



# Predicting counterproductive work behaviors with sub-clinical psychopathy: Beyond the Five Factor Model of personality

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## ABSTRACT

Organizational psychologists examining personality's relation to work behavior have focused largely on the "normal" traits comprising the Five Factor Model (FFM). However, given the aversive nature of *sub-clinical psychopathy* (e.g., callous affect, impulsivity), we posit that this toxic personality profile will enhance the prediction of negative work outcomes, namely forms of counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB). Study 1 ( $N = 193$ ) examined the value of sub-clinical psychopathy and the FFM in predicting intentions to engage in CWB; results support prior research indicating that both agreeableness and conscientiousness significantly correlated with CWB. In addition, sub-clinical psychopathy predicted CWB above and beyond the FFM. Study 2 ( $N = 360$ ) extended the findings of Study 1 by examining interpersonally deviant behavior in a team context. While agreeableness was significantly related to interpersonal deviance in Study 2, conscientiousness was not. Results from Study 2 replicate Study 1, suggesting that sub-clinical psychopathy accounted for the majority of the explained variance in interpersonal deviance. Overall, the results support the value of using sub-clinical psychopathy to predict CWB.

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## 1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) are voluntary behaviors that result in harm to an organization or the people in it (e.g., theft, sabotage; Gruys & Sackett, 2003). Organizational psychologists typically use the Five Factor Model (FFM) as a personality predictor of CWB (e.g., Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). However, we propose that compound personality traits such as sub-clinical psychopathy, when used in tandem with the FFM, could improve the prediction of CWBs (LeBreton & Wu, 2009; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Given prior research linking sub-clinical psychopathy to a number of antisocial behaviors in non-work contexts (cf. Jones & Paulhus, 2010; Nathanson, Paulhus, & Williams, 2006a, 2006b), we examined whether this trait might also predict antisocial behaviors in a work context.

### 1.1. The Five Factor Model and counterproductive work behaviors

The FFM includes *neuroticism* (psychological maladjustment), *extraversion* (sociability), *conscientiousness* (dutifulness), *openness* (tendency to embark on new experiences), and *agreeableness*

([cooperation] Goldberg, 1999; Johnson & Ostendorf, 1993). Past research supports a negative relationship between agreeableness and interpersonally-directed CWBs (e.g., verbal aggression) and between conscientiousness and organizationally-directed CWBs (e.g., organizational theft; Berry et al., 2007; Bolton, Becker, & Barber, 2010; Salgado, 2002). As such, we plan to corroborate this evidence with both of our studies.

**Hypothesis 1.** Agreeableness and conscientiousness will negatively correlate with CWB.

### 1.2. Dark traits and work outcomes

Past research links dark traits (e.g., Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) to workplace effectiveness and ineffectiveness (Furnham, Trickey, & Hyde, 2012), and managerial failure (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005). Though researchers have also used dark traits such as trait anger (Penney & Spector, 2002), Machiavellianism (Bennett & Robinson, 2000), narcissism (Judge, LePine, & Rich, 2006), and implicit aggression (James & LeBreton, 2010) to predict CWB, virtually no research links the dark trait *psychopathy* to counterproductive outcomes (see Jonason, Slomski, & Partyka, 2012 for a notable exception).

A recent meta-analysis (O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012) found a positive relationship between the Dark Triad (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams,

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2002) and CWBs. However, the overwhelming majority of samples measuring psychopathy relied on tests designed to measure *clinical* psychopathy. This is potentially problematic because the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA; 1990/1992) prohibits discrimination on the basis of physical and mental disabilities. Thus, using an inventory designed to identify clinical-level impairments (e.g., the MMPI) constitutes a pre-employment medical examination, thus violating the ADA. Consequently, for fear of litigation, organizations rarely use clinical measures for selection except for high-security occupations (e.g., military special forces; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Such occupations formed the basis for the O'Boyle et al. (2012) review. Thus, organizational scholars are left wondering whether sub-clinical variants of psychopathy, or any non-clinical, legally defensible, dark trait (e.g., sub-clinical psychopathy; sub-clinical narcissism; the Honesty–Humility factor of the HEXACO model; Lee & Ashton, 2005), predict CWBs or whether such relationships only emerge with clinical levels of dark traits.

### 1.3. Psychopathy predicting CWB

Psychopaths are impulsive, arrogant, manipulative, and lack the ability to empathize or experience guilt (Hare, 1999). Clinical psychopaths (1% base rate; Hare, 1996) are impaired in their ability to maintain relationships across situations (e.g., work, family, social). In contrast, sub-clinical psychopaths (5–15% base rate; LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006) function with levels of psychopathy that do not significantly impair their day-to-day life (Furnham et al., 2012). Though sub-clinical psychopathy shares qualitative similarities (i.e., types of behaviors) with clinical psychopathy which do negatively affect an individual's relationships and judgment (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), sub-clinical psychopathy operates at a lower intensity (LeBreton et al., 2006).

One popular framework for studying sub-clinical psychopathy emphasizes three distinct personality dimensions (i.e., callous affect, interpersonal manipulation, erratic lifestyle) and one behavioral dimension (criminal tendencies; Mahmut, Menictas, Stevenson, & Homewood, 2011). *Callous affect* reflects a sub-clinical psychopath's lack of ability to empathize and not experiencing guilt when harming others; the *interpersonal manipulation* dimension refers to a sub-clinical psychopath's selfishness and tendency to lie, deceive, and manipulate; *erratic lifestyle* refers to the tendency to behave impulsively and lack of self-regulatory resources (cf. Jonason & Tost, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). This latter tendency likely contributes to a propensity for *criminal behavior* (Mahmut et al., 2011). As such, we predict that sub-clinical psychopaths will report a high likelihood of counterproductive work behavior.

**Hypothesis 2.** Sub-clinical psychopathy will positively correlate with CWB.

In addition to corroborating past evidence linking CWB to agreeableness and conscientiousness, we examined whether variance in CWBs systematically related to variance in sub-clinical

psychopathy (Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Furthermore, given the positively skewed distribution of CWBs, it makes sense to identify personality traits with similar marginal distributions (e.g. dark traits; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). As such, we predict that we can maximize our prediction of CWB through aligning the joint marginal distributions of our predictor (sub-clinical psychopathy) and criterion (CWB). Although we acknowledge the relevant contribution of the FFM in predicting CWB, we hypothesize that because of the similar distributions of sub-clinical psychopathy and CWB, sub-clinical psychopathy will increment the FFM traits and will emerge as the most important predictor of CWB.

**Hypothesis 3.** Sub-clinical psychopathy will increment the prediction of CWB above and beyond agreeableness and conscientiousness.

**Hypothesis 4.** Sub-clinical psychopathy will demonstrate greater relative importance compared to the FFM traits.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants consisted of 193 undergraduates from a large urban Midwestern University, who earned course credit for completing our survey, via their introductory psychology course. Some of the characteristics of this sample differed from those of a typical college sample: mean age of 24 years (SD = 8.06), average work hours per week = 23, 66% of the sample was currently (or previously) employed full-time, and 73% of the sample was female.

#### 2.1.2. Materials

**2.1.2.1. Big Five personality traits.** The global FFM traits were measured using a 50-item questionnaire (Goldberg, 1999), consisting of 10 items per trait. Participants responded to each item using a scale ranging from “1-very inaccurate” to “5-very accurate.” Sample items are “I am the life of the party” and “I have difficulty understanding abstract ideas.” Table 1 contains descriptive statistics and estimates of internal consistency reliability for the study variables.

**2.1.2.2. Sub-clinical psychopathy.** We assessed sub-clinical psychopathy using a 48-item survey (Williams et al., 2007) measuring the three personality facets of callous affect (CA), interpersonal manipulation (IM), and erratic lifestyle (EL), again using a five-point Likert type scale. This scale had reasonable internal consistency reliability. Higher scores correspond to higher levels of sub-clinical psychopathy. Because we sought to predict deviant behavior, we opted to remove items measuring behavior (cf. Williams & Paulhus, 2004), as including them would artificially inflate the

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for CWB, the FFM, and sub-clinical psychopathy for Study 1.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. CWB	1.58	.64	<b>.97</b>						
2. Agreeableness	4.02	.58	-.17**	<b>.80</b>					
3. Conscientiousness	3.73	.58	-.15*	.29**	<b>.78</b>				
4. Neuroticism	3.27	.78	.24**	-.14	-.34**	<b>.88</b>			
5. Openness	3.73	.56	.06	.42**	.23**	-.12	<b>.79</b>		
6. Extraversion	3.32	.69	-.04	.26**	.07	-.018*	.24**	<b>.85</b>	
7. SCP	2.37	.47	.31**	-.40**	-.39**	.23**	-.07	.09	<b>.90</b>

Note. N = 193. CWB = counter-productive work behavior. SCP = sub-clinical psychopathy. Internal consistency reliabilities (alphas) appear in bold on the diagonal.

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .01.

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