



# Trait psychopathy, task performance, and counterproductive work behavior directed toward the organization



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## ABSTRACT

On the basis of Lykken's (1995) two-factor theory of trait psychopathy, we examined how self-centered impulsivity and fearless dominance were related to the achievement (or lack of achievement) of organizational goals (i.e., task performance and counterproductive work behavior directed toward the organization). We expected that self-centered impulsivity, characterized by behavioral impulsivity and disregard for responsibilities, would be positively related to counterproductive work behavior directed toward the organization. We further expected that fearless dominance would be positively associated with counterproductive work behavior directed toward the organization for individuals with low levels of education and low levels of a specific social skill called interpersonal influence and positively associated with task performance for individuals with high levels of education. The results provided support for the differential relations between the psychopathic personality factors and the criteria of interest as well as for the moderating role of education and the skill of interpersonal influence in the behavioral expressions of the fearless dominance factor.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychopathy in the workplace has thus far received much more attention from the public media than from scientific studies. Smith and Lilienfeld (2013) noted that this gap between popular and scientific attention is both substantial and troubling. The gap is substantial because in the public media, psychopathy is mostly portrayed as a unitary instead of a multifactorial construct, and the gap is troubling because there is a grossly negative characterization of individuals high on psychopathy. However, there might also be a bright side to these dark traits because there is reason to suspect that the different factors of psychopathy may be differentially related to behavior and performance and could potentially have a positive influence under certain circumstances (Hall & Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld, Watts, & Smith, 2015). Thus, using incomplete and prematurely undifferentiated concepts is risky as practitioners and the public may both potentially be led astray.

In scientific studies, psychopathy (Lykken, 1995) is mostly considered a personality construct (but see Harris, Skilling, & Rice, 2001, for a contrasting view) with hallmarks such as fearless dominance (FD; primary psychopathy) and self-centered impulsivity (SCI; secondary psychopathy; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005; Miller & Lynam, 2012). Despite the grossly negative characterization of individuals high on psychopathy in popular sources (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013), a recent meta-analysis found that global psychopathy had only weak relations with

counterproductive work behavior ( $r = 0.06$ ) and job performance ( $r = -0.08$ ; O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012). Lilienfeld et al. (2012) reported that the performance of former U.S. presidents was positively associated with the FD factor of psychopathy. Schütte et al. (2015) analyzed the relations between FD and the *interpersonal dimensions* of counterproductive work behavior and performance. They also identified a bright side of fearless dominance: A specific social skill at work called interpersonal influence (II) moderated the behavioral expression of FD. When combined with II, FD was negatively associated with interpersonal counterproductive work behavior (e.g., publicly embarrassing someone at work) and positively associated with interpersonal performance, so-called contextual performance (e.g., sharing information, meeting deadlines).

In this research, we focus on task performance (TP) and counterproductive work behavior directed toward the organization (CWB-O; Bennett & Robinson, 2000), thereby expanding previous searches for the bright side of FD as previous research focused on the *interpersonal dimensions* of work behavior and performance (Schütte et al., 2015). More specifically, we tested the hypothesis that SCI (but not FD) is directly associated with CWB-O. Further, we tested the hypothesis that educational achievement and II moderate how FD is related to TP and CWB-O. TP involves the core substantive duties that are formally recognized as part of a job. The higher a person's TP, the more the person contributes to the achievement of organizational goals (Motowidlo, 2003). CWB-O is dysfunctional individual work behavior (e.g., embezzlement, fraud, using drugs; Bennett & Robinson, 2000) that results in a lack of achievement of organizational goals.

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By combining different streams of research, the current study sought to contribute to the literature by providing an integrated and more fine-grained view on psychopathy (a) by showing that the distinction between different factors of psychopathy enhances the understanding of the effects of trait psychopathy in the workplace, (b) by examining moderating effects that buffer the dark and augment the bright behavioral expressions of FD at work, and (c) by finding support for the role of educational level as a manifestation of an effective socialization into society (Wentzel, 2015) that is based on intelligence (Lykken, 1995).

## 2. Maladaptive and adaptive features of psychopathy

The differential configuration model of psychopathy presumes that psychopathy is an amalgam of two or more distinct factors rather than being a unitary construct (Hall & Benning, 2006; Lilienfeld et al., 2015). According to Lykken's (1995) use of the concept of psychopathy, primary psychopathy (fearless dominance; FD) is essentially characterized by fearlessness, whereas secondary psychopathy (self-centered impulsivity; SCI) is characterized by impulsivity, irresponsibility, and a lack of self-control. These two factors of psychopathy have also been found in recent research (Drislane et al., 2014; Miller & Lynam, 2012).

With reference to secondary psychopathy, Lykken (1995) noted that individuals with high levels of this factor tend to "act impulsively, 'without thinking,' without giving themselves time to assess the situation, to appreciate dangers, to foresee the consequences, or even to anticipate how they will feel about their action themselves when they have time to consider it" (p. 122). This SCI factor indicates that such individuals seek thrills, lack diligence, and are unconcerned with deadlines or responsibilities (Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005). Consistent with research on psychopathy, Schütte et al. (2015) found that SCI is positively related to *interpersonal deviance* and negatively related to contextual performance (i.e., social performance at work). Expanding on Schütte et al. (2015), in this paper, we focus on CWB-O, thereby complementing previous research on interpersonal deviance and providing a more complete portrayal of the relation between SCI and CWB-O. CWB-O is comprised of individual behaviors such as taking property from work without permission, littering the work environment, failing to follow instructions, using illegal drugs or alcohol on the job, and communicating confidential company information to unauthorized persons. We expected that SCI would be positively related to CWB-O.

**Hypothesis 1.** Self-centered impulsivity (SCI) is positively associated with organizationally directed counterproductive work behavior (CWB-O).

The FD component of psychopathic personality consists of high fearlessness, high social attention seeking, and an immunity to stress. With reference to this trait, Lykken (1995) suggested that persons high on fearlessness who are effectively socialized into society on the basis of their intelligence tend to be successful in life and are able to avoid engaging in antisocial behavior; however, persons high on fearlessness who are not effectively socialized into society tend to fail in life and display antisocial behavior.

A similar distinction was made by McClelland (1970) with reference to the power motive. The personalized power motive is associated with aggressive, reprehensible behaviors, sexual aggression, and extreme risk-taking, whereas the socialized power motive creates a desire for prosocial influence. Socialization is the process whereby a person learns and accepts the norms, values, behaviors, and social skills of competent functioning in the culture in which the person is growing up (Wentzel, 2015). Being well socialized implies that a person is more cautious, conservative, conventional, responsible, unselfish, charming, and confident (Lykken, 1995)

Building on Lykken's ideas and on the basis of previous research, we determined that level of education would be a good proxy for an effective socialization that is based on intelligence (Ceci, 1991; Deary, Strand,

Smith, & Fernandes, 2007). Ng and Feldman (2009) defined educational level as the academic credentials or degrees an individual has obtained. Many studies have found a strong association between education and effective socialization into society (Hjalmarsson, Holmlund, & Lindquist, 2015; Jung, 2015; Meyer, 2015).

Being well-socialized on the basis of one's intelligence is also associated with work behavior (Marcus, Wagner, Poole, Powell, & Carswell, 2009). In their meta-analysis, Ng and Feldman (2009) found significant but weak correlations between educational level and organizational citizenship behavior directed at the organization. In addition, they found significant but weak negative correlations between educational level and self-rated workplace aggression, on-the-job substance use, objective measures of absenteeism, and sickness- and nonsickness-related absence. These meta-analytic findings support the idea that educational level is a proxy for an effective socialization that is based on intelligence with effects on workplace behavior.

On the basis of Lykken's (1995) conception of primary psychopathy and socioanalytic theory (Hogan & Shelton, 1998), we suggest how FD can interact with socialization to impact employees' work behavior: FD ignites (high social attention seeking) and energizes (low fear and an immunity to stress) the individual, whereas successful socialization into society (i.e., behaving in a manner that is more cautious, conservative, conventional, responsible, unselfish, charming, and confident) provides socially acceptable goals and gives direction to behavior and performance in organizational and work contexts. Through effective socialization, one is able to transform one's drives into actions that are positively perceived and evaluated by others. The socialization process also consists of training individuals to "hide or at least delay, their real desires and urges and, instead to behave in ways that are consistent with the norms of civilized adult conduct" (Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007, p. 1282). Effective socialization allows a person to achieve his or her goals just as hand-eye coordination allows a person to hit a tennis ball accurately and avoid unnecessary and costly mistakes "that may secure minor short-term benefits but at the expense of significant long-term costs" (Kaiser, LeBreton, & Hogan, 2015, p. 58). On the other hand, individuals with low levels of socialization and with high FD want to immediately satiate their urge for high social attention and act regardless of any possible long-term negative consequence because of their high levels of fearlessness and immunity to stress. Therefore, we suggest that the interplay between FD and educational level, indicating effective socialization, is associated with CWB-O.

**Hypothesis 2.** Educational level (EL) moderates the relation between fearless dominance (FD) and counterproductive work behavior toward the organization (CWB-O). If EL is low (high), there is a positive (zero) relation between FD and CWB-O.

In their meta-analysis, Ng and Feldman (2009) also found a significant positive but weak correlation between EL and peer ratings of TP. The relation between EL and TP stems from intelligence; meta-analyses have shown that intelligence predicts training success and TP (Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). However, the weak relation between EL and TP can be augmented if intelligent individuals work with high energy and perseverance (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1994) such as high fearlessness and immunity to stress (FD). In addition, related previous empirical research found that socialization directed the behavioral expression of the power motive. A high sense of responsibility (socialization) combined with a strong power motive was associated with a desire for prosocial influence (Magee & Langner, 2008). Therefore, we suggest that the interplay between FD and EL, indicating effective socialization based on intelligence, is also associated with TP.

**Hypothesis 3.** Educational level (EL) moderates the relation between FD and task performance (TP). If EL is high (low), there is a positive (zero) relation between FD and TP.

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