

## Counterproductive work behavior among frontline government employees: Role of personality, emotional intelligence, affectivity, emotional labor, and emotional exhaustion

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research is to study the effect of personality, emotional intelligence (EI), affectivity, emotional labor and emotional exhaustion on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) of frontline employees in the government sector. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to 625 frontline employees working at service counters in 25 ministries in Malaysia. We received responses from 519 employees (response rate = 83%). The data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The main findings are: (1) personality factors of employees drive their EI, affectivity, emotional labor, emotional exhaustion, and CWB and (2) EI and affectivity impact emotional labor, emotional exhaustion and CWB. Through the integrated model, we have studied the indirect roles of emotional labor and emotional exhaustion. This is one of the few studies that have effectively integrated the five constructs into a single framework to study their effects on CWB.

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### Comportamiento laboral contraproducente en funcionarios de primera línea: papel de la personalidad, la inteligencia emocional, la afectividad, el trabajo emocional y el agotamiento emocional

### RESUMEN

El objetivo principal de este trabajo es estudiar el efecto de la personalidad, la inteligencia emocional (IE), la afectividad, el trabajo emocional y el agotamiento emocional en el comportamiento laboral contraproducente de los empleados de primera línea del sector público. Se diseñó un cuestionario, que se distribuyó a 625 funcionarios de primera línea destinados en ventanillas de 25 ministerios de Malasia. Recibimos respuesta de 519 funcionarios (índice de respuesta del 83%). Los datos se analizaron mediante el modelado de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM). Se obtuvieron los siguientes resultados: (1) los factores de personalidad gobiernan su inteligencia emocional, afectividad, trabajo emocional, agotamiento emocional y el comportamiento laboral contraproducente (CLC) y (2) la inteligencia emocional y la afectividad influyen en el trabajo emocional, el agotamiento emocional y el CLC. Mediante el modelo integrado hemos estudiado el papel indirecto del trabajo emocional y del agotamiento emocional. Se trata de uno de los pocos estudios que han integrado eficazmente los cinco constructos en una estructura única para estudiar sus efectos sobre el CLC.

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#### Palabras clave:

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Rasgos de personalidad

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Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is quite common among employees in many organizations, but much of it apparently goes unnoticed, unreported, or both (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). CWB can be intentional or unintentional and can result from a wide range of underlying causes and motivations. CWB is the employees' behavior that goes against the goals of an organization. All acts of CWB violate the legitimate interests of an organization by harming the members of the organization and/or organization as a whole (Marcus & Schuler, 2004). It involves a wide spectrum of behaviors that harm employees, customers and/or the organization. These behaviors range from severe, systematic, and abusive to milder and ambiguous episodes of workplace incivility (Fox & Spector, 2005). According to Porath, MacInnes, and Folkes (2011, p. 12), "witnessing incivility among employees is not normal, it is not rare either". Examples of CWB are: intentionally working slow, taking long breaks, sabotage of equipment, theft of property, showing favoritism, gossiping, sexual harassment, blaming others, verbal abuse, physical abuse, receiving bribe, and being corrupt. The employees studied in this research are the frontline staff at the service counters at each of the ministries in Malaysia.

Researchers have shown that CWB of employees results in enormous economic and social costs for the organizations that can possibly run into billions of dollars (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Galperin & Burke, 2006). According to Ogbonna and Harris (2002), "the attitudes and behaviors of frontline, customer-contact service providers are a significant factor in customer's perceptions and interpretations of service encounters" (p. 163). The extant research on frontline employees seems to assume that these employees are compliant, obedient, and constructive but evidence shows otherwise (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). A recent study has argued that "the interaction between frontline employees and customers creates an impression of what is to come in the service experience" (Dagger, Danaher, Sweeney, & McColl-Kennedy 2013, p. 488). The evidence suggests that frontline employees deliberately behave in counterproductive ways (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). According to Harris and Ogbonna (2006), industrial sociology has explored CWB extensively and the studies have been conducted mainly in the non-service sectors. The fundamental difference between the effects of CWB in service and non-service sectors is the immediacy. In the service sector, the negative impact of CWB is immediate and the actions are likely to affect the customers' evaluations of the organization. The negative behavior of frontline government employees can make citizens form negative opinions about the government in power and these may have severe implications. In spite of the pivotal role played by the frontline employees in the service sector, the behavior of these employees are least understood and studied (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). There is a dearth of studies addressing CWB in the service sector and especially among the frontline employees of government agencies and ministries. In this research, we address the roles of personality factors, EI, affectivity, emotional labor, and emotional exhaustion on CWB of frontline government employees. In this research, (1) CWB has two dimensions: interpersonal (CWB-I) and organizational (CWB-O).

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, this paper has integrated the five constructs (emotional intelligence, personality factors, affectivity, emotional labor, and emotional exhaustion) into a single framework to study their effects on CWB. Earlier studies have looked at some of these constructs together. We have also looked at the inter-relationships between the five constructs. We have not only assessed the relationships at construct level but also at the dimension level of two constructs, affectivity and emotional labor. Second, we have studied the impact of demographic variables (gender, age, education, and duration of service) on all the constructs; there is a dearth of research in this area. Third, we have conducted this study in a fast developing country in South-East Asia, Malaysia. Malaysia has a population of 27 million. According

to statistics provided by the Public Complaints Bureau (PCB), Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia, the total complaints received from public by various sources for the year 2011 is 13,356 (Public Complaints Bureau Annual Report, 2011). Most of the complaints (about 75%) submitted to PCB are related to people's dissatisfaction with work behaviors of government personnel, especially frontline employees. Therefore, this research is timely and we believe that this situation must be prevalent in many developing countries.

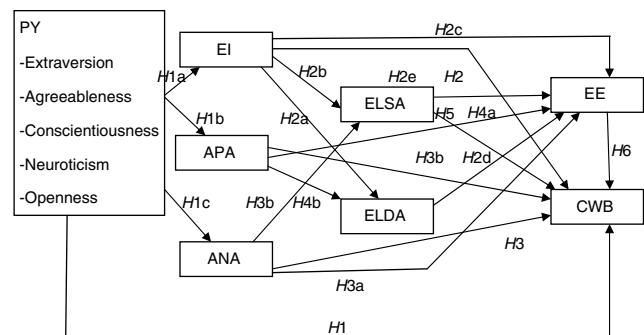
## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Many researchers have defined CWB and all the definitions agree that CWBs are "characterized by a disregard for societal and organizational rules and values" (Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas 2002, p. 37). Martinko et al. (2002) in their effort to develop an integrative theory of CWB have reviewed main theoretical perspectives of CWB, emphasizing their common elements such as individual factors, situational factors, and cognitive information-processing elements (causal attributions and perceptions of disequilibria). These perspectives indicate that CWB "is the result of a complex interaction between the person and the environment in which the individual's reasoning about the environment and expected outcomes drive the individual's behavior" (p. 41). They have argued that attribution theory provides the best explanation as to why some individuals engage in CWB when exposed to certain (negative) stimuli. In our research, personality factors, emotional intelligence, and affectivity fall under the 'individual differences' of the integrated framework developed by Martinko et al. (2002) and emotional labor and emotional exhaustion fall under 'situational variables' of the framework. These factors lead to internal and/or external attributions and these in turn lead to CWB of frontline government employees. The internal attribution results in a self-destructive form of CWB such as drug abuse, alcohol use, absenteeism, passivity, depression, dissatisfaction, and lower performance. The external attribution results in a retaliatory form of CWB such as aggression, violence, abuse, sabotage, terrorism, fraud, harassment, and being corrupt. The framework of our research is given in Figure 1.

### Hypotheses Development

#### Direct relationship between personality factors and CWB (H1).

Many researchers have shown the relationships between personality factors and CWB (Cullen & Sackett, 2003; Dalal, 2005; Ones, Viswesvaran & Schmidt 2003; Salgado, 2002). These researchers have used Big Five personality dimensions to reflect personality



**Figure 1.** Theoretical Framework of this Research (hypothesized relationships). Note. PY = Personality traits, EI = Emotional intelligence, APA = Positive affectivity, ANA = Negative affectivity, ELSA = Emotional labor (surface acting), ELDA = Emotional labor (deep acting), EE = Emotional exhaustion, CWB = Counterproductive work behavior.

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