Deviant behavior in constrained environments: Sensation-Seeking predicts workplace deviance in shallow learners

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ABSTRACT

Workplace deviance represents voluntary and intentional behavior that is harmful to organizations. In the current study, we examine workplace deviance using the Hybrid Model of Learning in Personality (HMLP), which has previously been shown to predict dysfunctional behavior in the workplace. Using a sample of part-time workers, we investigated whether dimensions of Rationality and Sensation-Seeking predict workplace deviance, when controlling for known predictors from the Big Five. More interestingly, we also assessed whether the effects of Sensation-Seeking and Deep Learning on workplace deviance depend on how constrained employees feel in their current position. Overall, our results indicate the unique importance of Rationality in the prediction of Interpersonal Deviance, and Sensation-Seeking and Deep Learning in the prediction of Organizational Deviance. In particular, we found that in highly constrained workplaces, Sensation Seekers tend to engage in deviant behavior when they have low levels of Deep Learning, but tend not to engage in deviant behavior when they have high levels of Deep Learning. Results are consistent with the HMLP and have implications for the management of deviant behavior in the workplace.

1. Introduction

Workplace deviance can be defined as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). Workplace deviance involves various negative work behaviors ranging from discrete demeanors such as taking unapproved breaks, to more destructive deeds such as aggression and violence. Research has identified several precursors to workplace deviance; these include highly constrained working conditions (Spector & Jex, 1998) and individual personality characteristics of employees (Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007). The current study examines workplace deviance from both a personality trait and situational perspective, in order to further our understanding of situations where particular individuals might be at a high risk of engaging in deviant workplace behavior. This research is necessary because despite the increasing incidence of workplace deviance (Chirayath, Eslinger, & De Zolt, 2002) researchers have not yet identified specific risk factors for sub-groups of individuals.

Workplace deviance contains two dimensions: Organizational Deviance and Interpersonal Deviance. Organizational Deviance refers to deviant behavior directed at an organization or its systems, such as stealing, taking long lunch breaks, or leaving early (Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). Interpersonal Deviance refers to deviant behaviors directed at other individuals in the organization, such political deviance, gossiping, and aggression (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). These variables are generally only moderately correlated with each other (Bennett & Robinson, 2000) and are likely predicted by different variables. In the present study, we focus on both forms of workplace deviance, but argue that they occur in different people and for different reasons.

Previous research exploring the relationship between personality traits and workplace deviance has linked the Big Five model of personality to workplace deviance (Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007). The Big Five is the dominant framework for describing individual differences in personality, and consequently provides a good starting point for the investigation of the relationship between personality traits and workplace deviance. Research on the Big Five and workplace deviance has found that low Conscientiousness (i.e., low trait levels of organization, reliability) and low Agreeableness (i.e., low trait levels of empathy, compassion) have been the most consistent predictors of workplace deviant behavior (e.g., Bolton, Becker, & Barber, 2010).

In addition to the Big Five, specific motivational traits have also been linked to workplace deviance. Motivational traits represent stable individual differences in dimensions of motivation, thought to underlie the basic dimensions of personality (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) and therefore provide a theoretical platform that is helpful in describing why individuals are motivated to partake in certain work behaviors (Bennett &

Robinson, 2000). Research has indicated that individuals who are high in approach motivation and high in avoidance motivation are likely to engage in deviant behaviors (Diefendorff & Mehta, 2007).

In the current study, we build on research investigating the trait basis of workplace deviance, by examining dysfunctional workplace behavior through the lens of the Hybrid Model of Learning in Personality (HMLP; Jackson, 2008). We also consider how traits interact with situational variables to produce deviant workplace behavior. As outlined in more detail later, the HMLP is a model of learning and personality designed to explain performance, counterproductive behavior, and learning, based on the idea that all individuals have an underlying, biologically based drive termed 'Sensation-Seeking' that motivates them to learn and explore their environment. According to the model, Sensation-Seeking will result in *functional* or *dysfunctional* behavior, depending on whether individuals learn to re-express or redirect their instinctively driven Sensation-Seeking approach tendencies with more complex conscious, socio-cognitive based cognitive styles, namely: Mastery, Rationality, Deep Learning, and Conscientiousness (Jackson, 2008). In the present research, we focus specifically on Sensation-Seeking, Rationality, and Deep Learning in the prediction of workplace deviance, as we believe these dimensions play important roles in the prediction of deviant behavior.

2. Rationality and Interpersonal Deviance

Rationality has received very little attention in personality psychology but is well understood in clinical psychology from the perspective of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (Ellis, 2004; Jackson, Izadikhah, & Oei, 2012), in which rational beliefs are defined as beliefs that are logical and consistent with reality, whereas irrational beliefs are defined as unstable, illogical, and not consistent with reality. At the trait level, Rationality can be defined as the tendency to hold rational beliefs, and is characterized by flexible, non-dogmatic thinking, and emotional independence (Jackson, 2008). Rationality is therefore associated with functional cognitions (flexible thinking, emotional independence) whereas low Rationality is associated with dysfunctional cognitions and behaviors (fixed, dogmatic, unreasonable, and emotionally dependent beliefs associated with high demandingness).

We suggest that Rationality will be a direct predictor of interpersonal workplace deviance (i.e., deviance characterized by aggression, interpersonal conflict, bullying, etc.). Individuals with irrational beliefs are known to have problems with interpersonal conflict in general and are more likely than people with rational beliefs to have poor mental health (Ellis, 2004). Additionally, the dogmatic nature of individuals low in Rationality indicates they will poorly handle individuals who disagree with their perspective. It follows therefore that low Rationality will be associated with workplace behavior characterized by aggressive, rude, or antisocial behavior directed at other individuals within the organization (Interpersonal Deviance).

H1. *There will be a negative relationship between Rationality and Interpersonal Deviance.*

3. Sensation-Seeking, Deep Learning, and Organizational Deviance

We also argue that Deep Learning will moderate Sensation-Seeking in the prediction of Organizational Deviance (i.e., deviant behavior directed at the organization) in highly constrained workplaces. The HMLP claims that a common biological foundation exists for positive and negative behavior within the workplace (Jackson, 2008; O'Connor & Jackson, 2008). Specifically, the model posits that both functional and dysfunctional learners have an underlying instinctive urge to learn and explore their environment, which manifests at the trait level as Sensation-Seeking (O'Connor & Jackson, 2008). Functional learners are understood to adaptively utilize Sensation-Seeking through socio-

cognitive skills to accomplish productive outcomes (e.g. self-reported work performance, school performance). Dysfunctional learners on the other hand maladaptively utilize their Sensation-Seeking, based on poorly developed socio-cognitive skills, and consequently engage in risky or counterproductive behavior. This aspect of the HMLP is supported (Gardiner & Jackson, 2015; Jackson, Baguma, & Furnham, 2009; Jackson, Hobman, Jimmieson, & Martin, 2009; Jackson et al., 2012; O'Connor & Jackson, 2008) and extends research claiming that Sensation-Seeking increases the tendency to engage in primarily dysfunctional behavior such as risk-taking behaviors (Ball & Zuckerman, 1990).

Deep Learning is associated with deep processing and critical thinking. Individuals high in Deep Learning have both the tendency and ability to devote their cognitive resources to reflecting on experiences and integrating new information (Jackson, 2008). According to the HMLP (Jackson, 2008), Deep Learners are effective *experiential* learners (see Kolb, 1984), in that they seek out concrete experiences and adaptively use such experiences to reflect and learn. Consistent with Jackson (2008), we argue that Sensation Seekers with low Deep Learning will struggle to learn from their experiences, and will be motivated to move from one concrete experience to another. On the contrary, we argue that Sensation Seekers with high Deep Learning will learn from their experiences, and only seek out new experiences once they have reflected and integrated knowledge based on their prior experiences.

In the context of work, we argue that Sensation-Seeking and Deep Learning will have predictable relationships with Organizational Deviance under certain conditions. In particular, we focus on high levels of Organizational Constraints (i.e., constrained working conditions, restrictive rules/procedures, inadequate facilities) because previous research has illustrated the importance of this variable in the prediction of workplace deviance (Spector & Jex, 1998). Specifically, we suggest that Sensation Seekers with low levels of Deep Learning will have difficulty when working under high levels of Organizational Constraints, because the restrictive rules and procedures limit their need for new experiences. Frustration with such conditions will likely result in Sensation Seekers engaging in Organizational Deviance behaviors such as breaking rules and leaving early. On the other hand, we suggest that Sensation Seekers with high Deep Learning will have less difficulty working under high levels of Organizational Constraints. It is likely they will quickly learn that Organizational Deviance behavior is inappropriate (based on their effective experiential learning) and also develop a complex understanding of why such restrictions might be necessary in their environment. Furthermore, their ability to reflect on, and learn from difficult experiences, as opposed to simply seeking out new experiences, might mean that such individuals will respond adaptively to limited resources. Indeed such individuals may recognize innovative and creative ways to make the best of a difficult situation. Consistent with this, Sensation-Seeking and related constructs (e.g. extraversion) have been found to predict creativity in constrained conditions (see O'Connor, Gardiner, & Watson, 2016; Zuckerman, 2014). Consequently, it follows that Sensation Seekers with high Deep Learning will be less likely to feel frustrated in high levels of Organizational Constraints, will more likely be engaged in their work, and be less likely to engage in Organizational Deviant behavior overall.

H2. *Deep Learning will moderate the relationship between Sensation-Seeking and Organizational Deviance under conditions of high Organizational Constraints. In such conditions, Sensation-Seeking will lead to Organizational Deviance at low Deep Learning, but will not predict deviance at high levels of Deep Learning.*

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Participants were part-time workers from various occupations and organizations who were concurrently undertaking university study