Brief Report

It's all about control: The role of self-control in buffering the effects of negative reciprocity beliefs and trait anger on workplace deviance

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the general aggression model, general theory of crime, and the integrative cognitive model of trait anger, we examined the role of self-control in buffering the effects of negative reciprocity beliefs and trait anger on workplace deviance. A total of 125 employees participated in the study. Results supported the hypothesized direct effects of negative reciprocity beliefs, trait anger, and self-control on archival data on workplace deviance. In addition, self-control moderated these relationships. Specifically, there was a weaker positive relationship between negative reciprocity beliefs, trait anger and workplace deviance for employees with high as opposed to low levels of self-control. These findings supported the view that self-control can override predispositions to engage in deviant behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Deviant workplace behaviors are becoming a cause for considerable concern in organizations across the globe. For instance, a report by the US Chamber of Commerce estimates that 75% of all employees steal at least once (Shulman, 2005). In Australia, a national poll reported that 31% of workers had been verbally abused by their immediate supervisor and 35% by a co-worker (Mayhew & Chappell, 2001). The prevalence of deviant behaviors in the workplace highlights the increasing importance to understand the antecedents of such behaviors. However, despite evidence suggesting that individual differences account for a significant amount of variance in the occurrence of hostile acts in the workplace (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Hershcovis et al., 2007), less research has focused on the direct relationship between dispositional factors and workplace deviance (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998). Rather, recent empirical work has treated individual differences primarily as moderators between perceptions of injustice and workplace deviance (Aquino, Galperin, & Bennett, 2004; Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2007).

In this brief report, we focus on the role of trait anger, negative reciprocity and self-control in predicting workplace deviance as well as the moderating role of self-control in influencing these relationships. In addition, while previous research on workplace deviance has predominantly used self-report methodology

(Robinson & Greenberg, 1998), this paper contributes to research on workplace deviance by utilizing archival data on workplace deviance. Compared to self-report measures, archival data are less vulnerable to biases because they capture "observable, countable and discrete outcomes" (Viswesvaran, 2001, p. 111).

We define workplace deviance as "voluntary behaviors that violate significant organizational norms and threaten the well-being of the organization, its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556; see Robinson & Greenberg, 1998 for a thorough discussion). Several authors have classified workplace deviance as a form of workplace aggression (Fox, Spector, Goh, & Bruursema, 2007; Neuman & Baron, 2005). For example, Neuman and Baron (2005) noted that there is much conceptual overlap between workplace deviance and workplace aggression as both involve hostile intent and motive. Despite many similarities, several critical components distinguish deviant behaviors from other constructs. For example, workplace deviant behaviors: (1) are not accidental, but instead voluntary and motivated; (2) violate norms established by leaders of the organization; and (3) can be targeted at organizational members or at the organization itself (Robinson & Bennett, 1997).

To explicate how individual differences serve as powerful predictors of workplace deviance, we draw upon the general aggression model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) which recognizes the role of aggressive personality in the occurrence of deviant behaviors. The GAM proposes that once aggressive knowledge structures (e.g., aggressive scripts, schemata, and desensitization to aggression) are strengthened and automatized, this leads to a predisposition to think and feel in a hostile manner. This in turn

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increases the individual's propensity to engage in deviant acts. Due to the consistent use of aggressive knowledge structures, these result in stable individual differences across time, situations, or both. In the next section, we delineate the constructs in our model and discuss the expected relationships among them.

The norm of reciprocity in its simplified form states that giving something generates an obligation to return the same gesture (Gouldner, 1960). Although extant research has identified the benefits associated with positive reciprocity (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), individuals may also endorse negative reciprocity beliefs which refer to a unitary set of beliefs favoring retribution as a response to mistreatment (Gouldner, 1960). It is trait-like in that it is norm-based influenced by acculturation and learning (Eisenberger, Lynch, Aselage, & Rohdieck, 2004). Those who highly endorse the negative reciprocity norm believes that when someone mistreats them, it is acceptable to retaliate in return (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Differences in negative reciprocity beliefs have also been found to influence aggressive behavior in both work and non-work contexts (Eisenberger et al., 2004; Garcia, Restubog, & Denson, 2010; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). For this reason, we predict that negative reciprocity will be positively related to workplace deviance (Hypothesis 1a).

Trait anger is defined as the tendency to experience anger with greater frequency, intensity and duration when annoyed or frustrated (Deffenbacher, 1992; Spielberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995). Individuals with high levels of trait anger are more likely to engage in undesirable behaviors including aggressive driving (Deffenbacher, Lynch, Oetting, & Yingling, 2001), violent attacks directed towards significant others (Parrott & Zeichner, 2003) and child abuse (Nomellini & Katz, 1983). Thus, we predict that trait anger will be positively related to workplace deviance (Hypothesis 1b).

Defined as the capacity to override one's impulses and resist external influences (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), self-control is regarded as a stable personality trait that differs among individuals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Polakowski, 1994; Turner & Piquero, 2002). Based on this characterization, we expect self-control to have direct and moderating effects. Self-control is positively associated with superior academic performance (Tangney et al., 2004) and better quality of interpersonal relationships (Finkel & Campbell, 2001) and negatively related to drug and alcohol abuse (Vazsonyi, Trejos-Castillo, & Huang, 2006) and anti-social behaviors (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Indeed, Baumeister and colleagues (1994) argued that aggression occurs when people fail to exert effortful control over their aggressive impulses. Based on previous research, we expect a negative relationship between self-control and workplace deviance (Hypothesis 1c).

Self-control can also mitigate the impact of negative reciprocity beliefs and trait anger on workplace deviance. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime posits that individuals with low levels of self-control are more likely to respond to situational triggers with criminal and delinquent behaviors especially when given the opportunity to do so. Similarly, Wilkowski and Robinson's integrative cognitive model of trait anger (2008) lends support to the buffering role of self-control. They argued that subsequent effortful control processes such as self-control, may override automatic tendencies to engage in aggression. Self-control may exert its influence in three ways. First, it may be used as a form of reappraisal in which earlier hostile interpretations are replaced with less hostile ones (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Second, it can distract the individual from ruminating on hostile information (Mischel & Ayduk, 2004). Third, it can suppress the expression of anger-inducing thoughts including non-verbal manifestations of anger (DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007). Based on these theoretical perspectives, we propose that self-control will moderate the relationship between negative reciprocity (Hypothe-

sis 2a) and trait anger (Hypothesis 2b) and workplace deviance. That is, individuals with high as opposed to low self-control will successfully curb their predisposition to engage in workplace deviance.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Data for this research were collected in a large manufacturing organization in the Philippines. Participation was voluntary and employees were assured of confidentiality and that they could withdraw from the study at any point in time. In the first phase of the data collection, a self-report survey assessing personality and demographic characteristics was administered to 279 employees. A reminder card along with a copy of the self-report survey was sent 4 weeks after the initial mail out to increase response rates (Dillman, 2000). One hundred eighty-nine employees chose to participate yielding a response rate of 67.74%. In the second phase of the data collection, we obtained archival data on workplace deviant behaviors in a period spanning 20 months for those participants who gave consent to access their personnel records. One hundred thirty-six gave consent and participated yielding a response rate of 71.43%. The self-report survey had identifying codes which allowed us to match the questionnaire and the archival data. Eleven participants were excluded because the identifying code in the self-report survey was not reported. In order to maintain confidentiality, an independent research assistant matched the information from the employees' personnel record with the self-report survey responses using identity codes. Neither the personnel office nor the research team had access to both pieces of information. Thus, the final sample used to examine the hypothesized relationships was 125 individuals.

Of the 125 participants in the final sample, 59% were female. To protect the identity of the participants, age was assessed in terms of age bands. Participants' ages were reported as follows: 20–24 years (1.6%), 25–29 years (15.2%), 30–34 years (32%), 35–39 years (24.8%), 40–44 years (18.4%), and 45–49 years (8%). Approximately 60% of the participants had been working in their organization between 1 and 5 years. More than three quarters of the participants (76%) hold a college degree.

2.2. Measures

The survey items were prepared in English because this language is spoken by a vast majority of the Filipino population and is predominantly used in work contexts (Bernardo, 2004). Multi-item scales were used to ensure adequate measurement of each study variable. Unless otherwise specified, the response format for all items, excluding the demographic variables, was a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), with items coded such that a higher score indicated a greater amount of the focal construct (except for reverse-coded items).

Negative reciprocity was assessed using five items developed by Eisenberger and his colleagues (2004). An example item is, "If someone dislikes you, you should dislike them".

Trait anger was measured using the 10 items drawn from the State–Trait Anger Expression Inventory scale by Spielberger and colleagues (1983). This included four items relating to angry temperament (e.g., "I have a fiery temper") and six items pertaining to angry reaction (e.g., "I feel like hitting someone when frustrated").

Self-control was assessed using the 10 items developed by Scott (1965). Example items include: "I practice self-control" and "I reply to anger with gentleness".

Workplace deviance was assessed using the frequency of workplace offenses (e.g., acts of disrespect towards supervisor;

obtaining office materials without permission) committed intentionally by the employees in a period spanning 20 months. This information was extracted from the organization's personnel records. These offenses constitute a behavioral operationalization of deviant behaviors because these actions violate organizational norms and are likely to cause harm to both the organization and its constituents (Bordia et al., 2008). An independent research assistant matched the survey responses with the frequency count of the offenses committed by each employee. The workplace offenses ranged from 0 to 4. Over a span of 20 months, the distribution of offenses is as follows: 32 employees (25.6%) did not commit any workplace offense; 45 employees (36%) committed at least one offense; 36 employees (28.8%) committed two offenses; 6 employees (4.8%) committed three offenses and another 6 (4.8%) employees committed four offenses. These workplace offenses map onto the typology of workplace deviance proposed by Robinson and Bennett (1995). For example, (a) offenses such as leaving early without supervisors' permission, promoting or participating in gambling within work premises, transmission or dissemination of obscene pornographic materials, internet surfing during work hours pertain to production deviance; (b) offenses relating to obtaining office materials without permission, tampering, falsifying or forging of attendance card, unauthorized use of company equipment pertain to property deviance; (c) offenses such as gossiping, and rumor mongering represent political deviance; and (d) offenses such as making malicious, or obscene statements about another employee and acts of disrespect towards supervisors pertain to personal deviance.

Several control variables were included in our analysis. Gender was controlled for because considerable evidence suggests that males tend to be more aggressive than females (Archer, 2004; Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Age was controlled for because as individuals grow older, they are able to better able to manage their emotions (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989; Tremblay, 2000). Finally, because the personality measures are vulnerable to self-report bias, we controlled for the effects of social desirability and assessed social desirability using the 10 item short version of the social desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics, inter-correlations, and internal consistency reliabilities of the study variables are summarized in Table 1. Given that the dependent variable was slightly positively skewed, the main analysis was performed with the appropriately transformed variable and compared with the analysis using the untransformed variable. There were no substantive changes in the results. Thus, the untransformed dependent variable was retained. We next conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test our predictions. Following Aiken and West (1991), we entered the control variables in the first block of the regression equation. In the second step, the independent variables (negative reciprocity and trait anger) and the moderator (self-control) were entered to test for main effects. The interaction terms were computed between the moderator variable (self-control) and each of the independent variables (negative reciprocity and trait anger) and entered in the regression equation in Step 3. In order to reduce multi-collinearity, the independent and moderator variables were centered at their means (Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 2 shows the results for the regression analysis. The personality variables – negative reciprocity, trait anger, and self-control – explained additional variance over and above the effects of the control variables, $R^{2\Delta} = .30$, $F(3, 118) = 9.85$, $p < .001$. Negative reciprocity ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) and trait anger ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) were both positively associated with workplace deviance. Self-control was negatively related to workplace deviance ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$). Overall, Hypotheses 1a–1c were supported.

Entry of the two interaction terms in Step 3 explained an additional amount of variance in predicting workplace deviance, $R^{2\Delta} = .21$, $F(2, 116) = 17.53$, $p < .001$. The interaction terms representing negative reciprocity × self-control ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$) as well as trait anger × self-control ($\beta = -.34$, $p < .001$) were statistically significant. Information from the regression equations was extracted to plot the effect of negative reciprocity and trait anger on workplace deviance at low and high levels of self-control. Fig. 1 shows a stronger positive relationship between negative reciprocity and workplace deviance for low levels of self-control, $t(116) = 4.66$, $p < .001$. However, at high levels of self-control, the relationship between negative reciprocity and workplace deviance was not significant, $t(116) = -.71$, ns indicating a buffering effect of self-control. A similar pattern of results emerged for trait anger.

Table 2
Hierarchical moderated regression analysis predicting workplace deviance.

Study variables	Archival measure on deviant behaviors		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Control variables			
Gender	.11	.10	.07
Age	−.10	−.10	−.08
Social desirability	−.09	−.08	.09
Main effects			
Negative reciprocity (NR)		.25[**]	.22[**]
Trait anger (TA)		.32[***]	.30[***]
Self-control (SC)		−.25[**]	−.21[*]
Two-way interactions			
NR × SC			−.34[*]
TA × SC			−.24[*]
F	1.29	9.85[***]	17.53[***]
Adjusted R^2	.01	.30[***]	.52[***]
ΔR^2		.30[***]	.21[***]

[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.
[***] $p < .001$.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and reliability coefficients for the study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	.59	.49							
2. Age	3.67	1.21	−.01						
3. Social desirability	5.98	2.17	.05	.00	(.70)				
4. Negative reciprocity	2.33	.92	−.04	.06	−.13	(.90)			
5. Trait anger	3.22	1.06	.03	.07	−.29[***]	.38[***]	(.87)		
6. Self-control	4.29	1.07	.01	.16	.20[*]	−.29[***]	−.06	(.87)	
7. Archival measure of deviant behaviors	1.27	1.05	.11	−.10	−.09	.41[***]	.40[***]	−.32[**]	

[*] $p < .05$.
[**] $p < .01$.
[***] $p < .001$.
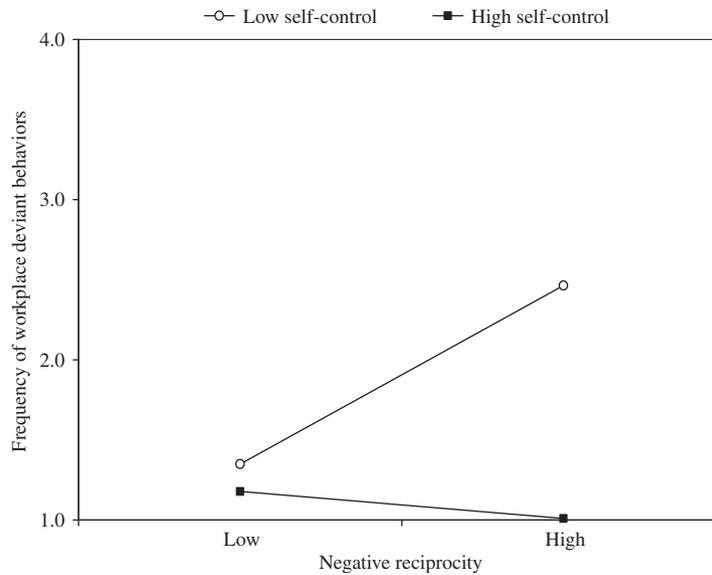
Fig. 1. The interactive relationship between negative reciprocity and self-control in predicting workplace deviance.

Fig. 2 shows that trait anger had stronger positive effect for those individuals with low levels of self-control, $t(116) = 6.64$, $p < .001$ compared to those with high levels of self-control, $t(116) = .30$, ns. Overall, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

4. Discussion

In the research reported here, we examined the impact of three dispositional antecedents to workplace deviance. Trait anger was chosen as a predictor of workplace deviance as the relationship between anger and aggression has been theoretically justified as far back as Dollard's frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard, 1938) and even more on recent theories on aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Neuman & Baron, 1998; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2008). Similarly, negative reciprocity was chosen as beliefs have been found to play an important role in both the preparedness to aggress and enact aggressive acts (Bandura, 1977; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997). Finally, we chose self-control as a moderator between trait anger, negative reciprocity and workplace deviance because the general theory of crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi,

1990) and later studies (Polakowski, 1994; Turner & Piquero, 2002) have found that those with a higher level of self-control are more able to resist the need to act upon emotions and impulses that lead to crime and deviance.

Overall, the results revealed two main findings. First, supporting previous work (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Garcia et al., 2010), both trait anger and negative reciprocity were positively related to individual's deviant acts in the workplace. Employees who have high propensity to experience anger engaged in more deviant behaviors. Likewise, employees with beliefs favoring retribution also engaged in more deviant acts. Second, and more importantly, the results also revealed that self-control had both a direct and a moderating effect on workplace deviance. Consistent with the view that self-regulation is an important resource that can restrain aggressive action (DeWall et al., 2007; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), self-control was not only negative related to workplace deviance it also buffered the adverse effects of trait anger and negative reciprocity. In particular, there was a weaker and non-significant relationship between trait anger and negative reciprocity and workplace deviance for those individuals with high as opposed to low levels of
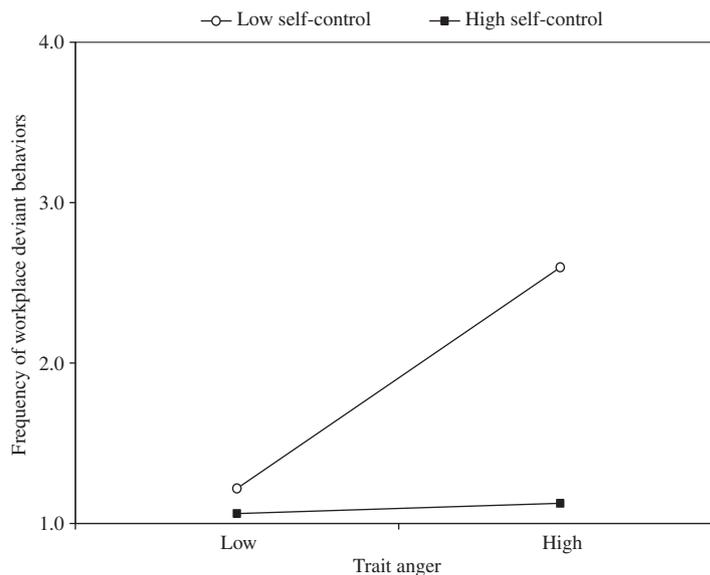
Fig. 2. The interactive relationship between trait anger and self-control in predicting workplace deviance.

self-control. This suggests that employees higher in self-control are less likely to engage in workplace deviance because they are capable of resisting their impulses to respond to their anger. Together, these findings extend research on workplace deviance by highlighting three dispositional antecedents to workplace deviance. In addition to the theoretical contributions, this paper also makes a significant methodological contribution. By utilizing an objective measure of workplace deviance, this paper addresses the limitations associated with self-report measures of workplace deviance.

Like most research, our study has limitations and results should be viewed with these in mind. First, workplace offenses extracted from the organization's personnel records may not capture all instances of workplace deviance. While organizations may have a strong motivation and a number of effective built-in mechanisms in detecting deviant acts in their workforce to ensure smooth organizational functioning, some deviant acts may occur without being noticed. Therefore, the findings reported here are based on observable acts of workplace deviance rather than all possible acts of deviance. Second, the nature of survey methodology used in this study prevents us from drawing strong causal relationship between the three dispositional factors and workplace deviance. In order to establish causality in the relationship reported here, future research should utilize a more controlled methodology. Lastly, future research may also investigate how dispositional factors interact with situational factors in affecting workplace deviance. In particular, while findings in this study highlight the importance of self-control in preventing negative workplace behaviors, what remains unclear is the extent to which self-control may interact with situational factors in predicting workplace deviance. In other words, when both dispositional and situational factors are considered simultaneously, the results may provide a more accurate and comprehensive picture compared to when the interaction of both dispositional and situational factors are examined independently. For example, an organizational climate which castigates aggressive actions interacting with employees' high levels of self-control may ameliorate the effects of trait anger and negative reciprocity on workplace deviance.

Our findings have important practical implications. First and most evidently, managers should become more cognizant of how stable traits can play a significant role in the emergence of deviant acts which can harm organizational interests. Second, the moderating role of self-control suggests that effective self-regulation can restrain impulses to engage in deviant acts. Thus, managers could consider self-control as a selection criterion when making hiring decisions. We hope that our findings will stimulate additional research on the effects of individual differences on workplace deviance as well as encourage empirical studies towards identifying practical strategies that reduce the incidence of deviant behaviors in the workplace.

Acknowledgment

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