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Emotional intelligence and dispositional affectivity as moderators of workplace aggression: The impact on behavior choice

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Abstract

This paper presents a model of emotional intelligence and dispositional affectivity as moderators of workplace aggression. Particular attention is devoted to the mediating processes through which workers make behavioral choices resulting from perceived injustices primarily using the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills of “emotional intelligence” and dispositional affectivity. The model explores the five components of emotional intelligence, which include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Building on the works of Goleman [Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.; Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.] and others, the model examines the individual’s degree of emotional intelligence and the impact that these skills may have on the type of behavior exhibited after the perception of injustice. The model also examines the impact that dispositional affectivity has on behavioral choices as well. It is proposed that the specific behavior choice can result in adaptive/constructive behavior or maladaptive behavior, such as workplace aggression. We include research propositions and discuss managerial implications as well as recommendations for training, selection practices, counseling, and attributional training. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; Dispositional affectivity; Workplace aggression

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1. Introduction

There exists much interest in the area of emotional intelligence on the part of both academic scholars and practitioners (Fox, 2000). Mayer and Salovey (1995) define emotional intelligence as “the capacity to process emotional information accurately and efficiently, including that information relevant to the recognition, construction, and regulation of emotion in oneself and others” (p. 197). Dimensions of emotional intelligence include self-confidence, self-control, emotional awareness, and empathy. These emotional dimensions are just a few of many that permeate everyday organizational life. Emotionally intelligent individuals may be more aware of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others, better able to identify them, and better able to communicate them when appropriate (Mayer & Salovey, 1993). Emotions influence behavior choices in the workplace and can even undermine rational selection of optimal courses of action (Leith & Baumeister, 1996).

Dispositional affectivity is also a significant predictor of work attitudes and may impact individual behavior at work. The two dimensions of affective response are trait-positive affect (PA) and trait-negative affect (NA) (Cropanzano, James, & Konovsky, 1993). Positive affect is the disposition to experience positive affective states while negative affect is the disposition to experience negative affective states. Studies have shown affect to be strongly related to job attitudes (Fisher, 2000) and to reactions to stress in the workplace (Burke, Brief, & George, 1993; Chen & Spector, 1991; Dua, 1993; Moyle, 1995; Schaubroeck, Ganster, & Fox, 1992). Therefore, dispositional affectivity may play a significant role in predicting individual behaviors in the face of perceived injustice at work.

Emotional intelligence and dispositional affectivity may be integral to understanding aggression in the workplace. The presence of aggression in the workplace has received considerable attention in recent literature (Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999; Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996; Neuman & Baron, 1998). Thus, the need to recognize the roots of workplace aggression has been well documented (Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996; Chenier, 1998; Greenberg & Barling, 1999; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996). In 1992, some sources estimated occurrences of nonfatal workplace violence assaults to be as high as half a million incidents (Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996). Bachman (1994) estimated organizational costs to include US\$55 million in lost wages resulting from 1,751,100 missed days of work on the part of half a million employees. However, little attention has been given to nonfatal forms of organizational violence on the part of academic researchers (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). O’Leary-Kelly et al. (1996) define workplace aggression as the process by which an individual attempts to physically injure a coworker, and they define workplace violence as the outcome, or the consequences, of those attempts. In a study by Romano (1994), 20% of participating human resource managers indicated that their organizations had encountered workplace violence since 1990.

Though workplace violence receives significant media attention, much of the aggression at work is in a less intense form. In fact, 99.8% of the victims of workplace violence survive (Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996). Aggression can encompass various forms of behavior by which individuals attempt to harm others in the workplace (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Aggression can include insubordination, sabotage, lying, spreading rumors,

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