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Be aware to be on the square: Mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to investigate the role of dispositional mindfulness – the capacity to be nonjudgmentally aware of the present moment (Brown & Ryan, 2003) – in counterproductive academic behavior. Apart from investigating the direct relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive behavior, we tested the moderating role of established personality dimensions (conscientiousness and honesty–humility) in the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior. Two hundred eighty-one graduate students completed a trait mindfulness measure and a personality inventory based on the HEXACO model, followed by self-ratings of counterproductive academic behavior after a three-month time lag. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that mindfulness, conscientiousness, and honesty–humility were negatively related to counterproductive academic behavior. As hypothesized, conscientiousness and honesty–humility moderated the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive behavior, such that the mindfulness-counterproductive behavior relationship was stronger for students low on conscientiousness and on honesty–humility. These findings add to previous findings on the positive effects of mindfulness for students by demonstrating that it also benefits professional academic behavior.

1. Introduction

Plagiarism, cheating, absenteeism, substance abuse, stealing, or procrastination — the list of counterproductive academic behaviors is long. Counterproductive behaviors are negatively related to students' academic achievements in terms of grades (Credé & Niehorster, 2009) and hamper other group members' performance (Koppenhaver, 2006). Cheating, for example, prevents students from understanding the content matter, whereas absenteeism reduces the possibilities to learn from each other not only for the absent student, but also for the rest of the work group (Koppenhaver, 2006). Likewise, universities' well-functioning and reputation may suffer from graduate students engaging in counterproductive behavior underlining the need to identify mechanisms through which academic misbehavior can be reduced.

Previous research investigating antecedents of counterproductive academic behavior has focused on the role of personality traits as specified in the Big Five and HEXACO model. Specifically, conscientiousness and honesty–humility were established as valid predictors of counterproductive academic behavior (de Vries et al., 2011; Marcus et al., 2007). In the present study, we focus on trait mindfulness, an individual difference variable that has, to our knowledge, not yet been investigated in relation to counterproductive (academic) behavior but which has the potential to provide additional insights into the antecedents and processes involved in counterproductive behavior. Mindfulness describes a state of consciousness in which individuals bring awareness to what is occurring in the present moment with a nonjudgemental attitude (Baer et al., 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Although conceptually mindfulness is a state, researchers agree that there are rather stable trait-like between-person differences in the extent and frequency with which individuals experience mindful states (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Glomb et al., 2011). Although mindfulness displays meaningful relationships with traditional Big Five personality traits (Giluk, 2009; Thompson & Waltz, 2007), it also differs from established personality traits and is worthy of investigation in its own right (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Giluk, 2009).

Goal of the present study is to link mindfulness to counterproductive academic behavior. Doing so, we will build upon affective events theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Specifically, we argue that mindfulness displays an overall negative relationship with counterproductive academic behavior. In addition, we posit that the personality characteristics of conscientiousness and honesty–humility shape this overall relationship such that the relationship is stronger when conscientiousness and honesty–humility are low.

1.1. Mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior

The link between mindfulness and counterproductive behavior can be understood against the backdrop of AET (Weiss & Cropanzano,

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1996; Matta et al., 2014) originating in the industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology literature. Accordingly, work events trigger affective experiences, which, in turn shape employees work behavior, including counterproductive behavior. Transferring this idea to the context of academia, AET suggests that counterproductive academic behavior is driven by students' affective states such as anger, anxiety or fear.

Linking mindfulness to extant work on counterproductive behavior suggests that mindfulness is negatively related to counterproductive student behavior by helping students to better regulate affective states. Previous research conducted in the work context indicates that trait positive and trait negative affect are related to counterproductive behavior (Dalal, 2005). High positive affect is associated with high levels of energy, full concentration, and pleasurable engagement, whereas high negative affect is associated with subjective distress and unpleasurable engagement (Watson et al., 1988). Thus, it might seem intuitively appealing that people with high positive affect engage less in counterproductive behavior, whereas people with high negative affect show counterproductive tendencies more frequently.

Mindfulness at the same time is negatively related to negative affect (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Giluk, 2009; Schutte & Malouff, 2011) and facilitates adaptive forms of emotion regulation (Baer et al., 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Hülsheger et al., 2013). A study investigating the neurocognitive underpinnings of trait mindfulness demonstrated that more mindful individuals showed increased activity in brain regions associated with the regulation of negative affect when they had to label emotionally threatening stimuli (Creswell et al., 2007). The authors conclude that the beneficial effects of mindfulness might be explained through the ability to label one's negative emotions which in turn reduces the intensity of the emotion, and finally the likelihood to engage in automatic maladaptive behavior in response to it. This is in line with empirical findings indicating that mindfulness is negatively related to the use of avoidant-oriented coping strategies (Weinstein et al., 2009). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Mindfulness is negatively related to counterproductive academic behavior.

1.2. Considering conscientiousness and honesty–humility as boundary conditions

Considering the boundary conditions under which mindfulness might lessen the occurrence of counterproductive academic behavior, the role of established personality traits as assessed by the Big Five and HEXACO model needs to be taken into account. In the I/O psychology literature, evidence has accumulated that honesty–humility is the strongest predictor of workplace delinquency (Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005a; Lee, Ashton, & Shin, 2005b; Oh et al., 2011). Conscientiousness has also been shown to be negatively related with workplace deviance (Berry et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2005b; Salgado, 2002). Similarly, research conducted in the academic context provides evidence that honesty–humility and conscientiousness are negatively correlated with counterproductive academic behavior (de Vries et al., 2011; Marcus et al., 2007). Students characterized by high levels of honesty–humility can be described as honest, sincere and fair (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Conscientious students are considered to be well organized, disciplined, precise and self-controlled (Lee & Ashton, 2004). Whereas the negative relation between honesty–humility and counterproductive behavior appears to be straightforward, conscientious students might engage less in counterproductive academic behavior as they are more likely to exert themselves for reaching their task-related goals (e.g., studying to pass an exam) instead of choosing a counterproductive alternative (e.g., cheating to pass an exam; de Vries et al., 2011).

Taken together, this line of research suggests that students with a high dispositional tendency towards conscientiousness and honesty–humility have a low overall tendency to engage in counterproductive academic behavior. For these highly conscientious and honest students, a ceiling effect may occur leaving little room for mindfulness to exert a positive influence. Thus, students with high honesty–humility and conscientiousness are expected to display low counterproductive academic behavior irrespective of their level of trait mindfulness. In contrast, the positive potential of mindfulness may fully unfold in the case of students low on conscientiousness and honesty–humility. Due to their personality disposition, they are inclined to engage in counterproductive academic behavior. This inclination may, in turn, be hampered by mindfulness such that the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior may be strong when students are at risk of displaying counterproductive behavior due to low levels of conscientiousness and honesty–humility. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2a. Conscientiousness moderates the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior, such that the negative relationship is stronger when conscientiousness is low.

H2b. Honesty–humility moderates the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive academic behavior, such that the negative relationship is stronger when honesty–humility is low.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The overall sample consisted of 281 master students (Age: $M = 23.55$; $SD = 2.36$; female = 154; male = 127) enrolled at five different faculties (Business, Psychology, Law, Health, Medicine and Life Science, and Arts and Social Science) of a Dutch University. The data used in this study was collected as part of a larger 3.5-year research project on cognitive and non-cognitive predictors of study success. Other publications that resulted from this project are Schwager et al. (2015) on the predictive validity of the General Record Examination (GRE) for student task performance and Schwager et al. (2014) on the predictive validity of the Personal Potential Index (PPI), a non-cognitive student selection instrument, for citizenship and counterproductive academic behavior. Theoretical ideas and analyses reported in the present study do not overlap with either of these publications.

Students participated voluntarily and provided their informed consent. Those students being interested were entered into a lottery and could win one of ten iPads. They had just started their master program when filling in the personality and mindfulness questionnaire. Counterproductive academic behavior was assessed approx. Three months later, when students had finished the first teaching term comprising lectures, tutorial group meetings and at least one exam. This is considered to be advantageous as a time lag between the investigation of predictor and criterion variables helps to reduce the problem of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In total, two-hundred sixty-one students filled in the questionnaire at time 2.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Mindfulness

Trait mindfulness was assessed with the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). All 15 items were reversed coded in such a way that they measure how often participants are in mindless states (e.g., "I find myself doing things without paying attention."). Accordingly, all items were recoded so that high values corresponded with high dispositional mindfulness before an average score was calculated. The rating scale ranged from 1 = almost always to 6 = almost never. Cronbach's alpha measuring the internal consistency across the 15 items measuring trait mindfulness was .80.

2.2.2. Personality

Personality traits were measured by using the HEXACO-60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009). The HEXACO-60 assesses a set of six broad personality