

## The Semantic-Differential Profiles of Successful Executives

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The study was designed to examine the various characteristics associated with executive success. In addition to personal data blank, a semantic-differential (SD) scale, employing 24 bipolar adjectives, was constructed to measure six personal orientations--risk, confidence dependency, originality, optimism, and dogmatism. Altogether 150 executives from three contrasting business organizations were interviewed. The study involved both subjective and objective criterion measures to classify an executive as obviously successful ( $n = 90$ ) or obviously unsuccessful ( $n = 60$ ). On the descriptive level, the research findings painted a fairly consistent portrait of the successful executive. The successful executives perceived themselves as confident, challenging, optimist, practical, enthusiastic, original, open-minded, submissive, and quick in decision-making. Yet, they were drawn cautious, exciting, and suspicious. The potential limitations of this study and future search guiding the hypothesis are discussed.

Executive success may be looked upon as a behavioral construct--that is, as a summative concept comprising various factors and elements connoting

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The paper is based on the author's doctoral dissertation. Gratitude is expressed to Dr. Jai B. P. Sinha, Professor of Social Psychology, A.N.S. Institute of Social Studies, Patna, under whose guidance and supervision the study was conducted. The study was made possible by a partial grant from the University Grants Commission, New Delhi. The author also wishes to thank Abha Verma and Alka Kapoor for their help in data analysis.

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career success. The concept of "success" has often been confused with "effectiveness." Many investigators (e.g., Dunnette, 1967, among others) have used the two terms--success and effectiveness--interchangeably. The question is: what is the extent of overlap between personal success and organizational success? It is worthy of mention that an executive may be effective on his job without being successful. For example, an executive may appear to be efficient one, although he depletes the human resources of his department and/or organization (Likert, 1967) and, hence, he may not be able to succeed in his professional career.

Or, organizational dynamics of a place may push even an inefficient one up in the hierarchy. In the present investigation, attention is addressed to the success and *not* effectiveness. Specifically, the study concerns with identifying the various characteristics associated with executive success.

A good number of studies are available both at descriptive and predictive levels. Attempts have been made to relate executive success with biographical data (Ansari, 1981; Kumar, 1970), need structure (Ghiselli, 1968a; Ghiselli, 1968b; Ghiselli & Johnson, 1970; Kumar, 1970), values (England & Lee, 1974; England & Weber, Note 1) and life styles (Ansari, 1981). Yet, role of personality in this problem area has been a topic of debate. In a review of hundreds of studies (1964-1964), Ghiselli (1966) concluded that proficiency in executive roles was most effectively predicted by tests of intellectual ability, perceptual accuracy, and personality. Korman (1965) has argued that objective personality inventories and leadership ability tests have generally not shown predictive validity with the possible exceptions of projective test of management motivation developed (Miner, 1968) and the well-documented leaderless group discussion technique. Dubno (1958), using the MMPI, observed that successful leaders (managers) engaged in a problem-solving task possess personality characteristics that are relatively free from encroachment and neurotic reactions to stress situations; however, actual job success was not used as the criterion. In one of the pioneer projective studies in this context, Henry (1949) reported that the TAT theme of successful business

managers contain a crystallization of high drive of achievement desire, strong mobility drive, willing acceptance of authority relationships, and ability to organize unstructured situations and to see the implications for their organizations. The themes such as decisiveness, sense of self-hood, aggressiveness, fear of failure, reality-orientation, identification with superiors, and a detachment from parents were also significantly related to career success. Kinslinger (1966), in a review of 11 studies with projective measures, observed that in nine of the reported studies certain indications or signs distinguished between the more successful and less successful managers. Out of 11 studies, only one (Kurtz, 1948) employed a cross-validation design. But in the Kurtz study, the RT themes were completely unrelated to success or failure among the 41 managers on the cross-validation group. Kinslinger (1966), as have others, concluded that projective tests have essentially no practical use in industry.

Looking over the above body of research, one must note the complex relationship of personality with career success. No single study could be noticed as explaining or predicting more than a small amount of variance in executive success. The problem lies in the criterion measures of success (Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982; Stark, 1959). Thus, the present study essentially departs employing both the *hard* and *soft* data as criteria of success, with a view to identifying some of the relevant personality characteristics associated with the obviously successful and obviously unsuccessful executives. Viewing over

the above literature search. It is expected that the two groups of executives would differ significantly in terms of six personality traits—risk-taking, confidence, dependency, optimism for career prospect, and dogmatism.

### Method

#### *Sample*

The proposed study concerns three organizations located in the State of Bihar, India. Since the organizations are many and of divergent nature, no attempt was made to draw the sample randomly. Rather, keeping in view a few dimensions of this heterogeneous universe, three contrasting organizations were selected for the study. The points of difference lie mainly in—(a) the styles of management, (b) the production process, (c) the source of capital investment, (d) the efficiency, (e) the size (numerical strength), and (f) the geographical location. Altogether 150 executives participated in the study from three selected business organizations. The executives were interviewed individually and in private either at their residence or in the office generally in the evening after working hours with prior appointment.

#### *Instruments*

A semantic-differential (SD) scale was constructed using 24 bipolar adjectives to measure the six dimensions of personal orientations. Before the items were put into final form of the scale, they were subjected to experimental tryout for weeding out ambiguous and unnecessary items. There were seven equal-distant

marks in between the two folds (a bipolar adjectives). The items were first counterbalanced and thereafter arranged randomly in the final scale. Thus the scores from the positive extreme of the pole to the extreme negative end ranged from 7 to 1, and *vice versa*. Standard instructions and procedures, as suggested by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957), were followed. The respondents were asked to rate their appropriateness on the scale according to their judgment or estimate. The SD scale does not only measure the attitudes but also accounts for the feeling tone attached to these attitudes. Thus, it measures attitudes and perceptions simultaneously (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). The internal consistency reliabilities of the six scales—risk-taking (13 items), confidence (4 items), dependency (4 items), originality (4 items), optimism (4 items), and dogmatism (5 items)—were found to be .37, .54, .45, .77, .57, and .73, respectively, with an average *r* of .57. Though not high, the scale appears to be a fairly reliable measure. It is of interest to examine the inter-relationships among the six subscales (Table 1). It does not require any closer scrutiny to notice that only 3, out of 15 correlations, do not touch the significance level. The rest of the correlations were found to be highly significant ( $p < .05$  or  $p < .01$ ). The risk-taking subscale positively correlates with confidence, originality, and optimism, but negatively with dependency and dogmatism subscales. The originality and optimism subscales exhibit direct relationship to confidence subscale, whereas confidence is negatively tied with dependency subscale. The dependency subscale has indirect

Table 1  
*Inter-correlations among Personal-Orientation Scales*

<i>Orientations</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Risk-taking						
(2) Confidence	28**					
(3) Dependency	-17*	-18**				
(4) Originality	38**	26**	-25**			
(5) Optimism	30**	44**	-21*	48**		
(6) Dogmatism	-22**	-04	-07	-16*	-01	

*Note.* Decimal points omitted.

$N = 150$

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

relationship with originality and optimism scales. The originality scale bears direct relationship to optimism but inversely to the dogmatism scales. The dogmatism scale does not show any relationship (near zero correlations) either with confidence, dependency, or optimism scales. Though most of the relationships appear to be significant, marked variations and directional change are also apparent--as one would expect on theoretical as well as common sense grounds. Hence, the results show a sharper focus on the fact that the dimensions (six scales) may not be regarded as orthogonal.

Descriptive information such as, respondents' position, length of service, history of service, monthly earnings, age, etc. were also gathered with the help of a personal data blank.

### ***Criterion Measures***

The availability of a goad criterion has been one of the key problems in industrial/organizational psychology, as evidenced by the increasing controversy and continuing efforts to clarify its theory and modify its measurement (see such reviews as those of Bray & Moses, 1972; Guion, 1976; Smith, 1976, etc.). It is also true with regard to executive success. Smith (1976) has recently talked about the *hard* and *soft* data--the former is verifiable and can be obtained through the company records for evaluating success or/and performance, while the latter is subjective and involves one's evaluation and judgment. The present study has been proposed to integrate both the data into a single vein. As stated earlier, the main objective of this study was to compare the obviously successful

executives from the obviously unsuccessful ones on some traits of personality. Thus, as a first-hand information, the study required the rating of executives by their associates (superiors, subordinates, and peers) on the following characteristics: (a) ability to think critically, (b) judgment, (c) independence of thought, (d) tact, (e) cooperation with others, (f) self-expression, (g) leadership qualities, (h) breadth of knowledge, and (i) originality, as suggested by Kraut (1975). An executive was finally selected either as *successful* or *unsuccessful* by checking the agreement among the raters. Usually, 75 percent or higher agreement principle was adopted to classify an executive in either of the categories. Keeping this end in view, 90 executives were classified as obviously successful and 60 executives as obviously unsuccessful.

The objective criteria consisted of rate of progression (RoP) determined by two scores--career (CP) and salary (SP)--progressions. The two scores were computed by employing the following formulae:

$$CP = (N_p / L_s) \times 100$$

$$SP = (P_s - F_s) / L_s$$

Where,

$N_p$  = Number of promotion

$L_s$  = Length of service

$P_s$  = Present salary

$F_s$  = First Salary in First Job

The relationship between the two scores--CP and SP--was, found to be positive and quite high ( $r = .71$ ,  $df = 148$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Such objective criterion measures have been used by several investigators (e.g., see Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982;

Grant & Bray, 1969; Watson & Williams, 1977; England & Webber, Note 1; among other).

On the basis of subjective criteria, the respondents' scores on the objective criterion measures were checked for their reliability. The reliability of measurement was judged through the application of *ANOVA* in 3 (organizations) x 2 (executives) data arrays. Table 2 displays the mean scores of RoP. It is readily observed that the successful executives appear to score significantly more in each of the organizations on both the CP ( $F[1,144] = 76.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and SP ( $F[1,144] = 131.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ) scores than the unsuccessful executives. The two groups of executives also differed significantly in their age. It was found that the successful executives of Organization-A ( $M = 38.58$ ), Organization-B ( $M = 39.67$ ), and Organization ( $M = 46.40$ ) significantly ( $F[1,144] = 7.52$ ,  $p < .01$ ) appear to be younger than their unsuccessful counterparts in Organization-A ( $M = 42.80$ ), Organization-B ( $M = 40.10$ ), and Organization-C ( $M = 51.27$ ), respectively.

## Results

As mentioned earlier, the main objective of this study was to compare the obviously unsuccessful and obviously successful executives in terms of some relevant traits of personality. The semantic-differential profiles of these executives are portrayed on Figure 1. The Figure readily shows that the successful executives rated themselves as significantly more quick in decision-making, challenging, confident, practical, optimist,

Table 2  
Mean Scores of Rate of Progression

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>CP</i>	<i>SP</i>
A	SE	31	35.95	155.47
	UE	30	13.15	94.58
B	SE	24	25.96	103.33
	UE	19	18.48	92.03
C	SE	35	16.06	99.21
	UE	11	9.88	61.73

*Note.* CP = Career Progression  
 SP = Salary Progression  
 SE = Successful executives  
 UE = Unsuccessful executives

Table 3  
Comparison of Successful ( $n = 90$ ) and Unsuccessful ( $n = 60$ ) Executives in  
Terms of their Mean Scores on Personal Orientation Factors (One-tailed test)

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> = 148)
Risk-taking	SE	15.84	3.23	.02
	UE	15.85	2.95	
Confidence	SE	20.83	3.43	2.00**
	UE	19.67	3.54	
Dependency	SE	12.70	3.41	1.24
	UE	13.42	3.50	
Originally	SE	25.51	3.11	1.87*
	UE	24.45	3.60	
Optimism	SE	24.20	3.54	2.18*
	UE	22.90	3.60	
Dogmatism	SE	13.38	3.23	1.44
	UE	12.52	3.73	

*Note.* SE = Successful Executives; UE = Unsuccessful Executives.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

enthusiastic, open-minded, and submissive. Yet, they were drawn as cautious, dependent, exciting, and suspicious. The difference is not significant beyond chance on other characteristics. Further, these 24 bipolar adjectives were clustered into six traits of personality (see Method section) on the basis of inter-item correlation matrix which is not reported here. For these traits; a summary of statistics is depicted in Table 3. The findings shown in Table 3 clearly indicate that the successful executives are more confident, optimist in their career prospect, and show originality reliably more than their unsuccessful counterparts. The two groups of executives did not discriminate significantly on other three traits--risk, dependency, and dogmatism.

### Discussion

Although significant relationships emerged from the analysis; the strength of association is not overly strong. These findings, however, are not inconsistent with previous research and suggest some additional factors influencing success on executive position. Goldstein and Schrader (1955), for example, reported a "better" manager as a self confident kind of person, while Kumar (1970) is of the opinion that highly successful executives are significantly more optimist for their career prospect than the less successful executives. The present findings are also upheld by the conclusion of Huse (1962) who observed a significant positive relationship between creativeness and peer rating for the successful executives. Though statistically insignificant, the trend partially succeeds to endorse the observation of Mohoney, Jerdee, and

Nash (1961)--that is a sense of dominance as one of the dominant characteristics of successful executives.

On the whole, the study approtioned far more its energies to analyzing the issues on descriptive rather than the predictive level. On the descriptive level, the research findings painted a fairly consistent portrait of the successful executive. He was drawn as confident, challenging; optimist, practical, enthusiastic, etc.

Though the study has identified a number of characteristics associated with executive success, it is not free from its own limitations. The main drawback is that it employed the subjective ratings of executives by their fellow-men. The criterion of effective performance is influence by the personal equation of the judges who made the initial rating. Consensual validations minimize the effect but do not totally eliminate it. Though serious, it is not the problem only with this study. Secondly, the investigation involved three business organizations which were heterogeneous in nature that may affect the managerial behavior in organizations. In sum, it is suggested that future studies should be conducted in longitudinal framework to enhance our understanding in this problem area. Besides, the "prediction of success" studies may be designed in a newer conceptualization of contingency model (Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982). It is hoped that ever changing combination of variables and their interaction effects on executive success will keep the professional experts busy for quite some time, which would have its implications to personnel selection, and training and development literature too.

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