Employee personality, justice perceptions, and the prediction of workplace deviance

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ABSTRACT

We examined the relative and incremental prediction of workplace deviance (i.e., intentional acts that harm the organization or its employees) offered by personality and organizational justice perceptions in a sample of 464 employees working in a large retail organization. We found that personality – including a sixth factor called Honesty–Humility, and its facet of trait Fairness – accounted for incremental variance in deviance criteria beyond justice perceptions. We found little support for the reverse. From a practical standpoint, these findings suggest that organizations may benefit from personality-related interventions (e.g., screening job applicants for relevant traits) more so than from justice-related interventions (e.g., organizational changes involving policies and procedures) in order to reduce workplace deviance. From a research perspective, our findings highlight the advantages of considering traits beyond the Big Five (e.g., Honesty–Humility) for maximizing the prediction and understanding of deviant behaviors at work.

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1. Introduction

Employee deviance, such as theft, withholding effort, and maltreatment of co-workers is a pressing issue for most organizations. Accordingly, one important research priority involves identifying antecedents of deviant behaviors in the workplace. In this regard, a recent meta-analysis by Berry, Ones, and Sackett (2007) revealed two powerful predictors of workplace deviance: employee personality and employee perceptions of organizational justice (e.g., fairness of management decisions). However, it is unclear whether these classes of variables provide unique prediction of workplace deviance. When cost-conscious organizations are faced with a choice of where to focus their intervention efforts, unique contributions matter. At the extreme, only one class of variables – personality or justice perceptions – will explain incremental variance in workplace deviance. Introducing an intervention based on a set of variables that fails to explain incremental variance could then be inefficient.

In light of the powerful predictiveness of both personality (a person variable) and organizational justice (perceptions of situational variables), the purpose of the current study was to identify whether any one of these variable sets is particularly powerful

for explaining and understanding workplace deviance. If justice does not add incrementally to the prediction offered by personality, then organizations might primarily focus on screening job applicants for relevant traits in order to reduce deviance. If personality does not add incrementally to the prediction offered by justice, then organizations might primarily focus on ensuring organizational policies and procedures have adequately addressed justice considerations, such as reasonable decision protocols, ample rewards for all employees, and sincere and informative explanations of decisions. Of course, interventions aimed at developing a legally defensible personality screening selection system, or revising organizational policies in order to favorably influence justice perceptions, could be incredibly resource intensive. Thus, considerable financial resources could be saved if organizations knew whether management of either employee personality or justice perceptions ought to be prioritized.

In addition to evaluating the predictiveness of workplace deviance using personality and perceptions of organizational justice, the current study makes three other contributions. First, the research goes beyond the "Big Five" factors of personality. A personality variable that is orthogonal to the Big Five, referred to as Honesty–Humility (H–H), was included as it has strong theoretical and empirical linkages with workplace deviance (see Ashton & Lee, 2008). Indeed, recent research strongly suggests that the Big Five are not adequate for maximizing the prediction of workplace deviance with personality (e.g., O'Neill & Hastings, 2010). Second, as facets have been shown to outpredict their factors in many in-

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stances (e.g., Hastings & O'Neill, 2009; O'Connor & Paunonen, 2007), we also explored a specific facet of H–H: trait Fairness. Applied to the current research, trait Fairness appears to be highly relevant to workplace deviance, perhaps even more so than the broader factor of H–H. Finally, whereas the majority of previous research on personality has incorporated limited frameworks of organizational justice perceptions, the current research employs a more elaborate model, detailed below.

We begin the current article by describing personality and justice considerations important for comparing the predictiveness of these two classes of variables for workplace deviance. We then report on an empirical field study that pits the two classes of variables against one another in order to investigate their potential incremental predictiveness.

1.1. Personality considerations

1.1.1. Big Five

In order to preserve limited survey space for only the most relevant variables, we did not consider all Big Five factors. Indeed, Berry et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis found that of the Big Five, only Agreeableness ($\rho = -.44$), Conscientiousness ($\rho = -.35$), and Neuroticism ($\rho = .26$) had non-trivial relations with deviance. Thus, we included these latter three Big Five factors in the current study.

1.1.2. Honesty–Humility factor

Because the current study involved a comparison of the predictiveness of personality versus perceptions of organizational justice, we did not want to inappropriately overlook highly relevant personality variables. Ashton and Lee (2008) have reported on numerous studies demonstrating that H–H represents a sixth factor of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2007). The H–H factor is associated with adjectives such as sincerity and trustworthiness, and individuals high on H–H tend to be reluctant to exploit others. Not surprisingly, H–H has been shown to be predictive of behaviors related to workplace deviance, such as sexual quid pro quos, unethical business decision making, and so forth (see Ashton & Lee, 2008). Accordingly, we included Lee and Ashton's (2004) H–H factor in the current study.

1.1.3. Honesty–Humility facets

Although the H–H factor is clearly relevant to deviance behaviors, it is defined by four facets that, arguably, could have differential relations with deviance. *Fairness* involves a tendency to avoid cheating, lying, and stealing; *Sincerity* involves a tendency to be genuine; *Greed Avoidance* involves a tendency to not be interested in wealth and luxury; and *Modesty* involves a tendency to feel ordinary and not entitled (see Lee & Ashton, 2004). In our view, the first of these facets would appear to be most clearly aligned to workplace deviance criteria. Employees high on trait Fairness have historical patterns of behavior that involve avoiding fraud and corruption – these people are unlikely to take unauthorized sick days, steal, lie, and mistreat co-workers. In order to support this prediction we employed expert judgments wherein we recruited five industrial/organizational graduate students to provide "trait-relevance" ratings that indicate the predicted relation between a given trait-criterion pairing. Collecting such ratings allows the researcher to identify the trait's relevance for a given criterion in an *a priori* manner.

Trait-relevance ratings were provided on a scale that asked our experts to predict the magnitude of trait-deviance relations. Specifically, the scale had the following anchors: -2 (*Strong negative relation with deviance*), -1 (*Slight negative relation with deviance*), 0 (*Unrelated to deviance*), $+1$ (*Slight positive relation with deviance*) and $+2$ (*Strong positive relation with deviance*). Using this scale, Hastings and O'Neill (2009) found that judges were surprisingly accurate in their predictions of trait-criterion linkages. In the current study our judges exhibited high agreement in their ratings (average $r_{wg} = .81$, SD = .11), and, consistent with expectation, judges rated H–H Fairness as the most relevant H–H facet (average relevance rating = -1.7). Building on earlier research demonstrating that at least one facet often outperforms its factor in the prediction of a criterion (e.g., Hastings & O'Neill), and that earlier research has generally left facets of H–H unconsidered, we investigated the extent to which the H–H Fairness facet would be an incremental predictor of deviance, relative to the Big Five and the overall H–H factor.

1.2. Justice considerations

As mentioned earlier, previous research involving justice and personality has generally not considered all four dimensions of justice perceptions that are now widespread and mainstream (see Colquitt, 2001). The justice dimensions include distributive (fairness of outcomes received), procedural (fairness of decision-making processes), interpersonal (respectful and dignified treatment), and informational (providing ample justifications for decisions). Berry et al.'s (2007) meta-analysis found that relations between justice and deviance were in the range of $-.15$ to $-.25$. Invoking equity theory (see Adams, 1965), some have argued that organizational justice relates to workplace deviance because employees feel a need to restore feelings of equity when they perceive unfair treatment. One way to restore equity is to retaliate through deviant behaviors, such as lateness or intentional misuse of work time. Social exchange theory and norms of reciprocity are additional theoretical frameworks potentially relevant to a person's willingness to engage in deviance (see Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006). These theories suggest that employees may respond in kind if they sense unfairness from the organization or co-workers.

The above suggests that there is considerable theory and evidence to indicate that perceptions of justice are associated with workplace deviance. Yet, systematic investigations of whether justice and personality variables offer incremental prediction beyond one another appear to be absent. Thus, it is not clear if situational perceptions (e.g., justice) and dispositional characteristics (e.g. personality) will explain incremental variance beyond one another. For organizational interventions, identifying which of these variable sets to prioritize should be informed by empirical evidence. Collecting such evidence is one of the main goals of the current research.

1.3. Deviance considerations

Previous research has typically considered both overall deviance scale scores, and the subscales of organizational deviance (OD) and interpersonal deviance (ID). OD involves acts that harm the organization; ID involves acts that harm co-workers. We considered both OD and ID as differential relations involving deviance, personality, and justice have been detected for each dimension of deviance.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The current study was part of a larger consulting project in which a major US discount retailer wished to collect criterion-validity evidence supporting the use of personality measures in personnel selection and development. Invitations to participate were included with pay stubs for approximately 3000 front line employees. Responses were obtained from 749 employees (25% re-