



## Cutting corners at work: An individual differences perspective



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### ABSTRACT

Across two studies, we investigated individual differences in the tendency to cut corners at work, and assessed whether a range of personality traits predict this behavior. In two independent samples of Australians ( $N = 533$ ) and Americans ( $N = 589$ ), we examined individual differences in cutting corners at work and tested sex differences and the surrounding nomological network of cutting corners. Collectively, we found that men were more likely than women were to cut corners at work, which was fully a function of individual differences in psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and conscientiousness. Various personality traits accounted for individual differences in the tendency to cut corners at work, indicating that individuals with this tendency may be morally compromised, selfish, impulsive, and not forward-thinking. Results were generally unaffected by contextual factors, such as the hypothetical risks and rewards associated with cutting corners. In our discussion, we focus on the deleterious consequences of cutting corners and the importance of selection and Human Resource practices that address the potential fallout from having such people in the workplace.

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“Corner-cutting” is a behavior characterized by skipping one or multiple steps considered important to a task, for the purpose of completing the task sooner by taking shortcuts (Beck, Scholer, & Schmidt, 2016) and bending the rules (Hannah & Rovertson, 2015; Sekerka & Zolin, 2007). It most commonly occurs in jobs that are highly demanding with few resources at ones disposal (Sekerka & Zolin, 2007) and where the organizational culture prioritizes efficiency regardless of potential risks (Beck et al., 2016; Parks, Ma, & Gallagher, 2010). Cutting corners is generally considered an undesirable aspect of employee behavior. Corner-cutting is associated with low job performance (Sackett, 2002), safety code violations and injuries (Christian, Bradley, Wallace, & Burke, 2009), and days absent from work caused by related injuries (Halbesleben, 2010). However cutting corners is not inherently negative and in some situations can potentially be adaptive (Beck et al., 2016). Indeed, the related concept of “workarounds” provides a context-specific conceptualization of cutting corners as “clever methods for getting done what the system does not let you do easily” (Ash et al., 2003; p. 195). Clearly, in the context of dysfunctional systems whereby administrative processes block the achievement of work-related goals, it follows that corner-cutting will sometimes be adaptive.

To date, research on cutting corners has focused primarily on situational predictors (e.g., Beck et al., 2016; Halbesleben, 2010). However, like other forms of salient behavior in the workplace (e.g., organizational citizenship behaviors, social influence, bullying), it is likely that

cutting corners is also the result of differences between people, such as sex differences and individual differences in personality. In two independent studies, therefore, we seek to better understand tendencies towards cutting corners by (1) developing a short self-report measure of corner-cutting at work, (2) testing for sex differences in cutting corners, (3) examining the nomological network surrounding this tendency with standard, broad-band personality traits, (4) testing whether sex differences in self-reported corner-cutting are a function (i.e., mediated by) personality traits, (5) test the stability of personality traits as predictors of corner-cutting behavior across contexts characterized by different consequences for this behavior (i.e. reward or punishment) hypothetical reward or punishment in the workplace, and (6) test whether work outcomes (i.e., income) of corner-cutting behavior are dependent on the personality traits of people who cut corners.

### 1. Individual differences in cutting corners

In this paper, we study the trait basis of cutting corners using three broadband sets of personality and one narrowband individual difference. Broadband traits are considered general in nature, distal in their predictive ability to understand individual differences in attitudes and behaviors, and describe people's dispositional biases towards the world. For broadband traits, we adopt the Big Five model (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and openness/intellect), its extension to include individual differences in honesty and humility in the HEXACO model, and capture darker aspects of personality in the Dark Triad traits (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism; Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). There is considerable

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literature demonstrating the importance of broadband traits in predicting a range of important outcomes including eating habits (Goldberg & Strycker, 2002), health beliefs (O'Connor, Martin, Weeks, & Ong, 2014), leadership (Judge & Bono, 2001; O'Connor & Jackson, 2010), job performance (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000), job satisfaction (Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002), and interests (Jonason, Wee, Li, & Jackson, 2014c).

Based on this literature, a number of traits stand out as instrumental in predicting workplace outcomes. First, individuals who are conscientious tend to perform better at work and engage in less counterproductive workplace behavior (Bowling, 2010). Conscientiousness describes “individuals who have characteristic tendencies to be dependable, careful, thorough, and hardworking” and consequently should be better performers on the job (Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; p. 870). We therefore suggest conscientious employees are likely to diligently complete their work, even when certain tasks seem tedious or unnecessary. We expect that individuals high in conscientiousness will generally be less likely to cut-corners in the workplace (H1a) and that their unwillingness to cut-corners will exist regardless of contextual factors (H1b).

In addition, neuroticism/emotional instability may prove important. Emotionally unstable and neurotic people tend to be less satisfied at work and perform poorly overall (Judge & Bono, 2001). Neuroticism is a trait that predisposes people to be vigilant to threats in one's environment and sensitive to punishment (DeYoung, 2015). As cutting corners comes with the potential risks of getting caught, fired, and demoted, we expect those with high levels of emotional stability or limited neuroticism to report little corner-cutting at work (H2a) which should be further suppressed when risk of punishment (H2b) and concerns about the quality of one's work are made salient (H2c).

For years, research on the role of personality traits in organizational contexts has been dominated by the Big Five (see Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2014a). Only recently has attention been drawn to the utility of examining darker aspects of human nature to understand aspects of organizational psychology such as vocational interests (Jonason et al., 2014c), workplace manipulation (Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012), and satisfaction (Jonason, Wee, & Li, 2015) as they relate to the Dark Triad traits (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013). The Dark Triad traits are characterized by vanity and self-centeredness (i.e. narcissism), manipulation and cynicism (i.e. Machiavellianism), callous social attitudes and impulsivity (i.e. psychopathy). There are good theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that these traits should be associated with attitudes that would facilitate cutting corners at work. First, the traits are associated with impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), risk-taking and future discounting (Jonason, Koenig, & Tost, 2010), limited self-control, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity symptoms (Jonason et al., 2010), deception and lying (Jonason et al., 2014b), and have a characteristically short-term mating style (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009). As cutting corners may impose costs on others (i.e., externalities), the limited empathy characterized by these traits (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013) may be fundamental in facilitating cutting corners. Second, these traits may represent adaptations geared towards prioritizing immediate outcomes over delayed rewards as predicted by Life History Theory (Figueredo, Vásquez, Brumbach, Schneider, Sefcek, Tal, & Jacobs, 2006; Wilson, 1975). Cutting corners may be a manifestation of the tradeoffs individuals face between doing work well that may take more time and doing it fast and perhaps less well and with more potential risk. If correct, those characterized by these traits (especially psychopathy) should report more corner-cutting (H3a) and given the considerable correlation between the Dark Triad traits (especially psychopathy) and the Honesty/Humility factor of the HEXACO model (Jonason & McCain, 2012), we expect low rates of honesty and humility to be associated with more corner-cutting (H3b). Low scores on this dimension have been associated with a range of maladaptive and antisocial behaviors in the workplace such as unethical business practices (Lee, Ashton, Morrison, Cordery, & Dunlop, 2008).

Thus far, we have focused on the broadband personality traits, but as mentioned above we were also interested in one narrowband personality trait as well. Narrowband traits are highly specific and act as proximal predictors of attitudes and behaviors. In this case, we adopt a measure that has its origins in the organizational psychology literature: proactive personality (Bateman & Crant, 1993). This construct taps individual differences in people's tendencies to take advantage of opportunities for advancement at work and planning for the future of one's career. People characterized by a proactive personality have objective (i.e., supervisor-rated) and subjective career success, career self-efficacy, and are characterized by extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Fuller & Marler, 2009). All estimates suggest these people are “ideal” employees. As cutting corners may have consequences that will inhibit getting ahead at work, we expect individuals high on this trait to shy away from cutting corners when presented with that opportunity (H4). As such, tests with this trait serve to assess the discriminant validity of corner-cutting, as we expect it to be less about advancement and more about getting the job done as quickly as possible.

We also expect sex differences in cutting corners. If we are correct that cutting corners reflects the tendency to prioritize immediate needs at work and engage in risky behavior, then men should be more likely to cut corners than women are (H5a). However, on its own, the bivariate association between sex and cutting corners is not informative because it begs the question of what are the psychological mechanisms that differ in the sexes that might predict this. Therefore, we further seek to investigate how personality traits might act as mediators accounting for the sex difference in cutting corners (i.e., confounding mediation). In this case, it is not that men are dispositionally predisposed as an entire sex towards cutting corners, but rather that men tend to be more likely than women are to be characterized by personality traits that enable cutting corners at work. In particular, we expect sex differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason, Li & Czarna, 2013) to be particularly salient. For instance, sex differences in people's interest in casual sex are mediated by individual differences in the Dark Triad traits (Jonason et al., 2009). In contrast to men, women are more conscientious and neurotic (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). Therefore, we expect individual differences in the Big Five traits and the Dark Triad traits to act as mediators for sex differences in corner-cutting (H5b).

Thus far we have focused only on the nomological network surrounding cutting corners and neglected potential outcomes. Previous research has examined the relationship between cutting corners and various outcomes such as safety (Christian et al., 2009; Halbesleben, 2010). Here, we seek to extend this research by examining whether corner-cutting is costly to individuals in terms of their career success (using salary as a proxy; see Heslin, 2005). We, therefore, explore whether the tendency to cut corners is associated with salary. Although this analysis is primarily exploratory, we do not expect a strong relationship in either direction because the impact of cutting corners on career success will likely depend on the *reason* for cutting corners. For example, when individuals cut-corners because they are disorganized and careless (i.e., low in conscientiousness) it is likely to have different consequences than when they cut corners because they have a selfish interest in boosting their own productivity at the potential expense of organizational goals (i.e., high in psychopathy). Therefore, we expect those low in conscientiousness who cut corners to make less income (H6a) but those high in psychopathy who cut corners to make more income (H6b).

Although no existing research (we know of) has focused on individual differences in the tendency to cut corners at work, a growing body of research is seeking to determine the trait basis of related constructs. For example, *perfectionism* and *workaholism* are work-styles associated with positive and negative outcomes in the workplace (e.g., high engagement, high job strain; Stoeber, Davis, & Townley, 2013) that have been linked to underlying personality traits. Similarly, workplace *maverickism* is a style of work characterized by independent thinking, goal-focus, and high

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