Predicting counterproductive work behavior from the interaction of personality traits

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ABSTRACT

Much attention has been given to enhancing the prediction of counterproductive work behavior (CWB), with a particular focus on the relationship between the five factor model of personality and CWB. Several scholars have advocated for a more complex view of this relationship, and rather than focusing simply on main effects, to examine the interaction of personality traits in predicting employee behavior. In consideration of the traits most strongly related to CWB, we examined the interaction between: (1) conscientiousness and emotional stability, (2) agreeableness and emotional stability, and (3) conscientiousness and agreeableness on CWB directed at individuals (CWB-I) and the organization (CWB-O). Results from a multi-national sample illustrate the interaction of traits increases the prediction of CWB over and above a single trait approach. The interactions suggest employees perform the least CWB when they are high on both traits (in the respective trait pairings), but low levels on *either* trait relate to increased CWB, and at levels comparable to individuals low on *both* traits. We conclude research on personality and CWB would benefit from an interactive approach as it allows for greater prediction of CWB-O and CWB-I, which is important in light of the organizational and interpersonal consequences of employee misbehavior.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on the organizational and interpersonal consequences of counterproductive work behavior (CWB), defined as intentional employee actions that harm or are intended to harm the organization and (or) its members (Spector & Fox, 2005). Examples of such behaviors include employee theft, harassment, abusive supervision, incivility, withholding effort or information, and aggression. These behaviors have been incorporated into the study of job performance at work, with CWB reflecting actions that put the organization and its members at risk (Sackett & DeVore, 2001). Increased CWB has been linked to decreased productivity, employee dissatisfaction, and greater psychological distress (Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Tepper, 2000). With these negative consequences in mind, much attention has been given to enhancing the prediction of CWB, with a particular focus on the relationship between the five factor model of personality (FFM) and CWB (Sackett & DeVore, 2001).

Meta-analytic evidence on the relationship between the FFM and CWB has found the strongest correlations between the traits of conscientiousness (hard working, dependable, and detail oriented, $\rho = -0.42$), agreeableness (likeable, easy to get along with,

and friendly, $\rho = -0.46$), and emotional stability (calm, low anxiety, and low emotionality, $\rho = -0.27$) and CWB (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). Correlations between extraversion (sociable, talkative, and ambitious) and openness to experience (curious, intelligent, and independent) and CWB demonstrate much weaker relationships (ρ range from -0.09 to 0.02; Berry et al., 2007). Thus, the FFM traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability show the greatest potential for predicting when an employee is more or less likely to behave counterproductively.

Building on this work, several scholars have advocated for a more complex view of the relationship between personality and job performance, and rather than focusing simply on main effects, to examine the interaction of personality traits in predicting behavior at work (King, George, & Hebl, 2005; Witt, 2002; Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002). A more holistic view of an individual would suggest behavior reflects a combination of traits rather than a single characteristic (Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996; Zaccaro, 2007) and the interactive relationship between traits carries important considerations (Witt, 2002). For example, Witt's (2002) arguments for the interaction of extraversion and conscientiousness on task performance follows on the circumplex model of personality whereby each trait can be characterized by its relationship with another facet of personality (Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992). By depicting the interaction of FFM traits, a tighter conceptual meaning of personality can be gained over and

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above single, hierarchical trait models, and as a result, the pairing of traits can be used to more accurately predict employee behavior (Hofstee et al., 1992).

Consideration of the meta-analytic evidence on traits most strongly related to CWB raises three avenues of inquiry, including the interaction between: (1) conscientiousness and emotional stability, (2) agreeableness and emotional stability, and (3) conscientiousness and agreeableness on CWB. These relationships can be explained by the theory of reasoned action, which predicts behavior as a function of the consequences of engaging in such behavior, beliefs about the normative nature of the behavior, and the motivation to comply with others (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In the context of CWB, the theory of reasoned action suggests that CWB is more likely to be performed if the person thinks detection is unlikely, believes CWB is widespread, and the motivation to comply with proper workplace norms is weak (Cullen & Sackett, 1993). We argue that personality influences individuals' beliefs in each of these three areas. For example, as evidenced by research on integrity tests (Ryan & Sackett, 1987), the traits of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability have all been linked to increased perceptions of CWB detection, weaker beliefs that other employees are engaging in CWB, and greater motivation to comply with norms of proper workplace conduct. However, individuals low on these traits believe there is a lesser chance of being caught and that more people around them are performing CWB. Further, they may be less inclined to care whether or not they are obeying workplace norms (Cullen & Sackett, 1993) which, in sum, will relate to increased engagement in CWB. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, it is important to consider the interaction of these traits to understand how employees will behave, especially when trait combinations suggest divergent beliefs regarding detection, the degree to which others are engaging in CWB, and compliance with workplace norms.

Following this theory, we argue that conscientiousness and emotional stability will interact to predict CWB, such that the lowest levels of CWB will be observed for individuals who are highly conscientious and highly emotionally stable (Hypothesis 1). While highly conscientious (emotionally stable) individuals may be less inclined to perform CWB, in combination with low levels of emotional stability (conscientiousness), the tendencies to withhold CWB will be tempered. Similarly, we argue that agreeableness and emotional stability will interact to predict CWB, such that the lowest levels of CWB will be observed for individuals who are highly agreeable and highly emotionally stable (Hypothesis 2). In other words, the beliefs of low emotional stability (agreeable) individuals regarding detection, normative nature of CWB, and low motivation to comply with proper norms will mitigate the tendencies of highly agreeable (emotionally stable) individuals to withhold CWB. Finally, we argue that agreeableness and conscientiousness will interact to predict CWB, such that the lowest levels of CWB will be observed for individuals who are highly agreeable and highly conscientious (Hypothesis 3). While highly agreeable or highly conscientious individuals may be more inclined to withhold CWB, their tendencies will weaken when combined with low conscientiousness (or agreeableness) as less consideration is given to proper standards of workplace conduct.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The data for this study were drawn from a larger study conducted by Coyne (2010) on the nature of productive and counterproductive behavior at work. The study focused on employees in the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Turkey, and Greece. Research on national culture suggests these four countries are diverse with respect to the five primary dimensions of culture (i.e., power distance, masculinity, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation) most often studied in cross-cultural research (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004).

In the UK, an online survey was sent to 136 full- and part-time staff at an event management firm. Of the 105 completed surveys, the average employee was 31.9 years old with 3.3 years tenure, and 44% of the respondents were female. The Dutch sample consisted of completed responses to an electronic survey from 203 of 218 targeted employees in an events management company. Twenty-eight percent of the employees were female, and the average employee was 33.9 years old with an average organizational tenure of 4.5 years. In Turkey, a paper-and-pencil survey was conducted at a poultry and soy production facility with a volunteer sample of 200 employees. Of the 185 employees who returned the completed survey, 62% were female, had worked at the organization for 2.8 years, and were 29 years old on average. The Greek sample combined responses from two pharmaceutical organizations. In the first sample completed paper questionnaires were obtained from 17 of the 19 employees, and in the second organization, 53 completed responses were obtained from 98 participants invited to take an online survey. The combined Greek sample was 54% female, with an average age of 35.6 years and tenure of 6.3 years. Based on pair-wise deletion, the final sample for the analysis resulted in 517 employees (UK = 97; Netherlands = 183; Turkey = 172; Greece = 65).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Counterproductive work behavior

We examined two types of CWB, including those directed at the organization, such as theft or wasting time (termed CWB-O), as well as behaviors directed at individuals within the organization, such as bullying and gossip (termed CWB-I; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). As such, participants completed the voluntary work behavior questionnaire (Coyne & Gentile, 2006), which measures the extent to which employees engaged in CWB-O and CWB-I over the past 12 months. Ten items assessed CWB-O (e.g., "Damaged or wasted property, material, or company supplies") and ten items assessed CWB-I (e.g., "Gossiped or spread rumours about a co-worker behind their back"). Responses were provided on a six-point scale ranging from 1 = never to 6 = very often.

2.2.2. Personality

The FFM of personality was measured with the 50-item International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999). Each trait was assessed with 10 items and participants were asked to indicate, on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 = very inaccurate to 5 = very accurate, how accurately each statement described them.

2.2.3. Analytic strategy

Our analyses were conducted in two parts. First, analyses for measurement equivalence were conducted for the measures of personality and CWB to ensure that the measures were invariant across cultures. Measurement equivalence analysis involves a process of placing increasingly restrictive parameters on the measurement models and comparing indices of model fit to examine the scaling and representativeness of each of the model indicators (Drasgow, 1984). Establishing this evidence is important because it demonstrates the measures of personality and CWB are equivalent in meaning across different cultures and only measures that are invariant can be accurately compared to one another.

After establishing this evidence, we proceeded to examine our relationships using hierarchical linear regression. Each