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Virtues and Vices in Workplace Settings: The Role of Moral Character in Predicting Counterproductive and Citizenship Behaviors

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Abstract

Which moral character traits are influential in predicting moral and immoral workplace behaviors? We focus our investigation on two workplace behaviors relevant to morality, organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) and counterproductive work behaviors (CWB), and review research on key personality traits associated with these behaviors. We discuss broad traits described by the Big Five personality framework and the HEXACO model of personality, as well as narrower traits that predict moral and immoral behaviors, including guilt proneness, self-control, and moral identity. The research we describe challenges situationist perspectives in business ethics and psychology that claim that character traits do not significantly and consistently predict behavior across situations. In contrast to situationist perspectives, we argue that moral character exists and predicts consequential work outcomes.

Keywords: personality, psychology, moral character, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior

Introduction

Does moral character exist? If so, can moral character help us to predict moral and immoral behaviors? Such questions have long been and continue to be discussed by philosophers, psychologists, and business ethicists (e.g., Allport, 1937; Alzola; 2008, 2012; Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012, 2013b; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013a, 2014; Doris, 2002; Fleeson, Furr, Jayawickreme, Meindl, & Helzer, 2014; Freud, 1961; Harman, 2009; Hogan, 1973; Lee & Ashton, 2012; Miller, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Historically, more attention has been paid to those arguing against the existence of moral character. Such individuals, known as situationists, believe that environmental influences dominate human behavior (e.g., Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989; Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009; Mischel, 1968; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Zimbardo, 2004). According to proponents of this view, character traits do not significantly and consistently predict behavior across situations. In contrast, others claim that moral character and other personality traits do indeed guide human behavior and point to empirical evidence from social/personality and industrial/organizational psychology that supports this view (e.g., Alzola; 2008, 2012; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Cohen et al., 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Fleeson et al., 2014; Funder & Ozer, 1983; Lee & Ashton, 2012; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007).

Recent work in our lab supports the moral character view (Cohen et al., 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). In two diary studies of approximately 1,500 working adults throughout the United States, we demonstrated that individual differences in moral character significantly predicted unethical and ethical work behaviors over a period of three months (Cohen et al., 2014). Contrary to the situationist view, basic attributes of the work setting, such as the enforcement of

an ethics code, were unrelated to the frequency with which employees committed unethical and ethical work behaviors. The behaviors we investigated were counterproductive work behaviors (CWB)—lying, stealing, abusing colleagues, and other harmful acts—and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB)—mentoring, volunteering, expressing gratitude, and other helpful acts.

Specifically, each week for a period of three months, we asked employees in diverse jobs and organizations to report how often they committed these behaviors; and, after one month of being in the study, we asked coworkers of these employees to report their observations of the frequency with which the employees' committed these behaviors (Cohen et al., 2014). Results indicated that employees classified as having low levels of moral character (based on their self-reported personality traits) committed substantially more counterproductive work behaviors as compared to those with average or high levels of moral character, both according to their self-reported behavior and their coworkers' observations of their behavior. Employees classified as having high levels of moral character committed more organizational citizenship behaviors than those with low or average levels of moral character, and this was especially apparent in the coworkers' reports of the employees' citizenship behaviors. These outcomes suggest that moral character traits exist and that moral character is a useful concept to study because it predicts a variety of moral and immoral behaviors in people's everyday lives, including the workplace. In this chapter, we describe several of the key moral character traits that we identified as being particularly relevant to predicting immoral and moral work behaviors. Before describing these traits, we first define what we mean by moral character and moral behavior.

Moral Character and Moral Behavior—Some Definitions

We regard moral character as a class of individual differences related to morality and ethics that are stable and consistent across time and situations, but nonetheless capable of change according to one's life circumstances. Like other scholars of moral character (e.g., Hogan, 1973; Lee & Ashton, 2012; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), we view it not as a single personality dimension but rather as combination of traits. Personality traits are defined by psychologists as "an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns" (Funder & Fast, 2010, p. 669). Moral character, then, refers to individual differences in patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior associated with morality and ethics (see Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2014 for more detailed discussion of this topic). In this chapter, we review key moral character traits identified by psychologists as relevant to understanding and predicting moral and immoral behavior. These traits have important implications for two key classes of behavior in the workplace—counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB).

Morality is relationally-based—people determine whether actions are moral or immoral depending on how they affect relevant social relationships and group functioning (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2013; Rai & Fiske, 2011). Behavior that hinders group functioning is considered harmful, whereas behavior that facilitates group functioning is considered helpful. By extension, employee behavior in the workplace may be considered unethical/immoral or ethical/moral according to how much it intentionally harms or helps an organization and its members.

While several definitions of CWB exist in the literature (e.g., Gruys & Sackett, 2003; Spector & Fox, 2005; Marcus & Schuler, 2004), most characterize CWB as voluntary deviant or ineffective behavior that potentially harms an organization's legitimate interests. It is important to keep in mind that people who engage in CWB do so intentionally. CWB consists of a broad range of behaviors, from behaviors directed at the organization itself, such as purposely doing work incorrectly, leaving work earlier than allowed, and sabotaging or stealing work equipment, to behaviors directed at people within the organization or associated with the organization, such as threatening, abusing, or insulting coworkers, clients, or customers (Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006).

In contrast, OCB captures helpful behavior in the workplace. OCB is characterized as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization" (Organ, 1988, p. 4). OCB, like CWB, can be directed at the organization itself, or to people within or associated with the organization. Examples of citizenship behaviors include: decorating, straightening up, or otherwise beautifying common work space; taking time to advise, coach, or mentor coworkers; lending a compassionate ear when someone has a work problem; and changing vacation schedules, work days, or shifts to accommodate coworkers' needs (Fox, Spector, Goh, Bruursema, & Kessler, 2012).

What determines whether employees will engage in these behaviors? As in many areas of psychological research, some have studied the role of situational or organizational factors (e.g., Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Chen & Spector, 1992; Organ & Ryan, 1995) while others have studied the role of personality factors (e.g., Salgado, 2002; Dalal, 2005; Cullen & Sackett, 2003; Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Of course, a comprehensive study of any behavior is

incomplete without examining the joint influence of both. However, in practice, personality has historically been considered by some to be a less powerful predictor of social behavior than situational influences (Doris, 2002; Mischel, 1968; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). More recently, however, this view has been debunked by empirical evidence demonstrating that personality has strong and consistent effects on behavior—potentially just as strong if not stronger than situational influences (e.g., Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Cohen et al., 2014; Funder & Ozer, 1983; Marcus & Schuler, 2004; Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). In this chapter, we review research on personality factors that influence CWB and OCB to provide readers with a brief overview of key findings from this literature.

Big Five Personality Dimensions

The most widely studied correlates of CWB and OCB are those derived from the Five Factor Model of personality, also known as the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 1987). According to the Big Five framework, all aspects of personality can be categorized into five broad dimensions: Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, and Emotional Stability (sometimes referred to as Neuroticism). In the Big Five framework, Conscientiousness refers to the extent to which an individual is responsible, hard-working, organized, goal-directed, and dependable. Agreeableness refers to the extent to which an individual is altruistic, modest, trusting, cooperative, and good-natured. Extraversion refers to the extent to which an individual is outgoing, assertive, energetic, sociable, and talkative. Openness to Experience refers to the extent to which an individual is imaginative, curious, independent, and willing to try new things. Emotional Stability (viewed from the negative pole) refers to the extent to which an individual is moody, anxious, irritable, and emotionally vulnerable.

Among these five dimensions, Conscientiousness is the strongest predictor of both CWB and OCB (Cullen & Sackett, 2003; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2003; Salgado, 2002; Sackett & DeVore, 2001; Hough, 1992; Berry et al., 2007). Individuals low in Conscientiousness are more likely than others to commit CWB because they tend to be irresponsible toward their duties, withhold effort from tasks, and are less rule-abiding. Low Conscientiousness is primarily linked to CWB directed toward organizations, such as stealing supplies from the workplace (Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006). In contrast, individuals high in Conscientiousness are not only less likely to engage in CWB, but also more likely to engage in OCB (Organ et al., 2006; Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2011). Individuals high in Conscientiousness are motivated to engage in OCB—particularly impersonal, organizationally-directed forms of OCB (Organ et al., 2006)—because doing so provides them with opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to the organization and to accomplish their goals both in the short-term (e.g., successfully perform work-related tasks) and in the long-term (e.g., earn a promotion).

Research within the Big Five framework also finds that Agreeableness predicts CWB (Borman et al., 2011; Hough, 1992; Salgado, 2002; Cullen & Sackett, 2003; Ones et al., 2003). Agreeableness is primarily linked to interpersonal forms of CWB, such as being nasty or rude to one's coworkers or clients (Mount et al., 2006; Berry et al., 2007). Individuals low in Agreeableness tend to lack the motivation to cooperate with others, often resulting in strained interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, individuals high in Agreeableness are concerned with helping others and meeting the needs of the larger group—motivations that foster engagement in OCB. Individuals high in Agreeableness may be motivated to perform OCB not just because of interpersonal concerns, but out of a larger concern for the organization and how it affects others within it and outside of it (Bourdage et al., 2012).

Emotional Stability, in the Big Five framework, is also negatively related to CWB (Cullen & Sackett, 2003), particularly so with CWB directed toward organizations (Hough, 1992; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2003; Mount et al., 2006). However, the link between Emotional Stability and CWB is less strong than both Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. For instance, a study of the relationship between these variables and CWB demonstrated that Emotional Stability did not uniquely predict CWB after accounting for relationships with Conscientiousness and Agreeableness (Mount et al., 2006). Thus far, researchers have failed to find a meaningful or consistent relationship between Emotional Stability and OCB (Organ & Ryan, 1995).

In regards to the two other personality dimensions in the Big Five, there is little consistent evidence of strong relationships of CWB or OCB with Extraversion or Openness to Experience. In general, some studies indicate that Extraversion but not Openness to Experience positively correlates with OCB (e.g., Kumar, Bakhshi, & Rani, 2009) while others reveal mixed findings for Extraversion (e.g., Neuman & Kickul, 1998). A third camp suggests that the underlying facets of Extraversion predict OCB in different directions, leading researchers to misinterpret the predictive power of this trait (Moon, Hollenbeck, Marinova, & Humphrey, 2008). In regards to Extraversion and CWB, one investigation found that individuals who are both low in Honesty-Humility and high in Extraversion are more likely to commit CWB than those low in Honesty-Humility and low in Extraversion; however, Extraversion alone does not directly influence CWB (Oh, Lee, Ashton, & Reinout, 2011).

Honesty-Humility and the HEXACO Personality Dimensions

More recent research suggests that, in fact, there are not five, but six major dimensions of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007; Lee & Ashton, 2012). According to this work—known as the HEXACO model of personality structure—the six personality dimensions are Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. The newest dimension, Honesty-Humility, refers to the extent to which an individual is fair, sincere, modest, and greed-avoidant. People high in Honesty-Humility tend to cooperate with others and are unconcerned with personal gain, while people low in Honesty-Humility tend to exploit others and behave selfishly. The other dimensions in the HEXACO correspond somewhat to the Big Five dimensions, albeit with some differences (see Ashton & Lee, 2007 for a review of the HEXACO model).

The relationship between Honesty-Humility and delinquent behaviors, including CWB, is well-established (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2013; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013; Lee, Ashton, & De Vries, 2005; Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007; Marcus, Ashton, & Lee, 2013; O'Neill, Lewis, & Carswell, 2011). Indeed, research investigating the relationship between HEXACO personality dimensions and CWB suggests that Honesty-Humility more strongly predicts CWB than traditional Big Five Factors such as Conscientiousness and Agreeableness (Lee et al., 2005; Marcus et al., 2007). Moreover, Emotional Stability and Agreeableness are only influential predictors of CWB when conceptualized as part of the Big Five personality model, not the HEXACO model. This is related to the fact that the HEXACO dimensions of Emotionality and Agreeableness are theoretically differ from the Big Five dimensions of low Emotional Stability and Agreeableness, despite the similar labels (Ashton & Lee, 2007). In the HEXACO model, Emotionality refers to the extent to which an individual is fearful, anxious, dependent, and sentimental. Agreeableness (versus Anger) refers to the extent to which an

individual is forgiving, gentle, flexible, and patient. The HEXACO dimension of Conscientiousness is similar to the Big Five's dimension with the same name.

Fewer studies have investigated the relationship between Honesty-Humility and OCB, as compared to between Honesty-Humility and CWB. One exception is a study by Bourdage and colleagues (2012), in which the researchers demonstrated that low levels of Honesty-Humility were associated with OCB motivated by impression management purposes (e.g., to be viewed positively by others at work, to get ahead) but not OCB motivated by altruistic values or concern for the organization. Another recent study exploring Honesty-Humility and OCB is by Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, and Kim (2013), who found a positive relationship between high Honesty-Humility (assessed both with self-reports and coworker reports) and coworker's observations of OCB. Interestingly, they did not find a correlation between Honesty-Humility and self-reported OCB (neither with self-reported Honesty-Humility, nor coworker-reported Honesty-Humility). In contrast, self-reported and coworker-reported Honesty-Humility were both correlated with self-reported and coworker-reported CWB. These results suggest that the relationship between Honesty-Humility and CWB is stronger and more robust than the relationship between Honesty-Humility and OCB. Possibly this is do the fact that it is not necessarily immoral to abstain from committing OCB, but it is generally considered immoral to commit acts of CWB.

Guilt Proneness, Self-Control, & Moral Identity

The traits we have discussed thus far are the six broad dimensions of personality. However, other research has identified comparatively more narrow traits that predict CWB and OCB. Prominent examples include guilt proneness, self-control, and moral identity.

First, guilt proneness is a trait indicative of the extent to which an individual would feel bad about his or her behavior after committing a transgression or making a mistake, even if knew

one knew about what happened (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2013; Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011). People who score high on measures of guilt proneness refrain from engaging in unethical behavior because they are guided by internalized moral values. When they do misbehave, they tend to take repair-oriented actions and vow to do better in the future. Individuals high in guilt proneness are consistently less likely to commit CWB and more likely to commit OCB compared to other people (Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2013; Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013). These relationships hold regardless of whether guilt proneness, CWB, and OCB are assessed with self-reports or coworker reports (Cohen, Panter, Turan, Morse, & Kim, 2013).

Second, self-control refers to the extent to which an individual refrains from personal desires and immediate gratification in order to achieve long-term goals (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). As such, this trait is related to the broad personality dimension of Conscientiousness in that both capture an ability to regulate one's impulses and focus on achieving long-term goals. People who are high in self-control are disciplined and abstain from bad behavior, including criminal behavior. Some have even gone as far as saying that nearly all criminal behavior can be explained by a lack of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). While, we think that argument overreaches because guilt proneness and other personality traits also predict criminal behavior (Tangney, Stuewig, Mashek, & Hastings, 2011), we agree that self-control plays a large role in keeping people out of trouble. In the workplace, employees with greater self-control commit less CWB and more OCB than employees with less self-control (Cohen et al., 2014; Marcus & Schuler, 2004).

Third, moral identity is characterized by how much a person's desire to be viewed as a moral person is ingrained in his or her self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002). People may have a stronger or weaker moral identities depending on how central being moral is to their sense of

who they are as individuals. Moral identity is conceptualized as having both private and public dimensions. The private dimension, known as moral identity-internalization, refers to how much an individual views his or her self as a moral person. The public dimension of moral identity, known as moral identity-symbolization, refers to how much an individual wishes to be viewed by others as a moral person. Moral identity-internalization is thought to be a relatively central indicator of moral character (Cohen et al., 2014), and is linked to such prosocial behaviors as donating to money to out-group members and self-reported OCB (Cohen et al., 2014; Reed & Aquino, 2003). Individuals with internalized moral identities are also less likely to commit CWB Cohen et al., 2014). Less support has been found for the relationship between moral identity-symbolization and CWB or OCB (Cohen et al., 2014).

Conclusion

In closing, moral character plays an influential role in determining behavior in the workplace. Employees high in moral character commit more virtuous behavior and less vicious behavior than employees low in moral character. What moral character traits matter? Of the six broad personality dimensions, Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and (to a lesser extent) Agreeableness are key factors that influence CWB and OCB. Other influential moral character traits include guilt proneness, self-control, and moral identity. Although the moral character traits we reviewed in this chapter do not constitute an exhaustive or comprehensive list, they do represent key dispositions that employers should be on the lookout for when making selection and promotion decisions in their organizations.

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