



Integrity, ego depletion, and the interactive impact on counterproductive behavior



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ABSTRACT

Integrity tests are widely used measures in organizational selection for predicting counterproductive behaviors. Research has identified elements of self-control underlying measures of integrity and reviews of integrity suggest that self-control may play a role in understanding how integrity predicts behavior. We examine how depletion of one's self-control resource (ego depletion) impacts the relationship between integrity and off-task behavior. Results indicate that when ego depleted, high and low integrity individuals were just as likely to engage in off-task behavior. Thus, temporary detriments in self-control negate the relationship between integrity and counterproductive behavior. Expression of integrity and avoidance of counterproductive behavior by high integrity individuals requires a corresponding level of the self-control resource.

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1. Introduction

Integrity tests are psychological inventories used to predict counterproductive work behaviors such as theft, rule-breaking, absence and turnover, and poor work habits, as well as overall job performance (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993). Measures of integrity are also related to counterproductive and deviant behaviors outside the workplace, including academic dishonesty (Lucas & Friedrich, 2005). Yet, questions remain about the integrity construct. Research has identified elements of self-control in measures of integrity and reviews have suggested that self-control may play a role in the expression of integrity (Bazyz & Woehr, 2012; Berry, Sackett, & Wiemann, 2007; Sackett & Wanek, 1996; Wanek, Sackett, & Ones, 2003). The primary goal of the present article is to directly examine the potential moderating role of self-control on integrity and behavioral outcomes.

Self-control is a tendency to avoid actions whose long-term costs exceed temporary advantages (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Recent research on self-control has focused on the stability of the construct, finding that self-control is a limited resource that can be depleted – referred to as ego depletion (Baumeister, 2002). The very act of exerting self-control has been shown to result in a diminished capacity to exert self-control in subsequent and unrelated behaviors (Hagger, Wood, Stiff, & Chatzisarantis, 2010), including procrastination/off-task behavior (Vohs et al., 2008), lying for monetary gain (Gino, Schweitzer,

Mead, & Ariely, 2011), and diminished work engagement (Lanaj, Johnson, & Barnes, 2014).

The present investigation extends previous research by examining the moderating role of ego depletion on the integrity/counterproductive behavior relationship. Based on the premise that an individual's ability to exhibit self-control is not constant, changes in self-control are expected to impact the ability to act consistent with one's typical level of integrity. Using the framework of behavioral self-regulation, the relationship between integrity and off-task behavior is expected to change as a function of state-level self-control (i.e., ego depletion state).

1.1. Integrity and ego depletion

Measures of integrity are well established tools in selection systems (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2012). Generally classified as either overt and covert (or, personality-based) tests, both types measure attitudes and tendencies for the purpose of predicting behaviors (Sackett & Wanek, 1996) and have similar predictive validities (Ones et al., 1993). Ones et al. found that integrity tests are predictive of a range of counterproductive work behaviors (CWB) and that integrity test validities (average $r = 0.33$, corrected $r = 0.47$) are also stable across time and conditions. More recent evidence suggests less consistency in observed validities (Van Iddekinge, Roth, Raymark, & Odle-Dusseau, 2012), yet still supports integrity as a significant predictor of CWB (Sackett & Schmitt, 2012). Moreover, integrity tests are likely to reduce the overall adverse impact of a selection system, marking them as an especially useful tool for organizations (Ones & Viswesvaran, 1998; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998).

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Little research, however, has examined the impact that situational factors may have on integrity, or more specifically, expression of integrity. Ryan et al. (1997) found that those who were lower in integrity saw dishonest behavior as being more normal and acceptable compared to high test scorers. Mumford, Connelly, Helton, Strange, and Osburn (2001) found that a variety of personal background factors (e.g., exposure to negative peer groups, non-supportive families) were related to integrity test scores. However, this study did not address the impact of current situational factors on integrity or CWB. Fine, Horowitz, Weigler, and Basis (2010) found interactions between integrity and external factors (e.g., perceived norms for deterring CWB, engagement) in predicting CWB. However, differences were limited to low integrity individuals; no differences in CWB were seen among high integrity individuals.

Relatedly, Baumeister and Heatherton (1996) and Baumeister (2002) proposed a model wherein self-control is a limited resource that can be depleted and renewed. Although self-control is a dispositional trait that is generally stable over time, it is also an ability that is not necessarily stable within a limited period. Ego depletion represents a deficit in operational capacity, leading to underregulation of behavior (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). When depleted, there is an inadequate amount of strength to override an unwanted thought, feeling, or impulse. Ego depletion has also been found to moderate the effect of various traits on behavior. The dispositional driver of behavior (e.g., trait) is consistent regardless of one's ego state, but ego depletion removes the capacity to actually restrain one's behavior (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006). As such, under conditions of diminished self-control, individuals may engage in behaviors that are otherwise undesirable (cf., Gino et al., 2011; Vohs et al., 2008).

1.2. Behavioral self-regulation

Although behavioral self-regulation is conceptualized somewhat differently by self-regulation and control theories, the central tenets of each are similar (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1977) is based on the idea that individuals possess the ability to monitor and control their thoughts, motives, and actions. Individuals adopt behavioral standards that guide, motivate, and regulate behavior and act to reduce discrepancies (Bandura, 1991). The basic element of control theory is the feedback loop (Campion & Lord, 1982). In the feedback loop, an awareness of one's present condition is compared to a point of reference. If a discrepancy is detected, then a behavior is performed or expectations are changed in order to reduce the discrepancy. It is this loop that provides a basis for integrity and ego depletion to interact in their impact on behavior.

Within this model integrity serves as the standard that guides behavior (Bardi & Schwartz, 2003) while state-level self-control/ego depletion functions in the operate phase (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). When a behavior is decided upon, the self-control resource will provide the requisite strength to enact it. Individuals will behave in accordance with the standards they have set (integrity) and subsequently adjust or continue behavior based on negative feedback. This adjustment will be dependent on one's strength (state-level self-control/ego depletion). If there is diminished ability to override an unwanted thought, feeling, or impulse, then underregulation will result.

2. Hypotheses

This study focuses on the role of integrity in predicting 'off-task behavior' – behavior not directly related to assigned task completion. We propose that this relationship will be moderated by ego depletion. Specifically, we examine the impact of a manipulation designed to induce a diminished level of self-control (i.e., ego depletion) on the relationship between integrity and off-task behavior. Drawing on theories of behavioral regulation we expect that participants exposed to the ego-depletion manipulation will experience an increased level of self-

control exertion. In essence, this reflects a check on the effectiveness of the ego depletion manipulation. More importantly, we also expect that the relationship between measures of integrity and subsequent off-task behavior will be significantly weaker for individuals experiencing an increased level of self-control exertion. Thus, we test the following hypotheses:

H1. Participants exposed to a manipulation designed to require a higher level of self-control (i.e., experimental group) will report a significantly higher level of self-control exertion than will non-depleted participants (i.e., the control group).

H2. There will be a significant interaction between integrity and ego depletion with respect to counterproductive behavior.

H2a: Integrity will be significantly related to counterproductive behavior under non-depletion conditions.

H2b: Integrity will not be significantly related to counterproductive behavior under depletion conditions.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 216 undergraduate business students at a large university in the southeastern United States. 51.4% were male and 48.6% were female. The majority (83.6%) of participants was White, 6.9% were Asian, and 4.2% were African American, with an average age of 21.3. Participants received course credit in exchange for participation.

3.2. Procedure

Prior to attending the experimental session, participants completed a measure of integrity, via an online system. Participants subsequently attended a session in which they completed a thought listing exercise. Details for this task are provided in paragraph 3.2.1. Upon completion of the thought listing task, participants completed a task perception questionnaire. Participants then completed a problem solving task (described in paragraph 3.2.2).

3.2.1. Thought listing exercise

The white bear/zoo task (Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987) required participants to imagine a visit to a zoo and to write down everything and every animal that came to mind. Half of the participants were instructed not to think about a white bear, but if they did, they should suppress the thought and continue to think about other animals and situations in the zoo (the experimental condition). The other half of participants were presented with the scenario with no restrictions (the control condition). This task is commonly used to manipulate ego depletion (Burkley, 2008; Muraven, Collins, & Nienhaus, 2002; Muraven & Slessareva, 2003).

3.2.2. Problem solving task

Participants were asked to complete a series of math problems drawn from the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) database. The use of GRE questions is consistent with previous research involving ego depletion (Finkel et al., 2006; Schmeichel, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2003). Performance was presented as beneficial to the university; responses would be used to create a database of performance to help establish norms for future students. Participants were told they had 45 min to answer as many questions as possible, but that they did not need to answer every question, as there were many others also contributing data to the database. Lastly, they were instructed that they could not use a calculator or scratch paper.

Participants responded to questions on a computer, using an online quiz system. Math problems were presented one at a time, in sets of eight, with a scheduled break opportunity allowed after each set.

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