

# Examining the Relationship between Individual Personality and the Incidence of Improvisation

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**Abstract** This study examines the relationship between personality traits towards the incidence of improvisation. The independent variable is represented by personality traits taken from the Big Five Personality Traits Theory, which are Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness. The sample of the study was a government officers from various ministries in and around Putrajaya, Malaysia. Results from the analyses conducted reveal that the traits Extraversion and Openness have significant contribution towards the incidence of improvisation. The findings of this study could contribute to both theorists and managerial practitioners.

**Keywords** Improvisation, Big Five Personality Traits – Extroversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Openness

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## 1. Introduction

Many organizational theories emphasize that organizations need strategic planning and strategic tools in order to make good decisions that will serve the organization best. These theories also state that the best actions taken are those that are planned and prepared for. However, an increasing number of studies and researches are focusing on organizational improvisation which is defined as the creative and spontaneous process of trying to achieve an objective in a new way[1].

Organizational improvisation offers the opportunity to get the best from both strategic planning and the use of available resources at the officer's disposal to make decisions in order to solve problems, settle issues and generally to perform at or above the expectations placed upon him or her. One way to reach excellence in performance is to improvise[1].

According to[2], improvisation may happen in a state of efficiency in daily organizational activities. This means that improvisation happens in organizations on a daily basis. Managers are often said to try and deny the existence of improvisation but people in organizations are often jumping into action without clear plans, making up reasons as they proceed, discovering new routes once action is initiated, proposing multiple interpretations, navigating through discrepancies, combining disparate and incomplete materials and then discovering what their original purpose was[3].

According to[4], organizational improvisation at the

individual level improvisation is the basis for improvisation at other levels.[4] also discovered that improvisation is collective when it is the combined effort of several individuals, a group or an organization, whilst improvisation is considered as individual when it is the result of a single person.

There has been previous studies on individual improvisation; one of them focused on the front-line of the public sector[5]. When public servants are faced with situations that demands almost immediate response or services, they are forced to use their experience, judgment and intuition to respond to the issue at hand. The response given by public servants then sets a precedent which eventually becomes a policy, which means that what began as individual improvisation may eventually evolve into a policy for an organization. One such example to this is in[5]'s study, where an agency receives a call requesting information on how to proceed with requests for enrolment. Staffs respond with the information and eventually other agencies learn of this situation the response used by the staff member, and began to use the same response when faced with the same requests.

Governments are organizations most likely to be complacent in daily operations. This is because the procedures, rules, regulations and processes are developed based on past successful experience. However, complacency is no longer tolerated by the Malaysian public or by the Malaysian government stakeholders[6].

The demand from the Malaysian public sectors to outstandingly perform has been increasing from year to year[7]. Malaysia's efforts towards these changes or transformations can be seen in the Government Transformation Program (GTP)[7] and the Economic

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Transformation Program (ETP)[7].

In the Malaysian public service, it is a well-known fact that the Malaysian government prepares for the future through various strategic plans which are made and implemented by various ministries and agencies. However, it is only logical to assume that the strategic plans in place for each ministry, department, division and unit are not sufficient for every situation that may arise. This point has been raised by previous authors such[4]; and[8], that there will be events and circumstances which are not covered by strategic plans.

Officers would spontaneously and creatively use whatever resources and processes in place at the moment to deal with the events facing them. This process is known as improvisation. One example of improvising in the Malaysian public sector is related to meetings. Malaysia Administrative Modernization Planning Unit (MAMPU) has a guideline for meetings, entitled 'Pekeliling Kemajuan Pentadbiran Awam (PKPA) Bil 2 1991: Panduan Pengurusan Mesyuarat dan Urusan Jawatankuasa-Jawatankuasa Kerajaan'[9]. This guideline explains the process and procedures on conducting meetings.

Oftentimes the instruction to set up a meeting is often given a few days or hours before a meeting is conducted, which goes against the guideline which clearly states that the invitations to the meeting must be sent out at least ten days before the actual meeting. Another area which officers are often forced to improvise is on the preparation and distribution of the minutes of the meeting. According to the guideline, the minutes should be approved by the chairperson within three working days and distributed amongst members of the meeting within seven working days. However, officers often improvise and incorporate technology when it comes to the preparation of the minutes, quite often the minutes are typed out as the meeting is conducted, approved right after the meeting and emailed out to members of the meeting immediately.

Due to this scenario, there has been a gap in examining the circumstances which leads to individual improvisation. The lack is in improvisation antecedents from an individual point of view and its association[10] specifically, individual improvisation in non-turbulent environments which is amongst government officers at a managerial level.

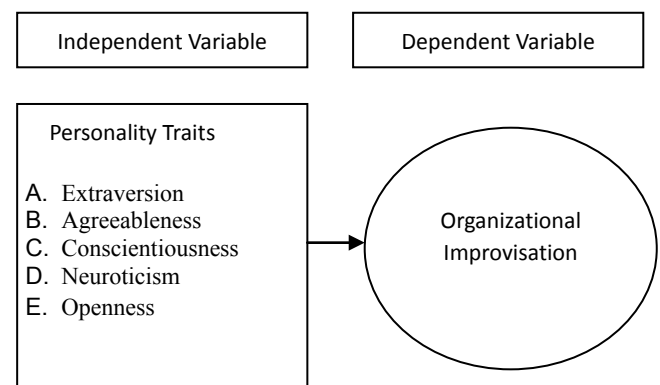
Improvisation should be examined because of its effect on managerial practice, because it has been said that should improvisation is left to happen on its own, the organization faces the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes[10].

Further, this research attempts to contribute to the management theories for organizational improvisation in the attempt to bridge the gap. For the practitioners (government officers') point of view, this research attempts to bring to light some factors which contribute to improvisation amongst the Malaysian government officers. This is important to see the relationship between pre-existing individual personality which may or may not lead to the individual manager improvising at work.

Hence, this research aims to examine individual factors which could lead to improvisation amongst individual officers. The research question which will be addressed in this research is "Do individual personality traits influence the incidence of improvisation? This question leads to the research objective, which is "To determine the personality traits which are most likely to encourage incidence of improvisation".

## 2. Research Framework

The research framework is a conceptual framework, which examines the relationship between personality traits and the incidence of improvisation. The conceptual framework for this research is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Relationship between Personality Traits and Improvisation

## 3. Research Hypotheses

Based from various literatures previously mentioned, the hypotheses developed are as follows:-

The hypotheses of each personality traits are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: There exists a relationship between the individual's level of extraversion and the incidence of improvisation

Hypothesis 2: There exists a relationship between the individual's level of agreeableness and the incidence of improvisation.

Hypothesis 3: There exists a relationship between the individual's level of conscientiousness and the incidence of improvisation.

Hypothesis 4: There exists a relationship between the individual's level of emotional stability (neuroticism) and the incidence of improvisation.

Hypothesis 5: There exists a relationship between the individual's level of openness and the incidence of improvisation.

## 4. Findings

176 responses from 400 questionnaires distributed were

returned to the researcher for the purpose of the study. The results clearly showed that all data are normally distributed. It was observed that all kurtosis and skewness of every dimension showed that at .05 probability level, the values of skewness ranged from -0.254 to 0.161; while kurtosis statistics ranged from -0.396 to 1.086 at the 0.01. Factor analysis conducted resulted in the Kaiser Meyer Olkin (KMO) measure of 0.738. According to [11], a minimum of 0.6 should be the KMO index and hence the sampling is assumed to be adequate for further analysis. To establish reliability, a scale of minimum 0.6 is used for the Cronbach alpha value [12] and alpha coefficients of all factors are greater than the accepted 0.6 threshold.

A multiple regression is used to explore the predictive ability of a set of independent variables against one continuous dependent measure [11]. The regression analysis is used to test the Hypotheses 1 to 5. Collinearity diagnostics performed before regression showed a low possibility of multicollinearity. Results from the regression analysis showed a total of 30.2% of the variance in incidence of improvisation is explained by personality traits.

To determine which variables contribute to organizational improvisation, the Standardized Coefficients are examined; the largest Beta value is 0.292 for Openness, which means Openness makes the strongest contribution to improvisation. The next highest value belongs to the trait Extraversion, with value of 0.258, followed by Agreeableness with value of 0.140, Conscientiousness with 0.081 and finally Neuroticism with -0.012. The personality traits with a lower Beta value mean a less unique contribution.

The traits Agreeableness, Conscientiousness and Neuroticism was found to have a high significance value (more than 0.05) which means these traits do not make significant unique contribution to improvisation. Therefore it can be concluded that the traits Openness and Extraversion did make a unique contribution to the incidence of improvisation.

From the regression analysis conducted, it can be determined that there exists relationship between personality traits extraversion and openness towards the incidence of organizational improvisation at an individual level – Hypotheses 1 and Hypothesis 5. Therefore, the more of the traits of Extraversion and Openness a person has, the higher the incidence of improvisation.

## 5. Discussions

The research objective of this study is to determine which personality traits are most likely to encourage incidence of improvisation. The reason for investigating personality traits and improvisation is because although personality type or traits has been accepted as an antecedent factor which contributes towards individual improvisation, it has not been fully explored [10]. In order to achieve this objective, the regression analysis was executed. The regression analysis was used to test the incidence of improvisation for each of

the five traits (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness). Based on the results of the regression analysis, it was observed that only the traits Extraversion and Openness have significance association towards the incidence of improvisation.

For Hypothesis 1, the findings of the regression analysis support the statement made by [1] that there may be a likelier incidence to improvise for an individual who is assertive, adventurous and enthusiastic. These adjectives describe individuals who have the trait Extraversion. Therefore we can conclude that Hypothesis 1 can be accepted based on the analysis conducted.

For Hypothesis 2, [1] had argued that improvisation is more likely to happen between individuals who are trusting, or trusts one another. Trust is a facet of the traits Agreeableness. The result from regression analysis showed that the trait Agreeableness does not have any significance towards the incidence of improvisation. This can be explained by the fact that the argument that [1] made is based on teamwork improvisation and not individual improvisation, which is explained that improvisation can only happen in a team when the team members trust and cooperates with one another. One other interpretation of the result of the regression analysis could also be explained by the facet of compliance, which translates into a need to be procedural, whereas the process of improvisation may deviate away from set procedures due to its spontaneity and creativity. Therefore the results of the regression analysis does not support the argument made by [1] that individuals who trust (Agreeable) are more likely to improvise.

For Hypothesis 3, the result of the regression analysis conducted shows that the trait Conscientiousness is one of the least significant traits which contribute towards the incidence of improvisation. The trait Conscientiousness has the facets of dutifulness and deliberation, which may mean those individuals with high levels of this trait, may not attempt to improvise due to a lack of impulsiveness and refusal to be seen as careless. This can be explained by looking at the definition of improvisation. Improvisation is defined as a spontaneous and creative process [13]. By its very definition, the process of improvisation goes against the nature of individuals with the trait Conscientiousness.

For Hypothesis 4, [14] found that a useful characteristic of individuals is the ability to manage their own emotions, in this case, anxiety due to performing. A failure to manage anxiety or emotions is translated into an inability to improvise and therefore failure to reap the benefits of improvisation [8]. This ability is measured as Neuroticism in this study. The Beta value for Neuroticism in the regression analysis was negative; however, since this trait was found to be insignificant, it does not make significant unique contribution to improvisation.

For Hypothesis 5, [15]'s argument stated that in order for individuals to improvise, to find new solutions or to achieve targets, they must at first be willing to put aside their usual learnt responses in facing the unexpected and unplanned for events or demands on them or their time.

According to the Big Five Traits theory, this description can be used to describe the Openness trait, which is translated to openness to new experiences[16]. The results of the Regression analysis conducted showed that the trait Openness has the highest significance which contributes towards the incidence of improvisation among all the five traits. Therefore, the findings of the analysis support the argument by[15].

## 6. Conclusions

It is hoped that the findings of this study will add to the reservoir of knowledge on organizational improvisation, and that it will in some way, fill the gap of research on individuals who improvise at the workplace and the personality traits of those who might be inclined to improvise.

For directions of future research, it is suggested that the antecedents of individual improvisation could be investigated on the level of knowledge and skills of an individual and organizational improvisation as well as the effect of culture on individual improvisation. There are two aspects of culture which could be examined, namely, organizational culture and the culture of the people itself. Another direction which future research could be examined is the environmental or ecological factors which may affect improvisation, for example, in countries that face natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms and volcanoes.

In conclusion, it is important that managers accept that improvisation is one of the processes which happen in the organization. Improvisation should be considered as important and should be also considered in view of performance. Additionally, since improvisation begins with the individual, it is important to examine the antecedent factors which lead to improvising individuals, which is the basis of organizational improvisation.

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