

The dimensionality of counterproductivity: Are all counterproductive behaviors created equal?

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Abstract

Most studies of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) assess it as one or two overall dimensions that might obscure relationships of potential antecedents with more specific forms of behavior. A finer-grained analysis of the relationship between counterproductive work behavior and antecedents was conducted with the five-subcales (abuse toward others, production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal) taken from the 45-item Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist, a measure that has been used in a number of prior studies. Described is the rationale for each of the five dimensions, which have been discussed individually in the literature. Data from three combined studies provide evidence for differential relationships with potential antecedents that suggest the use of more specific subscales to assess CWB. Most notably, abuse and sabotage were most strongly related to anger and stress, theft was unrelated to emotion, and withdrawal was associated with boredom and being upset. Finally, the distinct forms of CWB may suggest distinct underlying dynamics, that vary in their balance of hostile and instrumental motivational systems.

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1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has emerged as a major area of concern among researchers, managers, and the general public. These behaviors are a set of distinct acts that share the characteristics that they are volitional (as opposed to accidental or mandated) and harm or intend to harm organizations and/or organization stakeholders, such as clients, coworkers, customers, and supervisors (Spector & Fox, 2005). CWB has been studied under different labels from a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as aggression (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Fox & Spector, 1999; Neuman & Baron, 1997; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996), deviance (Hollinger, 1986; Robinson & Bennett, 1995), retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), and revenge (Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997). An inspection of various scales used by different groups of researchers across studies shows that they each contain an overlapping set of behaviors (Spector & Fox, 2005) that include disparate acts that have different targets. In most cases researchers combine a checklist of behaviors into a single index or at most two indices, distinguishing only between behaviors targeting the organization and those targeting persons in the organization. Efforts to empirically test a further subdivision of these two categories into minor versus serious (based upon the Robinson–Bennett typology) have been stymied by extremely low base rates of reports of serious behaviors, such as physical violence. As a result, behaviors as different as spreading rumors and stealing from coworkers, or coming late to work and destroying organization property, are combined (and implicitly equated) within a single index. Few researchers have divided CWBs into more specific categories, although some have focused attention on a single form of behavior.

1.1. *How CWB has been categorized*

Considering CWB broadly as intentional behavior that harms or intends to harm organizations and its members, there are a number of related research streams that would be included. Some of this research has focused on single, narrowly defined behaviors such as absence (Dalton & Mesch, 1991), client abuse (Perlow & Latham, 1993), or theft (Greenberg, 1990), whereas others have combined disparate behaviors into broader categories (e.g., Chen & Spector, 1992; Hanisch, Hulin, & Roznowski, 1998). More recently some researchers have adopted the Robinson and Bennett (1995) distinction of behaviors targeting the organization versus people (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Fox & Spector, 1999; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001), with disparate acts falling particularly into the organizational category. Many researchers, however, combine many different forms of CWB into a single index (e.g., Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002; Miles, Borman, Spector, & Fox, 2002; Penney & Spector, 2002), although perhaps calling it by a different term (e.g., retaliation, Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). In some cases a specific argument was made that the behaviors all represented a single underlying construct that was likely driven by the same antecedents. For example, retaliation is theorized to be a response to injustice that can take on many different forms (Folger & Skarlicki, 2005). This suggests that different behavioral forms of retaliation (CWB) can be interchangeable, and are chosen perhaps based on opportunity.

However, there is reason to question whether all forms of CWB have the same antecedents, and thus it may be fruitful to create multiple indices rather than combine all items into one. For example, Fox et al. (2001) tied justice more to CWB directed toward

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