Reconceptualizing self-defeating work behavior for management research

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ABSTRACT

Self-defeating work behavior (SDWB) is a common and costly behavior that is not adequately incorporated into management research. We argue there are two reasons for this. First, the construct has not been adequately defined for management scholars. This has hindered grounding the construct in the organizational context and created confusion about differences between SDWB and related constructs like deviant work behavior (DWB). Second, the underlying nature of SDWB is not well understood by management scientists. To stimulate management research on a costly and arguably understudied construct, we provide a definition of SDWB and use the definition to clarify relations between SDWB and DWB. We then proffer two research propositions to guide future management research based on two salient attributes of SDWB: 1) self-regulation failure, and 2) the habitual nature of SDWB. Finally, we demonstrate how investigating the two research propositions can open new territories for studying SDWB in the workplace.

1. Introduction

People have likely engaged in self-defeating work behavior (SDWB) since humankind began working (Steel, 2007). However, management research typically assumes employees are motivated to preserve the self and maximize self-interest (i.e., they pursue rational self-interest) (Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004; Miller, 1999). Comparatively less management research has investigated self-initiated and self-controlled employee behavior that can undermine job performance, healthy work attitudes, and work relationships. Yet, there is compelling evidence to suggest employees often engage in such behavior; and when they do, they violate the pursuit of rational self-interest and undermine their own work-related outcomes and relationships (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Goulston, 2005). This is exemplified by studies indicating that behaviors such as procrastination, escalation of commitment, self-handicapping, and impulsiveness interfere with work performance (Steel, Brothen, & Wambach, 2001; Wolters, 2003), decision quality (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Staw, 1997), goal setting (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994), prosocial behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007), interpersonal relationships (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007), and self-management (Renn, Allen, Fedor, & Davis, 2005; Renn, Allen, & Huling, 2011). Thus, it seems that SDWB may be a prevalent and critically important type of work behavior that management scholars have paid relatively scant attention to through the years.

One foundational issue that may have impeded management research on SDWB is the lack of a clear parsimonious definition of the construct. Most studies on self-sabotaging behaviors have been conducted in psychiatry and psychology under the general label of
self-defeating behavior (cf., Baumeister et al., 1994; Kass, Spitzer, Williams, & Widiger, 1989). Consequently, management researchers have usually borrowed definitions, conceptualizations, and measures from research in these fields (Renn et al., 2011; Thau et al., 2007). Although borrowing terminology and theories from related disciplines is common in management research, this practice with SDWB has resulted in a construct that is not adequately defined for the work context (Schwab, 1980; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009). What’s more, our review indicates that there are multiple definitions of self-defeating behavior in the psychological literature, and there appears to be no agreed upon definition of the construct in any discipline (cf., Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Cudney & Hardy, 1993; Goulston & Goldberg, 1996; Thau et al., 2007). To address this confusion, we review and analyze previous scholarly and professional definitions of self-defeating behavior to identify common characteristics of the behavior and then offer a clear parsimonious definition for SDWB to guide future management research on the construct. We use the new definition to clarify the SDWB construct and to distinguish SDWB from deviant work behavior (DWB).

Although studies have linked SDWB to important work-related outcomes, this research has focused on a limited number of behaviors. For instance, procrastination has been the subject of over 500 published studies and escalation of commitment has been the focus of more than 900 publications (see for a review, Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Sleesman, Conlon, McNamara, & Miles, 2012; Steel, 2007). Even though research on procrastination and escalation of commitment has unquestionably made valuable contributions to management science, there is a need to investigate other SDWBs. For example, comparatively little research has investigated employee counterproductive bargaining strategies, ineffective ingratiation strategies, self-handicapping, or failure to delay gratification in the workplace. This is not a trivial oversight because over 50 years of research in psychology on delay of gratification indicates that this self-defeating behavior (i.e., impulsiveness) predicts long-term achievement, coping with stress, social competencies, and longevity (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988; Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990). We believe that a clear parsimonious definition will help management researchers identify, classify, and study other types of SDWB like impulsiveness that may prove to be just as important as procrastination and escalation of commitment for understanding how and why employees can undermine their own effectiveness at work.

After providing a new definition of SDWB, we unpack two meaningful attributes of the construct. First, we discuss self-regulation failure as an inherent property of SDWB. After reviewing previous attempts to uncover commonalities among SDWB, we explain how certain SDWBs may share common forms of self-regulation failure. If SDWBs share common types of self-regulation failure, then management scholars may be able to transfer knowledge and theoretical frameworks from one SDWB (e.g., procrastination) to other, less studied, SDWBs (e.g., self-handicapping, impulsiveness, health care negligence) that fall within the same domain of self-regulation failure. This has potential for opening new theoretical and empirical pathways to investigating SDWBs that undermine employee effectiveness in the workplace but have not been sufficiently examined in management research. Second, we elaborate on the habitual nature of SDWB by linking SDWB to the reflective-impulsive model of social behavior (Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009; Strack & Deutsch, 2004). We then demonstrate how leveraging the habitual nature of SDWB can stimulate new management research on the relation between SDWB and the work context and on SDWB and work goals (Wood & Neal, 2007). Our overarching purpose is to illustrate how future management theory and research can move into new territories using the newly proposed definition of SDWB and a deeper understanding of these two important and relatively unexplored characteristics of SDWB.

2. Self-defeating work behavior

2.1. Definition

To the best of our knowledge, SDWB is an undefined construct. Researchers have investigated self-defeating behavior in a work context and in relation to work-related criteria, but the studies were guided by broad general definitions of this type of behavior drawn from related disciplines (e.g., Renn et al., 2005, 2011; Thau et al., 2007). This practice risks impeding progress on clarifying meaning of the SDWB construct, identifying phenomena that fall within and outside of the domain of the construct, validating the SDWB construct, and substantive management research on SDWB (Schwab, 1988). As Schwab (1988) notes, defining constructs should be an iterative process where definitions and empirical research continuously inform and influence each other over time. We suggest it is time for empirical research on the broad and general self-defeating behavior construct to inform a more precise and clear definition of SDWB. To accomplish this, we reviewed and analyzed similarities and differences in the most prominent scholarly and professional definitions of self-defeating behavior used in psychiatry, psychology, and management research to derive a clear parsimonious definition of SDWB.

Table 1 (see Table 1 for definitions and examples) includes eight definitions of self-defeating behavior along with examples of actions falling within the domain of the definitions. According to the American Journal of Psychiatry the term “self-defeating behavior” evolved from early work by Kraft-Ebing (1950) on masochism and Freud’s (1905) book, Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexual Theorie (Kass et al., 1989). After years of contentious debate within the American Psychiatric Association, self-defeating personality disorder was included in the Appendix of the DSM-III-R to facilitate study on the “disorder.” As shown in Table 1, to be classified as self-defeating personality disorder, there must be a pattern of avoiding or undermining pleasurable experiences, being drawn to harmful situations and relationships, and a rejection of help from others as indicated by five of six more specific patterns of behaviors (Kass, 2011). Despite creating this classification system, inclusion of self-defeating personality disorder in the DSM-III-R was short-lived because opponents argued that the classification overlapped with other psychiatric disorders (Skodol, Oldham, Gallaher, & Beziranian, 1994). However, the debate among psychiatrists and psychoanalysts about excluding self-defeating personality disorder from the DSM remains unresolved and continues through today (Amen, 2005; Kass, 2011; Goulston, 2005).

While clinicians were discussing whether to include self-defeating personality as a psychiatric disorder in the DSM-III-R, scholars
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