

Empirical Papers

Political skill in higher military staff: Measurement properties and latent profile analysis

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Ohlsson, A., Lindfors, P., Larsson, G. & Sverke, M. (2021). Political skill in higher military staff: Measurement properties and latent profile analysis. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*.

Abstract

Social effectiveness, including political skill, reflects individuals' ways of handling interpersonal processes at work. Most research has used a variable-oriented approach to investigate associations between political skill and key organizational factors, including performance, in civil settings. Thus, little is known of whether political skill transfers to a military context and whether there are specific profiles of political skill. Combining variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches, this study used self-reports from two samples of military student officers to: (1) investigate measurement properties of the 18-item political skill inventory; (2) explore whether it is possible to identify different profiles of political skill; and (3) investigate whether such profiles differ in demographics, personality, and job performance. Exploratory (sample 1: $n = 185$) and confirmatory (sample 2: $n = 183$) factor analyses supported a four-dimensional representation of political skill including networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. Latent profile analysis (samples 1 and 2: $N = 368$) identified four distinct combinations of these dimensions, namely: (1) weak political skill; (2) weak political skill with strong sincerity; (3) moderate political skill; and (4) strong political skill. Importantly, profiles differed consistently in networking ability. Subsequent comparisons suggested potentially important differences in demographics, personality, and job performance. Despite needing additional research of how profiles of political skill develop over time, these findings may have practical implications for recruitment and training in organizational settings where social effectiveness is important.

Key words: Measurement properties, latent profile analysis, social effectiveness, military.

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INTRODUCTION

Social interactions with others play an increasingly central role in working life. Such social interactions can involve collaboration between two or more individuals with the successful professional interactions typically requiring individuals to adapt their behaviors to reach organizational goals. Social interactions in professional contexts can vary in their constellations, and include interactions within one organization for instance in a team setting or with colleagues from other departments of the organization. Other types of professional social interactions can include individuals from different organizations, with each organization having their idiosyncratic organizational hierarchy. In international settings, individuals from different countries may need to collaborate and perform well to reach common goals (cf. Burke & Cooper, 2004; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). Typically, adaptive behaviors allowing efficient work and successful performance in such collaborative settings include social effectiveness skills (Perrewé, Ferris, Frink & Anthony, 2000). Thus, social effectiveness skills facilitating communication, collaboration, and coordination of efforts in working life, have received increasing attention (Munyon, Summers, Thompson & Ferris, 2015). Still, most existing research has primarily focused on defining and describing social effectiveness skills and their antecedents and consequences, thus, emphasizing the interplay between different variables. However, such variable-oriented research approaches typically ignore the fact that individuals have their personal combinations of social

effectiveness skills. This means that there is a need to use other approaches to explore different combinations, or profiles of skills. Person-oriented research approaches allow for the study of such profiles, which may add to the understanding of how skills vary between individuals within different populations (Mäkikangas, Tolvanen, Aunola, Feldt, Mauno & Kinnunen, 2018; Oberski, 2016). Thus, this study combined variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches to investigate a specific social effectiveness construct, namely political skill, in an international setting requiring efficiency and high performance.

In the international arena, individuals working in teams of networks face dynamic processes and complex tasks that require thorough communication, collaboration, and coordination (MacMillan, Paley, Levchuk, Entin, Serfaty & Freeman, 2002). Although these informal organization interactions are particularly relevant in civilian organizations, allowing for improved inter-organization collaboration, less focus has been placed on the usefulness of social skills in military organizations. However, over the past 20 years, the goals of many European military organizations have evolved, and resulted in an increase of peacekeeping missions generally in collaboration with for instance the United Nations, European Union and civilian organizations (Goldenberg, Andres, Österberg, James-Yates & Johansson Pearce, 2019; Hedlund, 2017; Ohlsson, Wallenius & Larsson, 2014). Thus, changing demands and contexts that modern European military organizations work in also require the investigation of skills considered to improve performance in

highly collaborative environments. Sometimes, these work contexts demand individuals to sidestep organizational boundaries and make use of their social influencing abilities to facilitate necessary collaboration (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Williams, 2002). The use of such social influencing skills that facilitate social adaptability in various contexts, is often referred to as individual social effectiveness (Ferris, Perrewé & Douglas, 2002; Ferris, Treadway, Kolodinsky et al., 2005). Research on civilian organizations underscores a particular form of social effectiveness, namely political skill, which has been argued to be relevant in military contexts as well (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Yet, very few studies have been performed in military contexts. Thus, combining variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches, this study investigated political skill in an international collaborative military setting.

Political skill

Political skill is a social effectiveness construct that is typically defined as a moderately stable behavioral pattern of social skills reflecting cognitive and affective abilities of individuals to influence others to reach personal and organizational goals (Ferris et al., 2007; Perrewé, Young & Blass, 2002; Semadar, Robbins & Ferris, 2006). This means that political skill allows individual interpersonal effectiveness in informal social interactions at work (Perrewé et al., 2004). Particularly, the effective understanding of others and the use of this understanding for the benefit of both individual and organizational goals seem key (Ahearn, Ferris, Hochwarter, Douglas & Ammeter, 2004; Ferris et al., 2005) and involve behavioral adaptation characterized by self-regulation (Kimura, 2015; Zellars, Perrewé, Rossi, Tepper & Ferris, 2008). Importantly, political skill is considered trainable, thus making it a potential personal resource of value to both individuals and organizations (Ferris et al., 2008).

The conceptualization of political skill has been operationalized in the political skill inventory (PSI; Ferris et al., 1999, 2005). Originally, PSI was a unidimensional six-item measure. Later revisions have resulted in an 18-item measure (Ferris et al., 2005) including four distinct but related dimensions, namely Networking Ability (NA), Apparent Sincerity (AS), Social Astuteness (SA), and Interpersonal Influence (II). Networking ability reflects the ability to identify and develop important social relationships valuable for exchanging resources, with strong negotiation skills and efficient conflict management (Ferris et al., 2005, 2008). Apparent sincerity is described as reflecting an individual's impression management of integrity and authenticity based on trust from others (Ferris et al., 2005), with successful influence attempts not conveying any ulterior motives. Social astuteness refers to the individual ability to accurately understand situations and social interactions, while still aware of one's own behavior in relation to these interactions, and is often manifested in ingenious and/or clever social interactions (Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Ferris et al., 2005). Interpersonal influence includes the capability to adapt one's behaviors to the current situation to get an intended response (Ferris et al., 2005), by using superb communication skills to subtly influence others' behavior (Kim, Wells & Kim, 2016). Typically, the four dimensions are considered to form an overall political skill level. However, other theoretical

conceptualizations have political skill involving two distinct levels: (1) a cognitive, intra-psyche level, including the dimensions of networking ability and social astuteness; and (2) a behavioral, inter-psyche level, including apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence (Brouer, Badaway, Gallagher & Haber, 2015).

Empirical studies of the PSI and its psychometric properties, including different cultural settings, support the four-dimensional structure (Ferris et al., 2008; Lvina, Johns, Treadway et al., 2012; Shi & Chen, 2012). There is also support for a two-dimensional structure, with one dimension including networking skills, and the other covering apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence (Coole, 2007). Yet other studies suggest that the four dimensions form a higher-order factor representing an overall political skill level (Ferris et al., 2008). However, concerns have been raised regarding the reliability and validity of apparent sincerity, which includes only three items and has weak associations with the other dimensions (Ferris et al., 2008; Kimura, 2015). Given the existing inconsistencies, there is reason to further investigate the measurement properties of the PSI. In addition, the PSI is a relatively new measure and needs to be tested in various organizations and contexts in order to contribute to its further validation (Ferris et al., 2008; Lvina et al., 2012). Research has previously indicated that the use of political skill is positively related to organizational outcomes; however, political skill in military staff is relatively unknown.

Besides measurement properties, previous research of political skill has focused on associations to organizational outcomes, including job performance. Specifically, an individual's overall political skill has been found to predict job performance (Ferris et al., 2007; Hochwarter, Ferris, Gavin, Perrewé, Hall & Frink, 2007; Munyon et al., 2015; Semadar et al., 2006). For leaders, their use of political skill has predicted team performance (Ahearn et al., 2004). Importantly, political skill has indicated to be a stronger predictor of individual performance than other social effectiveness constructs (i.e., self-monitoring, leadership self-efficacy, and emotional intelligence; Semadar et al., 2006). However, few studies have investigated how the four different dimensions relate to performance. Also, existing findings seem inconclusive. For instance, social astuteness has been found the strongest predictor of job performance (Ferris et al., 2005; Shi, Chen & Zhou, 2011), while networking ability has been found the strongest predictor of task performance. This may obviously relate to different performance indicators being used in different contexts (Blickle, Meurs, Zettler et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2002), which suggests a need of additional research of political skill and job performance.

Additional studies have investigated associations between political skill and various individual factors, such as impression management (Maher, Gallagher, Rossi, Gerris & Perrewé, 2018), and dispositional factors, such as Big-Five personality dimensions (e.g., Blickle et al., 2008). This aligns with the assumption that individual dispositional factors not only influence but also predict political skill (Ferris et al., 2007, 2008; Liu, Ferris, Zinko, Perrewé, Weitz & Xu, 2007; Munyon et al., 2015). For instance, findings regarding personality suggest that Big-Five dimensions are associated with overall political skill (Blickle et al., 2008; Ferris et al., 2005, 2007). Also, negative associations have been

found between emotional instability in terms of trait anxiety and overall political skill (Treadway, Hochwarter, Kacmar & Ferris, 2005). Importantly, both extraversion and proactive personality have been found to predict overall political skill (Liu *et al.*, 2007). Regarding the different dimensions of political skill, extraversion is as a positive predictor of social astuteness, networking ability and interpersonal influence (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). Still, little is known of how dispositional factors, including personality, relate to variations in political skill, which, in turn, motivates further research.

Beyond organizational and dispositional factors, previous research has underscored that political skill is key in relation to hierarchical organizational positions, in particular leadership positions (Ahearn *et al.*, 2004). Indeed, aside from interpersonal influence, all political skill dimensions have been associated to hierarchical position (Ferris *et al.*, 2008). Thus, there is good reason to consider hierarchical organizational position when researching political skill.

A person-oriented approach

Most research investigating political skill in the workplace has taken a variable-oriented approach. While this approach is important for investigating measurement properties and relationships between variables, and has added to the overall understanding of predictors and consequences of, for instance political skill, it has limitations. Importantly, the variable-oriented approach tends to assume homogeneity between individuals. Yet, individuals do differ. A person-oriented approach makes use of such differences and allows the study of groups, or profiles, of individuals exhibiting similar variation in some key dimensions. Moreover, it allows estimation of the prevalence of specific profiles (Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2018; Oberski, 2016). Thus, regarding political skill, going beyond the perhaps simplistic characterization of groups with high and low skills based on some arbitrary cut-off, the person-oriented approach allows investigating more dynamic combinations of different political skill dimensions. Specifically, some individuals may have good networking abilities but weaker apparent sincerity, while others may have a strong social astuteness and weaker interpersonal influence, and yet others may have good political skill, reflected in strong skills across all four dimensions.

Latent profile analysis (LPA) is a person-oriented analysis that uses finite mixture models and allows exploration of variations of identified subpopulations within reasonably sized samples (Nylund, Asparouhov & Muthén, 2007). By first investigating properties of measures reflecting individuals' ways of thinking and acting and then including such measures in a person-oriented analysis, it becomes possible to further the understanding of individual patterns, their variation, and potential correlates. As for political skill, the person-oriented approach has potential to broaden the knowledge of whether its dimensions can be combined into profiles and whether there is variation between such profiles.

Present study

Despite research of political skill mainly focusing on the overall construct, the PSI allows for investigation of its dimensions

(Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Studying the dimensionality is of particular interest when using PSI in new contexts, such as the international military setting. Research establishing key dimensions is also needed to investigate different combinations, or profiles, of political skill and to clarify whether such individual differences in political skill are reflected in previously studied key factors including personality and job performance. Specifically, the first study aim was to investigate measurement properties of the PSI among military student officers. The second aim was to explore whether it was possible to identify different profiles of political skill in this group. The limited use of a person-oriented approach in previous studies makes it difficult to define *à priori* how many and which profiles to distinguish, which in turn, motivates exploring this. The final aim was to investigate profile differences in demographics, personality, and job performance.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Study participants were military student officers from various organizational levels (e.g., with different ranks) and from different European defense universities participating in either of two annual training events in 2015 (Sample 1) and 2016 (Sample 2). The events were organized by Swedish military institutions at different locations in Sweden and aimed to train military officers to effectively perform staff work and increase their understanding of using standard operating procedures within a NATO led operation. During the events, officers engaged in different activities with their performance being rated by senior staff who acted as pedagogical observers to enhance individual and group performance.

Sample 1. In 2015, all individuals participating in the training event were invited on site to complete an electronic questionnaire in English. Of the 375 individuals present, 185 (response rate: 49%) volunteered participation. Of these, 104 came from the Swedish Defence University, 43 from the Finnish Defence University, 23 from the Baltic Defence College, 11 from the Swiss Armed Forces, while the remaining four were unspecified. Most participants were men ($n = 176$; 95%).

Sample 2. In 2016, all individuals participating in the training event received paper-and-pen questionnaires in English in conjunction to the event and then returned anonymously completed questionnaires. Of the 230 invited individuals, 185 volunteered participation (response rate: 80%). Having removed two outliers, the effective sample size was 183. Of these, 45 came from the Baltic Defence College, 61 from the Norwegian Defence College, 45 from the Swedish Defence University, 25 from the US Air Force Academy, while seven identified themselves as "other." Again, most participants ($n = 167$; 90%) were men.

The work was carried out in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration: along with details regarding data use, participants were informed about their rights and that participation was anonymous. Data were collected and stored in registers with the Swedish Defence University. The present study passed ethical vetting and was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Ref. No. 2019-06259).

Measures

Questionnaires varied slightly between Samples 1 and 2. Besides political skill, personality, and job performance, the questionnaires asked respondents about demographics (i.e., participating country, military branch, and leadership position). Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations for all measures, along with reliability estimates where applicable. For multi-item measures, Cronbach's alpha's ranged from 0.72 to 0.93.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations for Samples 1 (below the diagonal) and 2 (above the diagonal)

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Political skill																
1. Networking ability	0.33*	0.22*	0.58*	0.43*	-0.09	-0.27*	0.11	-0.06	-0.20*	0.53*	0.03	0.14	0.01	0.29*	-	0.34*
2. Apparent sincerity	0.55*	0.42*	0.44*	0.47*	-0.01	0.01	-0.04	-0.13	0.11	0.32*	0.27*	0.31*	0.16*	0.29*	-	0.39*
3. Social astuteness	0.48*	0.46*	0.56*	0.56*	0.02	-0.16*	0.06	-0.17*	-0.14	0.55*	0.03	0.32*	0.14	0.40*	-	0.38*
4. Interpersonal influence					0.09	0.12	0.07	-0.25*	-0.07	0.48*	0.35*	0.35*	0.27*	0.26*	-	0.32*
Demographic characteristics																
5. Swedish vs. others	-0.17*	0.05	0.01	-0.01		0.49*	-0.03	-0.16*	0.22*	0.07	0.02	0.10	0.18*	0.06	-	0.12
6. Nordic vs. others	-0.05	-0.02	-0.01	-0.07	0.57*		-0.11	-0.18*	0.27*	-0.02	0.13	0.11	0.30*	-0.05	-	0.00
7. Leadership position	0.04	0.08	0.14	0.06	0.06	0.01		0.04	-0.04	-0.02	0.14	-0.05	-0.09	0.03	-	-0.04
8. Army	-0.11	-0.20*	0.06	-0.10	-0.13	-0.25*	0.05		0.13	-0.02	-0.05	-0.05	-0.06	-0.05	-	-0.17*
9. Navy	-0.00	0.14	-0.02	0.09	0.26*	0.23*	-0.06	-0.49*		-0.08	0.19*	0.07	0.13	0.04	-	0.01
Personality																
10. Extraversion	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.09	0.31*	0.17*	0.36*	-	0.31*
11. Agreeableness	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.37*	0.25*	-0.03	-	0.02
12. Conscientiousness	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		0.42*	0.14	-	0.27*
13. Emotional stability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.09	-	0.18*
14. Openness	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.25*
Job performance																
15. Team performance	0.15*	0.35*	0.32*	0.34*	-0.10	-0.08	0.15*	0.10	0.11	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
16. Individual performance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cronbach's alpha																
Sample 1	0.92	0.78	0.78	0.83	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.77	-
Sample 2	0.93	0.83	0.83	0.84	-	-	-	-	-	0.81	0.72	0.78	0.78	0.80	-	-
Mean																
Sample 1	4.62	5.77	4.91	5.37	0.57	0.80	0.31	0.51	0.19	-	-	-	-	-	5.61	-
Sample 2	4.47	5.89	5.01	5.35	0.25	0.58	0.73	0.55	0.55	3.48	3.93	3.96	3.82	3.47	-	3.99
Standard deviation																
Sample 1	1.05	0.83	0.81	0.82	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.18	-
Sample 2	1.24	0.85	0.87	0.79	-	-	-	-	-	0.62	0.47	0.49	0.53	0.54	-	0.58

Notes: -; Not applicable. Measures vary between samples. Leadership position: yes = 1. Scale range: 1-5 (personality and individual performance), 1-7 (political skill and team performance). * $p < 0.05$; ($n = 185$ [Sample 1] and $n = 183$ [Sample 2]).

Political skill. The 18-item version of PSI (Ferris *et al.*, 2005) was used to measure political skill. Besides a total score reflecting individuals' overall political skill (e.g. Blickle *et al.*, 2008; Huang, Friderger & Pearce, 2013; Shi, Johnson, Liu & Wang, 2013), PSI includes four dimensions (Brouer *et al.*, 2015; Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Lvina *et al.*, 2012): (1) networking ability; (2) apparent sincerity; (3) social astuteness; and (4) interpersonal influence. Likert scale response alternatives ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a stronger political skill.

Personality. In sample 2, the previously established 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to measure five personality dimensions, namely: (1) extraversion; (2) agreeableness; (3) conscientiousness; (4) emotional stability; and (5) openness. Likert scale response alternatives ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher levels of the specific dimension.

Job performance. In Sample 1, team performance was measured using a previously established five-item measure (Hackman, 1987), with good validity (Edmondson, 1999). Item wording was slightly adjusted to fit the military setting (e.g., "The quality of work provided by this team is improving over time"). Ratings were made on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In Sample 2, a single-item question ("How would you rate the quality of your own performance of your job responsibilities in general staff work?") was used to measure individual job performance. Ratings were made on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (low quality) to 5 (high quality).

Statistical analyses

Measurement properties. First, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed in Sample 1 to investigate PSI dimensionality in the military setting (principal axis factoring with oblique rotation, in SPSS version 25). With EFA, factor loadings between 0.30 and 0.40 are often considered sufficient to justify that an item measures its factor (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). Then, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in Sample 2, using Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017), to compare the proposed four-factor representation with alternative models derived from the existing research literature. Model fit was determined using the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR), for which values below 0.08 indicate reasonable fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Model comparisons were based on the comparative fit index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), with values above 0.90 indicating adequate fit, in addition to the sample-size adjusted Bayesian information criterion (ABIC) and Akaike's information criterion (AIC), with lower values indicating a better fit. Also, chi-square difference tests were performed.

Identifying profiles of political skill. Collapsing Samples 1 and 2, latent profile analysis (LPA) in Mplus was used to identify groups with different combinations of the dimensions of political skill, testing solutions ranging from one to eight profiles. LPA is a mixture modeling type used to identify subgroups with similar patterns within a larger population (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017; Nylund *et al.*, 2007). Specifically, the fit of each model was evaluated based on the ABIC (with lower values indicating a better fit), the Lo–Mendell–Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test (LMR-LRT; Lo, Mendell & Rubin, 2001), and the bootstrapped likelihood ratio test (BLRT; McLachlan & Peel, 2000), for which non-significant values indicate that a solution with x profiles has no increment in comparison with the $x-1$ solution. Also considered were entropy (with values closer to 1 indicating the accuracy of the classification), the proportion of individuals that were classified to a certain profile (where 5% is typically considered a minimum), and the posterior probabilities for these classifications (where an 80% probability being considered adequate; Nylund *et al.*, 2007).

Differences between latent profiles. For validation purposes, the derived latent political skill profiles were then compared with respect to demographics (cross-tabulations), personality, and job performance (analysis of variance, ANOVA) in SPSS 25.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows intercorrelations between the PSI dimensions, with these associations being strong. However, most associations between PSI dimensions and demographics were weak. Overall, PSI dimensions were positively associated with different personality dimensions (Sample 2), and job performance (Sample 1: team performance; Sample 2: individual performance).

Measurement properties

Table 2 shows EFA results (Sample 1), which, as expected, yielded four factors with eigenvalues > 1 . All items designed to measure networking ability, apparent sincerity, and interpersonal influence loaded strongly on distinct factors (loading range: 0.49–0.90), whereas two of five social astuteness items had lower factor loadings (range: 0.34–0.46). Also, these two items loaded above 0.30 on apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence, respectively. Besides these two items, there were no other indications of double-loadings. Given that this was the first evaluation in this particular context, the lower loadings were considered satisfactory. Tables 2 and 3 summarize CFA results (Sample 2) regarding the PSI and show that the assumed four-factor representation provided a better fit compared to alternative models (Table 3), including a one-factor model and a second-order factor model, with all items loading strongly and significantly on their proposed factor (Table 2).

Identifying latent profiles

Table 4 reports LPA fit indicators for solutions from one to eight profiles. The model with four latent profiles was considered to provide the best fit since its proportions of individuals ranged from 11 to 48, and all posterior probabilities were above 0.80. Although the BLRT for the five-profile solution was significant, the LMR-LRT did not suggest that this model represented an improvement when compared to the four-profile model; also the five-profile model had a substantially lower entropy, and some probabilities were below 0.80. Moreover, the BLRT indicated that the seven-profile solution, which also had the lowest ABIC, represented an improvement in comparison to the six-profile model. However, no other fit statistic (LRM-LRT, entropy, posterior probabilities) provided any support for the seven-profile model, which also included a profile with only 3% of the sample.

Table 5 shows the four latent profiles and their different patterns across the four political skill dimensions. Profile 1 ($n = 44$) had the lowest means of apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence, coupled with means for networking ability and social astuteness well below average, and was thus labeled *weak political skill*. Profile 2 ($n = 32$), the smallest group, had the lowest means in networking ability, along with low social astuteness and interpersonal influence respectively. Given the relatively high mean of apparent sincerity, this pattern was labeled *weak political skill with strong sincerity*. Profile 3 ($n = 188$), the most prevalent combination, had around average means across all PSI dimensions and was labeled *moderate political skill*. Profile 4 ($n = 104$) had the highest means across all the four PSI dimensions was thus labeled *strong political skill*.

Table 2. Results (standardized parameter estimates) of exploratory factor analysis (EFA; Sample 1) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA; Sample 2)

Item	EFA: Sample 1				CFA: Sample 2			
	1	2	3	4	NA	AS	SA	II
Networking ability (NA)								
01. I spend a lot of time and effort at work networking with others	0.76	-0.07	0.07	0.02	0.78	-	-	-
02. At work, I know a lot of important people and am well connected	0.70	0.19	-0.02	0.05	0.82	-	-	-
03. I am good at using my connections and networks to make things happen at work	0.79	0.03	0.00	0.12	0.85	-	-	-
04. I have developed a large network of colleagues and associates at work who I can call on for support when I really need to get things done	0.73	0.04	0.09	0.07	0.85	-	-	-
05. I spend a lot of time at work developing connections with others	0.90	-0.06	-0.03	-0.08	0.83	-	-	-
06. I am good at building relationships with influential people at work	0.72	0.11	0.07	0.04	0.86	-	-	-
Apparent Sincerity (AS)								
07. It is important that people believe I am sincere in what I say and do	0.04	0.01	0.81	0.01	0.63	-	-	-
08. When communicating with others, I try to be genuine in what I say and do	0.28	0.08	0.58	-0.11	0.82	-	-	-
09. I try and show a genuine interest in other people	-0.11	0.10	0.74	0.05	0.88	-	-	-
Social Astuteness (SA)								
10. I always seem to instinctively know the right thing to say or do to influence others	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.70	-	0.69	-	-
11. I have good intuition or "savvy" about how to present myself to others	0.02	0.26	0.13	0.54	-	0.73	-	-
12. I am particularly good at sensing the motivations and hidden agendas of others	0.12	-0.04	0.10	0.65	-	0.73	-	-
13. I pay close attention to people's facial expressions	0.15	-0.11	0.35	0.34	-	0.64	-	-
14. I understand people very well	0.16	0.30	-0.00	0.36	-	0.69	-	-
Interpersonal Influence (II)								
15. It is easy for me to develop good rapport with most people	-0.02	0.59	0.09	0.22	-	-	0.74	-
16. I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me	-0.06	0.84	0.07	0.06	-	-	0.84	-
17. I am able to communicate easily and effectively with others	0.10	0.49	0.17	0.05	-	-	0.63	-
18. I am good at getting people to like me	0.15	0.80	-0.10	0.01	-	-	0.75	-
Eigenvalue	5.43	4.33	3.14	3.93	-	-	-	-
Proportion of variance accounted for	0.30	0.24	0.17	0.22	-	-	-	-
Factor correlations								
Networking ability (NA)	1				1			
Apparent sincerity (AS)	0.41	1			0.24	1		
Social astuteness (SA)	0.28	0.40	1		0.66	0.52	1	
Interpersonal influence (II)	0.48	0.43	0.33	1	0.47	0.57	0.67	1

Notes: - Not applicable. Factor loadings above 0.40 in the EFA (Sample 1, $n = 185$) in bold. All CFA loadings (Sample 2, $n = 183$) were significant ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. Fit statistics for the confirmatory factor analysis (Sample 2)

Model	df	χ^2	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	ABIC	AIC	Model	Δ df	$\Delta\chi^2$
0. Null model	153	2068.15***	0.26	0.36	0.000	0.000	10364.80	10363.28	-	-	-
1. 1 factor	135	842.79***	0.17	0.13	0.63	0.58	9176.20	9173.92	1 vs. 0	16	1225.36***
2. 2 factors (NA; SA/AS/IS)	134	508.92***	0.12	0.09	0.80	0.78	8844.38	8842.05	2 vs. 1	1	333.87***
4a. 4 factors (oblique)	129	293.75***	0.08	0.06	0.91	0.90	8639.42	8636.88	4a vs. 2	5	234.31***
4b. 4 factors (orthogonal)	135	493.91***	0.12	0.26	0.81	0.79	8827.33	8825.04	4b vs. 4a	6	200.16***
5. Higher-order construct	131	309.22***	0.09	0.07	0.91	0.89	8650.80	8648.35	5 vs. 4a	4	15.47**

Notes: - Not applicable.

Bold indicates best-fitting model.

AS = apparent sincerity; II = interpersonal influence; NA = networking ability; SA = social astuteness.

* $p < 0.05$;

** $p < 0.01$;

*** $p < 0.001$ ($n = 183$).

Latent profile differences

Table 6 presents profile differences in validation variables including demographics, personality, and job performance. Regarding country, Profile 2 (weak political skill with strong sincerity), had an overrepresentation of individuals from the Nordic organizations. Comparing officers from Sweden with the remaining countries showed no significant difference. Profiles 3

and 4 (moderate and strong political skill, respectively) had a higher prevalence of officers with leadership positions. The prevalence of army officers was highest in Profile 1 (weak political skill) and lowest in Profile 2 (weak political skill with strong sincerity). Instead, Profile 2 included most naval officers while Profile 1 (weak political skill) had the fewest. Profile 4 (strong political skill) had a slight overrepresentation of air force officers.

Table 4. Fit statistics for the latent profile analysis models, based on the four dimensions of political skill

No. of profiles	ABIC	Entropy	% of total counts	Posterior probabilities	LMR-LRT	BLRT
1	3882.63	(1.00)	[1.00]	[1.00]	–	–
2	3589.61	0.72	[0.55; 0.45]	[0.92; 0.91]	296.66***	306.70***
3	3529.07	0.72	[0.23; 0.50; 0.27]	[0.87; 0.86; 0.88]	71.78*	74.21*
4	3500.65	0.75	[0.13; 0.11; 0.48; 0.28]	[0.86; 0.81; 0.85; 0.89]	40.73*	42.10***
5	3493.06	0.68	[0.14; 0.29; 0.27; 0.12; 0.18]	[0.79; 0.77; 0.71; 0.87; 0.85]	20.57	21.27*
6	3490.59	0.71	[0.12; 0.11; 0.26; 0.06; 0.34; 0.11]	[0.82; 0.88; 0.75; 0.71; 0.80; 0.81]	15.61	16.14
7	3486.17	0.73	[0.09; 0.16; 0.26; 0.07; 0.24; 0.16; 0.03]	[0.89; 0.76; 0.75; 0.73; 0.78; 0.86; 0.93]	17.51	18.10*
0.78	3487.14		[0.09; 0.10; 0.12; 0.08; 0.23; 0.07; 0.28; 0.03]	[0.92; 0.81; 0.75; 0.93; 0.80; 0.79; 0.86; 0.80]	12.29	12.71

Notes: Samples 1 and 2 collapsed (N = 368). –: Not applicable.

Bold indicates best-fitting model.

ABIC = sample-size adjusted Bayesian information criterion; BLRT = bootstrapped log-likelihood ratio test; LMR-LRT = Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted likelihood ratio test.

*p < 0.05;

**p < 0.01;

***p < 0.001.

Table 5. Description of the four latent profiles with the four dimensions of political skill as input

Input	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3	Profile 4	Total	F	post-hoc (Bonferroni)	eta ²
Networking ability (NA)	3.84	2.56	4.47	5.60	4.55	148.59***	4 > 3 > 1 > 2	0.55
Apparent sincerity (AS)	4.61	6.00	5.71	6.53	5.83	104.53***	4 > 2,3 > 1	0.46
Social astuteness (SA)	3.80	4.03	4.89	5.86	4.96	244.87***	4 > 3 > 1,2	0.67
Interpersonal influence (II)	4.30	4.98	5.25	6.12	5.36	115.28***	4 > 2,3 > 1	0.49

Notes: Samples 1 and 2 collapsed (N = 368). Profile 1: weak political skill (n = 44); Profile 2: weak political skill with strong sincerity (n = 32); Profile 3: moderate political skill (n = 188); Profile 4: strong political skill (n = 104). Scale range: 1–7.

*p < 0.05;

**p < 0.01;

***p < 0.001.

Table 6. Latent profile differences in demographics, personality, and job performance

Validation variable	Profile 1	Profile 2	Profile 3	Profile 4	Total	Sign (F/χ ²)	post-hoc (Bonferroni)	eta ²
Demographics								
Swedish vs. others (%)	32.56	56.25	39.57	41.34	40.71	4.50	–	–
Nordic vs. others (%)	74.42	90.63	63.71	68.27	69.13	9.24*	–	–
Leadership position (%)	29.55	25.81	40.64	43.56	38.84	5.02	–	–
Military branch	–	–	–	–	–	22.59**	–	–
Army (%)	61.90	30.00	55.80	40.00	49.85	–	–	–
Navy (%)	9.52	46.67	19.34	23.00	21.53	–	–	–
Air force (%)	28.57	23.33	24.86	37.00	28.61	–	–	–
Personality (Sample 2)								
Extraversion	3.04	3.04	3.39	3.99	3.48	27.38***	4 > 3 > 1, 2	0.33
Agreeableness	3.75	4.03	3.88	4.04	3.93	2.77*	–	0.05
Conscientiousness	3.66	4.03	3.88	4.18	3.96	8.05***	4 > 1, 3	0.13
Emotional stability	3.61	3.71	3.81	3.92	3.81	2.12	–	0.04
Openness	3.22	3.42	3.36	3.77	3.47	9.04***	4 > 1, 3	0.14
Job performance								
Team performance (Sample 1)	4.74	5.42	5.58	6.10	5.61	8.02***	4 > 3 > 1	0.12
Individual performance (Sample 2)	3.47	3.79	3.99	4.24	3.99	10.46***	4 > 1, 2; 3 > 1	0.15

Notes: Samples 1 and 2 collapsed; N = 368. – Not applicable. Profile 1: weak political skill (n = 44); Profile 2: weak political skill with strong sincerity (n = 32); Profile 3: moderate political skill (n = 188); Profile 4: strong political skill (n = 104). Scale range: 1–5 (personality and individual performance), 1–7 (team performance).

*p < 0.05;

**p < 0.01;

***p < 0.001.

Significant differences emerged between all profiles in all personality dimensions but emotional stability. The most consistent difference concerned extraversion, with profiles accounting for 33% of the variance; extraversion was highest in Profile 4, the profile with strong political skill, followed by Profile 3 with moderate political skill. Conscientiousness and openness were also highest in Profile 4 (strong political skill), while Profile 1 (weak political skill) had the lowest means. As for job performance, Profile 4 (strong political skill) had the highest team performance score. Moreover, Profile 3 (moderate political skill) had higher scores than Profile 1 (weak political skill). A similar pattern emerged for individual performance with Profile 4 (strong political skill) having significantly higher scores than Profiles 1 and 2, which were both characterized by weaker political skill, and with Profile 3 (moderate political skill) having higher levels than Profile 1 (weak political skill).

DISCUSSION

With previous research underscoring political skill as a key aspect of social effectiveness facilitating social interactions and job performance, the present study combined variable-oriented and person-oriented approaches to investigate political skill in an international military setting and showed that political skill transferred well to this multi-organizational context, with individuals exhibiting distinct profiles of political skill of potential importance for organizational outcomes. Specifically, and in line with theoretical and empirical research (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, 2008), measurement properties of the PSI were replicated with the four political skill dimensions including networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. Also, these four dimensions were found to combine into four distinct profiles of political skill, namely: (1) weak political skill; (2) weak political skill with strong sincerity; (3) moderate political skill; and (4) strong political skill. Importantly, there were variations between profiles, mainly in personality and job performance.

In detail, given that this study investigated PSI in an international military setting, the first aim was to analyze its measurement properties among military student officers in such a context. Starting with an EFA, using data from one sample (Sample 1), the results aligned with theoretical and empirical research (Ferris *et al.*, 2005, 2008), and provided initial support for the items forming four distinct factors with most items loading on factors interpreted as networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. However, two items, that were designed to measure social astuteness, had lower factor loadings (around 0.35) on this factor combined with loadings of a similar magnitude on an additional factor (apparent sincerity and interpersonal influence, respectively). This adds to previous critique regarding measurement properties of PSI (cf. Ferris *et al.*, 2008; Kimura, 2015). Yet, with EFA results indicating no other double-loadings, all items were included in the subsequent confirmatory tests.

The CFAs used in Sample 2 data provided further support for the previously proposed four-dimensional representation of the PSI. Following previous research (Ferris *et al.*, 2008), the four-factor representation provided a rather similar fit to a second-order model, where the four dimensions were specified to load on a

higher-order factor representing the overall concept of political skill. Importantly, however, the four-factor model still provided a significantly better fit, which adds to the accumulated findings suggesting that the 18 PSI items are best represented by four first-order factors. Moreover, the fact that the model with four correlated factors provided a substantially better fit than the uni-factor model, and clearly outperformed other first-order models, provides additional support for a four-dimensional representation transferring well to an international military context. Taken together, this adds to the research showing that the four factors can be identified in different cultural settings (cf. Lvina *et al.*, 2012; Shi & Chen, 2012), and also adds to the research investigating political skill in various organizational settings (Ferris *et al.*, 2008).

As for the second aim, this involved using a person-oriented approach to explore whether it is possible to identify groups of individuals with distinct patterns of combinations of the four dimensions of political skill. Besides this approach allowing the identification of specific groups, or profiles, of individuals with similar combinations of political skill, it allows estimating the prevalence of any particular profile (cf. Nylund *et al.*, 2007; Oberski, 2016). In detail, we used LPA and identified four distinct profiles of political skill of different prevalence. The most prevalent profile represented moderate political skill (Profile 3), which suggests that the majority exhibited average networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness, and interpersonal influence. The second largest group, representing strong political skill (Profile 4), were consistently high across all four dimensions. Despite variation within this professional group, this suggests that the majority of military student officers share a behavior pattern of political skill, which is characterized by a typical behavior pattern ranging from moderate to strong political skill. This may relate to the recruitment of military organizations but also to the hierarchical structures of military organizations, which include a highly formalized “up or out” promotion system (Blass & Ferris, 2007). Yet, considering that two additional profiles were identified, this seems only part of the explanation. Notably, the two smaller profiles, that is, weak political skill (Profile 1) and weak political skill with strong sincerity (Profile 2), exhibited lower levels across most dimensions. This may relate to the study participants being student officers and perhaps having had different opportunities for training political skill in international settings. Importantly, the findings suggest that individuals with weaker political skill may need further training of skills if they are to develop adaptive behaviors and social effectiveness skills comparable with those of the majority. While the prevalence of different profiles may vary between populations, the present findings may be helpful in guiding future studies, particularly in military settings and in other hierarchical and homogeneous groups.

The findings pertaining to the third aim, which involved investigating profile differences in demographics, personality, and job performance, contribute to the distinctiveness of the four profiles. As for demographics, one of the profiles with weaker political skill (Profile 2) seemed to have an overrepresentation of individuals from the Nordic countries. Yet, considering the prevalence and smaller group sizes any further conclusions should be avoided. Still, it should be noted that the highest percentages of individuals with any leadership position were found in the two profiles with stronger political skill (Profiles 3 and 4).

Regarding personality, there were consistent differences between the four political skill profiles. In detail, the strong political skill profile (Profile 4) had a pattern with scores above the mean on all personality dimensions, and significantly higher scores on extraversion in relation to the other three profiles as well as higher conscientiousness and openness scores than the profiles with moderate (Profile 3) and weak (Profile 1) political skill respectively. This aligns with the consistent research findings showing that conscientiousness and extraversion are associated with political skill (Ferris *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Liu *et al.*, 2007); however, not for openness. The finding regarding openness is new and may be due to the collaborative working context or be specific to the profession. These personality patterns may be valuable for future research of political skill in different collaborative environments. Moreover, thus far, most research has shown associations between political skill and positive organizational outcomes, relating these findings to positive aspects of personality. However, future studies should also investigate linkages between political skill and negative organizational behaviors as well as negative aspects of personality, such as the dark triad (Furnham, Richards & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), to better further the understanding of the multifaceted characteristics of social effectiveness in organizations.

While demographics and personality play some role, organizational outcomes including job performance may be easier to monitor. Importantly, the fact that team performance was highest among individuals with strong political skill (Profile 4), followed by those with moderate political skill (Profile 3), while those with weak political skill (Profile 1) had the lowest team performance suggest that abilities to make successful use of all four political skill dimensions are key for a stronger team performance. Partly, these variations in team performance were reflected in individual performance, where there were no statistically significant differences between profiles with strong (Profile 4) and moderate political skill (Profile 3) while profiles with weaker political skill had individual performance scores well below average. These findings align with previous research showing that use of political skill has positive associations with job performance at both individual (Ferris *et al.*, 2007; Hochwarter *et al.*, 2007; Munyon *et al.*, 2015; Semadar *et al.*, 2006) and team levels (Ahearn *et al.*, 2004). Also, the variation between the four profiles is noteworthy. Specifically, the most consistent profile difference involved networking ability, with the strong political skill (Profile 4) having the highest networking ability while the weak political skill with high sincerity (Profile 2) had the lowest. This suggests that the use of informal networks in international military staff work plays a role for better team and individual performance outcomes. Thus, a strong political skill, with good networking ability, may be relevant to performance well in the modern international, collaborative environments that military officers often have to handle in their work.

As for position, profiles with stronger political skill (Profiles 3 and 4) included more individuals with a leadership position which probably provide opportunities for exercising political skill. This suggests that varying experiences that come with different hierarchical positions, also among military student officers, are important. Taken together, individual social effectiveness, including political skill, play a role for measures pertinent to organizational performance.

Methodological considerations

While the present study, particularly in it identifying individual differences in terms of profiles, provides a contribution to the area there are some limitations. An obvious limitation relates to the characteristics of the international military setting. This professional occupational context mainly includes men, which limits generalization to domestic settings mostly including women, such as elementary school teaching. However, while tasks and performance goals may seem to differ, social effectiveness skills may still facilitate work in seemingly different contexts which involve problem-solving, negotiation, and collaboration with others (e.g., Ahearn *et al.*, 2004; Ferris *et al.*, 2005; Perrewé *et al.*, 2000). Besides specifics of the context and samples, the present study includes self-reports only. This involves a risk of common method variance with possible overestimation of associations (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003; Podsakoff, MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012).

However, this risk is often overestimated (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Importantly, individuals are still in the best position to report on their own behaviors, perceptions, and experiences (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003, 2012). Instead, the cross-sectional study design seems more of a limitation since it allows no conclusions regarding causality.

A main methodological contribution of this study involves the use of a person-oriented approach (Mäkikangas *et al.*, 2018; Oberski, 2016). While the present findings partly replicated previous findings from variable-oriented research, the person-oriented approach also allowed for more nuanced combinations of political skill dimensions that go beyond arbitrary cut-offs. Despite the profiles in this sample of military staff ranging from weak over moderate to strong, the person-oriented approach still distinguished between different types of weak political skill. This clearly underscores the relevance of investigating different combinations of political skill dimensions. Obviously, person-oriented analyses of political skill in other samples may identify other combinations of political skill. Besides sample characteristics, the context is likely to play a role. This means that future research should ideally include longitudinal designs allowing the study of how political skill vary over time and between tasks, with measurements going beyond self-reports and single-items to provide a broader understanding of the correlates, coherence, and complexity of profiles of political skill and their prevalence in larger samples reflecting different occupations and their organizational contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Investigating measurement properties and profiles of political skill, this study expands the existing research to include individual differences in a challenging international professional context where such differences can be key to performance. Specifically, the study contributes by showing that it is possible to measure political skill with its four dimensions in an international military setting. More importantly, the four political skill dimensions can be used to identify groups of individuals with distinct profiles characterized by: (1) weak political skill; (2) weak political skill with strong sincerity; (3) moderate political skill; and (4) strong political skill, with moderate political skill seeming most prevalent. Furthermore, there were potentially important

variations between profiles in terms of demographics, personality, and job performance. While there are differences between military and civil organizations, along with potential contextual variations in the development of political skill, knowledge of adaptive behaviors including social effectiveness skills which facilitate collaboration may be pertinent to any organizational setting.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to all who volunteered participation and to all those who in different ways enabled the collecting of self-reports. The Swedish Defence University funded the PhD position of the first author. Additional financial support came from The Swedish Armed forces and Stockholm University.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Received 26 June 2020, Revised 25 March 2021, accepted 16 September 2021