



Personality, equity sensitivity, and discretionary workplace behavior



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ABSTRACT

The present study sought to utilize an equity based approach to understand the relationships between broad personality traits (i.e., Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness) and two important workplace behaviors: organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) and workplace deviance (WD). We hypothesized that the relationships between these traits and OCB/WD could be somewhat accounted for by the association between these traits and individual differences in equity sensitivity – one's input/output orientation. Using two samples ($N_s = 182$ and 206) we found evidence that (a) Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness are associated with equity sensitivity, (b) equity sensitivity predicts levels of OCB and WD, and (c) Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness predict OCB and WD through their association with equity sensitivity. Although equity sensitivity provided clarity as to these relationships, direct effects remained for Conscientiousness on WD in one of the samples, and Honesty-Humility retained a direct effect on WD in both samples. Agreeableness was not robustly associated with equity sensitivity, but did have a direct negative effect on WD, indicating additional important mechanisms linking traits to WD. Overall, however, evidence emerged that individual differences in equity sensitivity (Benevolence versus Entitledness) can help to understand the associations between broad personality traits and workplace behavior.

Workplace Deviance (WD) and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs) are two critical sets of organizational behaviors that have been studied extensively in the organizational sciences, as they play a significant role in the attainment of organizational goals and are central to the understanding of individual workplace behaviors (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Workplace deviance (WD) is defined as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both” (Bennett & Robinson, 2000, p. 349). WD includes negative workplace behaviors such as theft, coming in late, or rude or aggressive acts towards co-workers. On the other hand, OCBs are generally more positive discretionary behaviors that support the broader social and organizational success, such as helping others, volunteering, and attending non-mandatory functions (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Lee & Allen, 2002; Organ, 1997). WD has been demonstrated to have many potential damaging and costly effects on organizations (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), whereas OCBs are proposed to positively impact employee productivity and organizational performance (Bolino, Turnley, & Bloodgood, 2002; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994).

Given the importance of WD and OCB, research has focused on understanding the personality traits that predict such behaviors (e.g., Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Organ & Ryan, 1995). For instance, within the HEXACO model,

research has found Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness to be consistently negatively associated with WD and similar behaviors (e.g., Lee et al., 2005; Louw, Dunlop, Yeo, & Griffin, 2016), whereas research on the Big Five has found Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability to be the strongest predictors of WD (e.g., Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). A similar constellation of traits has been proposed to be central to understanding OCB, although in the positive direction, with Conscientiousness and Agreeableness consistently predicting OCB (Borman et al., 2001; Ilies, Scott, & Judge, 2006).

Despite our increasing knowledge of the traits that predict OCB and WD, there are gaps in our understanding of the theoretical mechanisms through which personality may impact these behaviors. In other words, our understanding of “why” certain traits may predict OCB and WD remains under-represented. In the present study, we propose that the relationship between broad personality traits and these behaviors can be explained by the fact that individuals with certain personality traits have different preferences surrounding input/outcome ratios, and differing tolerances for under-reward and over-reward in the workplace – otherwise known as differences in “equity sensitivity” (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). Benevolents are more oriented towards inputs and tolerant of being under-rewarded, while Entitleds are more outcome oriented and intolerant of under-reward. Recent research has indicated that three traits that are central correlates of WD and OCB –

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namely Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness – are also robust correlates of equity sensitivity, with individuals high on these traits being more Benevolent, and individuals low on these traits being more Entitled (Woodley, Bourdage, Ogunfowora, & Nguyen, 2016). Combined with the fact that equity and justice frameworks have been central in understanding WD and OCB, we believe that individual equity sensitivity may enable an understanding of why certain broad personality traits are associated with WD and OCB. This is consistent with research proposing that equity sensitivity might help to understand the relations between certain traits and workplace behaviors (Woodley & Allen, 2014).

In the present study, we test the idea that Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness predict WD and OCB because of their association or shared variance with equity sensitivity. The implications of this study are two-fold: it builds knowledge by enhancing our understanding of the complex associations between individual differences and workplace behaviors, and it may also provide valuable insight to organizations on how different individuals may react to various organizational phenomena, such as injustice and reward.

1. Personality and WD/OCB

Research has found that personality plays a substantive role in predicting OCB and WD. Within the HEXACO model, the two most prominent predictors of WD have been Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness. Honesty-Humility describes individual differences in tendencies towards manipulateness, willingness to take advantage of others, greed, and perceived superiority (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Research has repeatedly demonstrated Honesty-Humility to be robustly and negatively correlated with WD and related behaviors (e.g., Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; Zettler & Hilbig, 2010). These same studies also demonstrate Conscientiousness to robustly and negatively relate to WD, while studies utilizing the Big Five or Five-Factor Model have shown meta-analytic negative associations for Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability with WD (e.g., Berry et al., 2007). On the other hand, studies have found that Conscientiousness and Agreeableness have the most robust positive relationships with OCB (Borman et al., 2001; Organ & Ryan, 1995). In sum, there seems to be a strong personality basis in predicting WD and OCB, with prominent roles for Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness.¹

2. The equity basis for WD/OCB

Both WD and OCB are noted as being discretionary behaviors that are rooted in social exchange and responses to the environment. One's perceptions of fairness and justice in the workplace predicts both WD and OCB, with organizational justice perceptions being positively related to OCB (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001) and negatively related to WD (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001).

Of particular relevance to the present paper is equity theory and the idea of distributive justice. According to equity theory (Adams, 1965) individuals judge fairness based on the ratio of inputs (e.g. effort, time, energy) to outputs (e.g. rewards) that they receive relative to a referent other. In the context of WD and OCB, if an individual feels they are under-rewarded relative to their inputs, they may reduce their effort to decrease inputs or perhaps steal (i.e., engage in WD) to increase their outputs. Similarly, an individual who feels that they are being treated well and rewarded beyond what they deserve may increase their inputs – for instance, by engaging in OCB – to better match their outputs.

Rather than all individuals having the same preferences surrounding the appropriate ratio of input-outcomes, Huseman et al. (1987) propose

that individuals differ in their preferred ratios, with some individuals being more input-oriented and others more outcome-oriented. Variation on this preference is labeled “equity sensitivity.” On the high end of the continuum are Benevolents – these individuals focus on what they can “give” in a situation, and are more tolerant of under-reward. On the other end of the continuum are Entitleds – individuals who are focused on outcomes, and prefer to receive more relative to their inputs than others do.

An individual's equity sensitivity should impact the extent to which they engage in OCB and WD. Indeed, Blakely, Andrews, and Moorman (2005) found that when perceptions of organizational justice were low, Entitleds exhibited substantially lower levels of OCBs, whereas Benevolents performed more OCBs than Entitleds regardless of justice perceptions. Similarly, research indicates that Benevolents seem to engage in more citizenship behaviors in a team environment than do Entitleds (Akan, Allen, & White, 2009).

Conversely, WD has also been found to be a potential means by which employees can control their input/output ratios, particularly in instances of perceived unfairness or mistreatment. A number of studies have shown that individuals who perceive greater unfairness tend to engage in more WD (e.g., Aquino, Galperin, & Bennett, 2004). It is proposed that this perceived unfairness or injustice is related to WD because employees who feel unfairly treated may reduce their co-operative behaviors to avoid exploitation and to even the score (Lind, 2001), or engage in sabotage (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002).

Despite the prominent relationship between perceived injustice and WD, research on the relationship between Equity Sensitivity and WD is limited. However, it has been found that following contract breach, entitled individuals responded more adversely as evidenced by an increasing display of interpersonal deviant acts (Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2007).

Together, we predict that equity sensitivity will be positively related to OCB and negatively related to WD, such that those who are more Benevolent will engage in more OCB and less WD, and those who are more Entitled will engage in less OCB and more WD.

3. Personality, equity sensitivity, and WD/OCB

To this point, we have demonstrated that both broad personality traits and equity sensitivity have a role to play in predicting OCB and WD. However, we propose that traits such as Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness are associated with OCB and WD at least partially because these personality traits are associated with variations in equity sensitivity. Indeed, a recent study by Woodley et al. (2016) found that across three studies and both self and peer-reports of personality, Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness were robustly associated with equity sensitivity, such that individuals high on these traits tend to be more Benevolent, and individuals low on these traits tend to be more Entitled. Agreeableness demonstrated similar patterns with equity sensitivity, although somewhat less robustly. While the finding with Honesty-Humility was novel, other studies have also found Conscientiousness and Agreeableness to relate to equity sensitivity (e.g., Bing & Burroughs, 2001; Scott & Colquitt, 2007). These findings were consistent with the nature of these traits for a number of reasons. First, individuals low on Honesty-Humility tend to believe they are superior to others and are very status and outcome oriented, whereas those high in Honesty-Humility are higher on reciprocal altruism (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Moreover, research indicates that agreeable individuals are more flexible, trusting, and lenient with others (Lee & Ashton, 2004), whereas those high (versus low) in Conscientiousness are generally input oriented and willing to work hard even when outcomes (e.g., pay) are low (Burnett, Williamson, & Bartol, 2009).

Together, these findings indicate that individuals high on these traits will be more input-oriented and willing to tolerate unequal treatment, whereas those low on these traits will attempt to gain more

¹ Although a number of other traits have emerged as predictors of WD and OCB in various studies, we focus our discussion on these three, as they are uniquely related to equity sensitivity.

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