at all). Items were scored using both forward coding (0, 1, 2, 3) and reverse coding (3, 2, 1, 0), as specified by the tool guidelines. Higher scores indicate greater executive functioning difficulties (or lower executive control, depending on scoring direction). The scale demonstrates acceptable psychometric properties, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .68 to .81 and test–retest reliability intra-class correlations ranging from .75 to .89 (Karr, 2024).

Procedure

Data were collected through a self-report questionnaire administered either in pencil-and-paper format or through an online survey platform. Participants first provided their informed consent and then completed demographic questions followed by the three standardized instruments. The sequence of the scales was kept fixed to keep confusion in response formats at minimum. Instructions emphasized honest responses and confidentiality. Total completion time was approximated to be 15–20 minutes.

Data Analyses

Data were first screened for missing values, outliers, and normality prior to analysis. Reverse-coded items were recoded according to scale instructions, and composite scores were computed by summing or averaging item responses as appropriate. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships among the three variables i.e. conscientiousness, procrastination and executive functioning. Mediation analysis was performed to test whether executive functioning indeed acts as a mediator in the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination. Statistical analyses were conducted using appropriate software SPSS 25, with the significance level set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Conceptualized model:

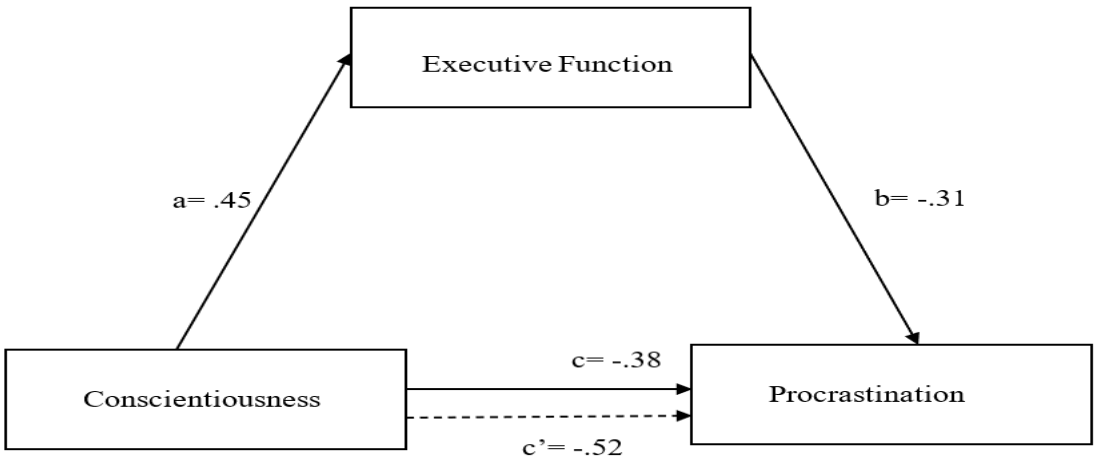

Table 1: Descriptive and correlational analysis of Conscientiousness, executive function and procrastination

Variable	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Conscientiousness	110	20.79	3.74	-	0.45**	-0.52**
2. Executive Function	110	26.52	5.97		-	-0.48**
3. Procrastination	110	54.95	7.55			-

The descriptive statistical analyses and Pearson's product–moment correlations for the three variables- conscientiousness, executive function, and procrastination- are presented in Table 1. The sample consisted of 110 participants. Conscientiousness had a mean score of 20.79 (SD = 3.74), Executive functioning had a mean of 26.52 (SD = 5.97), and Procrastination had a mean of 54.95 (SD = 7.55). Correlational analyses made it evident that conscientiousness was significantly positively correlated with executive functioning ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), indicating that individuals with higher conscientiousness reported better executive functioning. Conscientiousness was significantly negatively correlated with procrastination ($r = -.52$, $p < .01$), implying that higher conscientiousness was correlated with lower levels of procrastinative behaviour. Executive functioning was also significantly negatively correlated with procrastination ($r = -.48$, $p < .01$), indicating that better executive functioning was associated with reduced procrastination.

Table 2: Path Estimates

Paths	R	R-sq	F value	Coeff.	Std Err	t	p	Conf Int 95%	Std. coff.
Model 1: Outcome Variable- Executive Function; Predictor: Conscientiousness									
Conscientiousness → Executive Function	.45	.205	F(1,108) = 27.86; p=.0000	.72	.13	5.27	.0000	[.4517, .9949]	.45
Model 2: Outcome Variable- Procrastination; Predictor: Conscientiousness, Executive Function									
Conscientiousness → Procrastination	.59	.35	F(2,107) = 29.36; p=.0000	-.77	.17	-4.41	.0000	[-1.1244, -.4272]	-.38
Executive Function→ Procrastination				-.39	.11	-3.58	.0005	[-.6134, -.1769	-.31
Total Effect Model: Outcome Variable- Procrastination; Predictor: Conscientiousness									
Conscientiousness→ Procrastination	.52	.27	F(1,108) = 41.30; p=.0000	-1.06	.16	-6.42	.0000	[-1.3891, -.7342]	-.52

Regression-based path analyses were conducted to test the proposed mediation model (see Table 2). In Model 1, conscientiousness significantly predicted executive function, $R = .45$, $R^2 = .21$, $F(1, 108) = 27.86$, $p < .001$. Conscientiousness had a positive effect on executive functioning ($B = .72$, $SE = .13$, $t = 5.27$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that higher conscientiousness was associated with higher executive functioning. In Model 2, procrastination was regressed on both the variables- conscientiousness and executive function. The overall model was significant, $R = .59$, $R^2 = .35$, $F (2, 107) = 29.36$, $p < .001$. Conscientiousness remained a significant negative predictor of procrastination ($B = -.77$, $SE = .17$, $t = -4.41$, $p < .001$), and executive functioning also significantly negatively predicted procrastination ($B = -.39$, $SE = .11$, $t = -3.58$, $p < .001$). The results indicate that higher conscientiousness and better executive functioning independently led to lower levels of procrastination. The total effect of conscientiousness on procrastination was examined

separately. The model was significant, R = .52, R^2 = .27, F(1, 108) = 41.30, p < .001. Conscientiousness significantly negatively predicted procrastination (B = −1.06, SE = .16, t = −6.42, p < .001).

Table 3: Mediation Analyses Estimates

Relationship	Effect Types	Effect	Std Err	Conf Int 95%	t	p
Conscientiousness→ Executive Function → Procrastination	Total	-1.06	.16	[-1.3891, -.7342]	-6.42	.0000
	Direct	-.775	.17	[-1.1244, -.4272]	-4.41	.0000
	Indirect (Bootstrapped)	-.285	.08	[-.4780, -.1299]		
	Indirect standardized (Bootstrapped)	-.141	.04	[-.2332, -.0650]		

The results of mediation analysis are presented in Table 3. The indirect effect of conscientiousness on procrastination through executive functioning was statistically significant (B = −.285, SE = .08), with a 95% bootstrapped confidence interval that did not include zero [−.4780, −.1299], indicating a significant mediation effect. The standardized indirect effect was also significant (B = −.141, SE = .04, 95% CI [−.2332, −.0650]). Even though the direct effect of conscientiousness on procrastination remained significant after including executive function in the model (B = −.775, SE = .17, p < .001), its magnitude was diminished as compared to the total effect, indicating partial mediation. These findings suggest that executive function partially explains the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed at testing the mediating role of executive functioning in the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination. The findings of the study provide empirical evidence for the proposed model and contribute to an integrated understanding of how personality traits and cognitive control processes jointly play their roles in self-regulatory behaviour.

In line with the previous line of research, conscientiousness was found to be negatively correlated with procrastination. Individuals who scored high in conscientiousness had a predisposition to be more organized, disciplined and goal-oriented. Conversely, those with lower scores exhibited impulsivity, chaotic behavioural patterns and diminished persistence, thereby increasing proneness to delay (Lee, D. et al., 2006; Scher, S.J. & Osterman, 2002; Lay, 1997, 1998). The observed relationship matches with trait-based accounts of procrastination, which conceptualize it as a failure of self-regulation associated with low conscientiousness. The results also indicate towards a significant positive relation between conscientiousness and executive functioning. The results support theoretical perspectives that suggest that conscientiousness reflects, at least in part, efficient cognitive control processes. Conscientious individuals are more likely to engage in planning, maintain task goals in working memory, inhibit distractions, and flexibly adapt strategies—all core components of executive functioning. Thus, conscientiousness may manifest itself behaviourally through superior executive regulation.

The results also show that executive functioning was significantly negatively correlated with procrastination, indicating that individuals with stronger cognitive control capacities are less likely to delay tasks unnecessarily (Gustavson et al. 2015; Nesavan et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2025; Wang, Y. et al., 2026). Effective executive functioning enables individuals to initiate tasks, resist conflicting impulses, manage time efficiently, and sustain attention—abilities that directly help to counteract procrastinative tendencies. Conversely, deficits in executive processes may hinder goal-directed behaviour and promote avoidance.

Lastly, the mediation analysis showed that executive functioning partially mediated the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination. This implies that conscientiousness hinders procrastinative behaviours both directly and indirectly through enhanced executive functioning. In other words, individuals high in conscientiousness may procrastinate less partly due to the fact that they possess stronger cognitive control mechanisms, which support effective self-regulation. However, the presence of a significant direct effect indicates that additional pathways—such as motivation, emotional regulation, or self-efficacy—may also play a role in maintaining this relationship.

These findings have important theoretical and practical implications. The results support integrative models that theorize procrastination as arising from both dispositional traits and cognitive processes rather than from personality alone. The results also align with neurocognitive perspectives and emphasize the role of prefrontal executive systems in goal-directed behaviour and delay regulation. From an applied standpoint, the findings are suggestive of the idea that interventions which are aimed at reducing procrastination should not focus solely on personality factors, which are relatively stable, but should also focus on improving executive skills. Providing training in skills such as planning, time management, attentional control, and cognitive flexibility may help individuals—particularly those low in conscientiousness—improve task engagement and reduce delay behaviours.

Despite these positive results, there are several limitations which should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted using a correlational design and hence causal inferences cannot be drawn. Longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to establish temporal relationships among variables. Second, the use of self-report measures, to assess the three variables, may introduce response biases and shared method variance further reducing the generalizability of these findings. Future studies must focus on incorporating behavioural or performance-based assessments of executive. Third, the sample consisted of university students, which may limit generalizability to other age groups or occupational populations. Future research could also focus on exploring additional mediators or moderators, such as self-efficacy, emotional regulation, stress, or task characteristics. The use of longitudinal designs to explore domain-specific procrastination (e.g., occupational, academic etc.) would further elucidiate developmental pathways. Neurocognitive approaches to investigate brain-based correlates of executive control may also provide deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms of procrastination.

CONCLUSION

This study conclusively demonstrates that executive functioning plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between conscientiousness and procrastination. Higher conscientiousness is correlated with stronger executive functioning, which in turn contributes to lower levels of procrastinative behaviour. Despite the fact that conscientiousness directly predicts procrastination, a substantial portion of this influence

operates through cognitive control processes. These findings highlight the executive functioning as a key mechanism joining personality with self-regulatory behaviours, underscoring the importance of cognitive skills in managing procrastinative tendencies. Interventions which are aimed at strengthening executive functioning—such as training in planning, inhibition, and working memory—may offer effective strategies for reducing procrastination, particularly among individuals with lower discipline. Overall, the study contributes to a more holistic and deeper understanding of procrastination by integrating personality and cognitive frameworks, highlighting the fact that effective pursuit of any goal depends not only on who the individuals are but also on how well adept they are at regulating their thoughts and actions.

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Conflict of Interest

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