Proceedings of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium: Critical Perspectives on Global Education and Psychological Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

Personality–Behavior Links in Career Search: Big Five Predictors of Proactive Exploration

Anran Li

The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
lianna_anranli@outlook.com

Abstract. Career exploration is a key developmental task for university students; however, most evidence on its antecedents comes from Western contexts. Research on how personality predicts proactive career exploration in collectivistic cultures remains limited. This study analyzes whether and to what extent the Big-five personality traits contribute to students' proactive career exploration behavior in Mainland China. A two-wave survey was conducted with 179 students. We measured big-five personality traits at Time 1, and measured proactive career exploration behavior at Time 2. The results of the regression analysis show that extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience have positive effects on positive career exploration behavior respectively, while neuroticism has no significant impact on positive career exploration behavior. These findings extend the big-five personality model to an Eastern cultural context by identifying personality traits as soma important factors of students' career behavior, offering both theoretical insights for cross-cultural personality research and practical guidance for personality-informed career interventions.

Keywords: Big-five personality traits, Career exploration behavior, University students, Regression

1. Introduction

People now live in the digital age. The work environment is changing fast and has many parts [1]. The job market is complex. So how college students can know themselves well, find possible job paths, and make good decisions has become an important research topic in many fields [2]. Career exploration behavior means activities where people collect and study information about themselves, possible jobs, companies, and positions [3]. People now agree that proactive career exploration is very important for helping individuals prepare and develop their careers [1]. When people connect self-knowledge with knowledge about the outside world, they can build a good base for career decisions and grow in their careers through exploration. Studies show that active career exploration makes people clearer and more confident about career decisions [1] and is closely connected with self-efficacy [4]. So encouraging proactive career exploration may be very important for improving career adaptability and preparing people for work [5].

Although people widely know that career exploration is important, people still differ a lot in how much they explore [3]. Personality is a key psychological idea to explain why people behave in

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

stable different ways. It is used to explain and predict proactive career exploration [4-6]. For example, some students actively collect information and ask for advice when preparing for jobs, while others avoid these activities or only act passively [5]. The big-five personality model is a complete way to describe personality. It has five parts: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience [7]. Research shows that people with different personalities do different levels of career exploration [4,5,8]. However, most existing research comes from Western cultures. There is not enough research on how personality connects with career exploration in Eastern or collectivist cultures [9]. This means we should study whether the big-five personality model works well in different social and cultural environments.

Some studies say that psychological qualities such as career adaptability may influence or connect the relationship between personality and career exploration [5]. But how well these factors predict is not consistent, and they cannot explain very well. Even when studying many factors together, personal difference factors can only explain a small part of why people differ in career exploration [8,10]. Bartley and Robitschek also said that using many predictive factors together does not make the model explain better. This may be because shared similar influences hide the independent role of personality as a basic psychological factor [8]. This study focuses on personality traits and directly studies their relationship with proactive career exploration. It aims to show more clearly the independent predictive ability of personality. The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

To sum up our purpose: we test whether personality traits are connected with proactive career exploration among final-year college students in mainland China. This study has three theoretical contributions: (1) to test whether the big-five personality model can predict proactive career exploration in Eastern culture, so as to increase cross-cultural research on personality theory; (2) to find the direct relationship between personality and proactive career exploration after removing the influence of other middle factors; and (3) to provide real evidence for career guidance and employment help in colleges, so that educators can make suitable career development plans based on students' different personalities, and help college students improve career adaptability and growth.

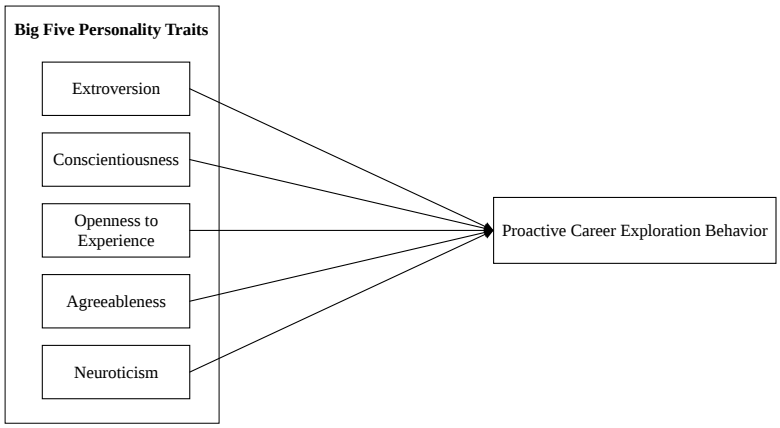

Figure 1. Research model

2. Theory and hypotheses development

Extraversion means some people like to be with friends. They are happy and active [11]. A theory says these people feel good when they are with others. So they want to find jobs more [12]. Many studies show that people who like being with friends do more to find jobs [5,6]. They go to parties. They ask questions. They talk to people. This helps them find jobs. So we think:

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

Hypothesis 1: People who like being with friends do more to find jobs.

Conscientiousness means some people work hard. They are careful. They want to finish their work [7]. These people know what jobs they want. They make plans. They work step by step [6]. Studies show these students look for jobs in a careful way. They write down information. They make goals. They pick good jobs [5]. So we think:

Hypothesis 2: People who work hard do more to find jobs.

Openness to experience means some people like new things. They are curious. They think in different ways [7]. These people like to try new things. They do not only look for easy answers. They want to know what they like [13]. When they look for jobs, they try many things. They make new plans. They do many activities [6]. This helps them change and fit in new places. So they do more to find jobs. So we think:

Hypothesis 3: People who like new things do more to find jobs.

Agreeableness means some people are nice. They like to help others. They trust people [11]. These people are kind. They like good friends. They like to talk nicely. When they look for jobs, they work well with others. They get help from people [5]. They listen to advice. This helps them get support. So we think:

Hypothesis 4: Nice people do more to find jobs.

Neuroticism shows how emotionally stable people are. People high in neuroticism feel more worried and stressed easily [11]. Usually, people who are less anxious and less neurotic do more career exploration. People high in neuroticism feel more bad emotions when things are not sure. This stops them from exploring careers [14]. So in a competitive job market, neuroticism may be negatively related to proactive career exploration. Therefore, we propose a hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Neuroticism has a negative impact on undergraduates' proactive career exploration behavior.

3. Research design

3.1. Samples and survey process

We collected data from senior undergraduate students of an applied university in China through an online questionnaire survey. Before the survey began, we had in-depth communication with the staff of the university's career guidance center, indicating that our research findings could provide guidance for the career guidance work of this department. Eventually, we received support from this department. Our survey was conducted at two time points. At the first time point, the survey collected Big-five personality traits data and demographic information from the students. One month later, we conducted a second survey, collecting data on the proactive career exploration behavior of students.

After two surveys, we collected a total of 202 data. We removed 23 data because the respondents of these data failed to pass the attention check questions (i.e., this question is an attention check question, please select "strongly disagree"), or their answers for consecutive more than 10 questions were consistent. In the end, we obtained 179 valid data, with an effective rate of 88.61%. Among the valid samples, there were 44 male students (24.58%), and 135 female students (75.42%). Their average age was 22.33 years old. 118 students came from rural areas (65.92%), and 61 students came from urban areas (34.08%).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

3.2. Measures

Because the instruments were developed in English, Chinese versions were produced via a translate–back-translate procedure conducted by bilingual Chinese psychology faculty [15]. All focal constructs were measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Big-five personality traits were measured with the 20-item scale developed by Donnellan et al. [16]. Sample items were "Most people think I am a warm and friendly person" (open to experience) and "In my studies and work, I am quite strict with myself" (conscientiousness). The Cronbach's α coefficients for extraversion (0.898), conscientiousness (0.901), openness to experience (0.874), agreeableness (0.809), and neuroticism (0.784) are all satisfactory.

Proactive career exploration behavior was measured with the 14-item instrument developed by Stumpf et al. [3]. Some items were "I have collected information on various job markets" and "I have made plans and set goals for my future career". The Cronbach's α coefficients for this measure was 0.928.

We took the students' gender, age and residence registration as the control variables.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed in SPSS 26.0. Table 1 reports the results.

Table 1. Descriptive statistical analysis results

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.Gender	0.25	0.43	1								
2.Age	22.33	1.20	0.12	1							
3.RR	1.34	0.48	0.06	-0.04	1						
4.Extraversion	3.40	0.85	-0.07	-0.16*	0.13	1					
5.Conscientiousness	3.70	0.69	-0.07	-0.13	0.11	0.64**	1				
6.Openness	3.96	0.67	-0.05	-0.04	0.10	0.43**	0.47**	1			
7.Agreeableness	3.93	0.63	0.10	-0.07	0.11	0.44**	0.59**	0.63**	1		
8.Neuroticism	2.64	0.62	-0.06	-0.05	0.05	-0.15*	-0.20*	-0.22**	-0.20**	1	
9.PCEB	3.85	0.62	-0.11	-0.09	0.06	0.65**	0.62**	0.58**	0.62**	-0.25**	1

Note: N = 179; Gender coded as 0 = female, 1 = male; *p < .05; ** p < .01, two-tailed tests; RR = residence registration, PCEB = Proactive career exploration behavior.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

We used SPSS (Version 26.0) to estimate the regression models testing our hypotheses. The findings are reported in Table 2.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

Table 2. The results of hypotheses test

Variables	Proactive career exploration behavior	
	M1	M2
Gender	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.04 (0.07)
Age	-0.07 (0.04)	.015 (0.02)
Residence registration	0.07 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.06)
Extraversion		0.31** (0.05)
Conscientiousness		0.28** (0.06)
Openness to experience		0.19** (0.06)
Agreeableness		0.19** (0.07)
Neuroticism		-0.07 (0.05)
R^2	0.02	0.63
ΔR^2	0.02	0.61

Note: N = 179; Gender coded as 0 = female, 1 = male; residence registration code as 0 = urban, city = 1; *p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

According to the results in Table 2, extraversion has a positive impact on proactive career exploration behavior (B = 0.31, p 0.01). This result supports Hypothesis 1. Conscientiousness has a positive impact on proactive career exploration behavior (B = 0.27, p 0.01). This result supports Hypothesis 2. Openness to experience has a positive impact on proactive career exploration behavior (B = 0.19., p 0.01). This result supports Hypothesis 3. Agreeableness has a positive impact on proactive career exploration behavior (B = 0.19, p < 0.01). This result supports Hypothesis 4. Neuroticism not has a significant impact on proactive career exploration behavior (B = -0.07, p 0.05). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

5. Conclusions and discussion

This study looked at how college students' five big personality traits affect their proactive career exploration behavior. We found that conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experience all have a positive influence on students' proactive career exploration behaviors.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study teaches us some things. First, we found that people who like friends (extraversion) and people who are nice (agreeableness) do more to find jobs. This shows that in China, being good with people is very important. Chinese culture likes harmony and working together. So students ask others for help when they look for jobs. Some old studies said people who like friends actually look for jobs less. This tells us that the place where you live changes how your personality works [17]. In China, schools care a lot about what others think. Competition is hard. People expect a lot from you. So people who like friends may care more about keeping friends happy than thinking about their own jobs [17].

Second, about being nervous (neuroticism). Some old studies said nervous people may look for jobs more because they want to feel safe. But looking too much can make them see only bad things. Then they feel less sure about jobs [6,14]. In our study, being nervous did not change how much

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

people look for jobs. This may be because Chinese culture says "do not show your feelings" and "get along with others." So nervous people hide their feelings. They do not look for jobs to feel better [17]. Also, last-year students feel big pressure from outside. Job competition is hard. Families expect a lot. These pressures push students to look for jobs more than their own feelings do. So being nervous does not matter much [18].

In short, our study shows that personality helps explain why some people look for jobs more than others. But the culture where you live is very important. It changes how personality works.

5.2. Practical implications

This study can help people do better things. First, schools and society should use the Big Five personality test to help students. Schools can give students this test in career class. This helps students know what they are good at and what they are bad at. Then career centers can give each student special help. For example, students who do not like talking to people can join parties or get a friend to help them. This makes them more confident. Also, schools can teach classes about how to change and how to manage yourself. This helps students look for jobs better and feel ready for the hard job market.

Second, students themselves should work on their personality. Students can become more hardworking by making clear job goals, following steps, and checking their work. They can like new things more by trying different classes, internships, and new subjects. They can join teams, volunteer work, and clubs. This makes them nicer and more friendly. It also makes them better at talking and working with others. If students work on these things on purpose, they can change better, feel more sure, and do more to find jobs.

5.3. Limitations and future directions

Our study has some problems. First, we only asked students from one school in China. So our findings may not work for other places or cultures. Future studies can ask students from many cultures. This helps us see how culture changes the link between personality and looking for jobs. For example, China likes group harmony and hiding feelings. This may make some personality traits matter less, like being nervous [18].

Second, our study only shows personality directly changes job-looking behavior. We did not look at what happens in between. But old studies said that your mind and your environment are the bridges between personality and behavior [5]. Future studies can look at these bridges. This helps us understand better how personality and job-looking work together.

Finally, future studies can use different ways to ask questions, not just surveys. They can talk to students in depth. This helps us understand how students think about their personality and how they really look for jobs. For example, studying a few students closely may help us see exactly how personality changes job behavior. This connects theory and real life. It also makes career help more useful in real life.

References

[1] Hermawan, R., & Farozin, M. (2018). The role of career exploration in career decision participants. COUNS-EDU: The International Journal of Counseling and Education, 3(4), 126. https: //doi.org/10.23916/0020180315640

[2] Morgan, M. J., Heo, J., & Osborn, D. S. (2023). Career decision-making, career exploration behaviors, and self-regulated learning. The Career Development Quarterly, 72(1). https: //doi.org/10.1002/cdq.12340

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT32317

[3] Stumpf, S. A., Colarelli, S. M., & Hartman, K. (1983). Development of the career exploration survey (CES). Journal of Vocational Behavior, 22(2), 191-226. https: //doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(83)90028-3
[4] Nauta, M. M. (2007). Career Interests, self-efficacy, and personality as antecedents of career Exploration. Journal of Career Assessment, 15(2), 162-180. https: //doi.org/10.1177/1069072706298018
[5] Li, Y., Guan, Y., Wang, F., Zhou, X., Guo, K., Jiang, P., Mo, Z., Li, Y., & Fang, Z. (2015). Big-five personality and BIS/BAS traits as predictors of career exploration: The mediation role of career adaptability. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 89, 39-45. https: //doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2015.04.006
[6] Reed, M. B., Bruch, M. A., & Haase, R. F. (2004). Five-Factor model of personality and career exploration. Journal of Career Assessment, 12(3), 223-238. https: //doi.org/10.1177/1069072703261524
[7] McCrae, R. R., & John, O. P. (1992). An introduction to the five-factor model and its applications. Journal of Personality, 60(2), 175–215. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1992.tb00970.x
[8] Bartley, D. F., & Robitschek, C. (2000). Career exploration: A multivariate analysis of predictors. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 56(1), 63–81. https: //doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1999.1708
[9] McAdams, D. P. (1992). The five-factor model in personality: A critical appraisal. Journal of Personality, 60(2), 329–361. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1992.tb00976.x
[10] Blustein, D. L. (1989). The role of goal instability and career self-efficacy in the career exploration process. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 35(2), 194–203. https: //doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(89)90040-7
[11] Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). The five-factor model of personality and its relevance to personality disorders. Journal of Personality Disorders, 6(4), 343–359. https: //doi.org/10.1521/pedi.1992.6.4.343
[12] Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry, 11(4), 227-268. https: //doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1104_01
[13] Tesch, S. A., & Cameron, K. A. (1987). Openness to experience and development of adult identity. Journal of Personality, 55(4), 615–630. https: //doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1987.tb00455.x
[14] Saks, A. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (2000). Change in job search behaviors and employment outcomes. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 56(2), 277–287. https: //doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1999.1714
[15] Brislin, R. W. (1970). Back-Translation for cross-cultural research. Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 1(3), 185–216. https: //doi.org/10.1177/135910457000100301
[16] Donnellan, M. B., Oswald, F. L., Baird, B. M., & Lucas, R. E. (2006). The Mini-IPIP Scales: Tiny-yet-effective measures of the Big Five Factors of Personality. Psychological Assessment, 18(2), 192–203. https: //doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.18.2.192
[17] Fan, W., Cheung, F. M., Leong, F. T. L., & Cheung, S. F. (2011). Personality traits, vocational interests, and career exploration: A cross-cultural comparison between American and Hong Kong students. Journal of Career Assessment, 20(1), 105–119. https: //doi.org/10.1177/1069072711417167
[18] Klein, N. D., Bravo, A. J., Conway, C. C., Keough, M. T., Pilatti, A., Mezquita, L., Bravo, A. J., Conway, C. C., Henson, J. M., Hogarth, L., Ibáñez, M. I., Kaminer, D., Keough, M., Mezquita, L., Generós Ortet, Pearson, M. R., Pilatti, A., Prince, M. A., Read, J. P., & Roozen, H. G. (2024). Individualism, collectivism, and emotion regulation: A cross-cultural examination among young adults from seven countries. Current Psychology, 43. https: //doi.org/10.1007/s12144-024-06226-8