

# PRIMARY PSYCHOPATHY AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIORS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF HELPLESSNESS AS A COGNITIVE DISTORTION FORM

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to explore whether helplessness moderates the relationship between counter productive work behavior (CWB) and primary psychopathy (PP). In the present study, total of 150 administrative and academic staff (70 females and 80 males) were surveyed from the Turkish universities. Data were collected by the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector, et al., 2006), Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale – LSRP (Levenson et al.; 1995), and Cognitive Distortion Scale (Yurica and DiTomasso, 2002). It was found that the cognitive distortion (helplessness) represses the tendency of CWB for people who depict the level of primary psychopathy and that the helplessness played a moderating role between PP and CWB.*

**Keywords:** Counter productive work behavior, psychopathy, helplessness, cognitive distortion

## INTRODUCTION

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has become an important topic in organizational research in recent years due to its increasing occurrence and potential consequences. When employees engage in deviant work behaviors, these behaviors may harm the organization by directly impacting on its functioning or property, or hurt employees by reducing their effectiveness (Fox, Spector, and Miles, 2001). CWB is generally classified in two categories: CWB targeted at the organization (CWBO) and CWB targeted at the organizational members (CWBI) (e.g., Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Spector and Fox, 2005).

Yet little is known about if and how personality traits (especially psychopathy) and cognitive distortions account for the workplace deviance directed at the employing organization.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In line with the researches about CWB in labour market, we proposed that academic staff's personality-primary psychopathy positively predicts their CWB. But also their cognitive distortions type and its level may moderate this relationship. As known, cognitive mistakes lead people to think that they are victims of their surroundings, so they feel unhappy and frustrated. These wrong interpretations stimulate the feeling of being unable to control the live. Inadequacy perceptions can evolve furiousness which cause antagonism towards environment and all going-on. But then, because primary psychopaths engage easily into interpersonally oriented behaviors without feeling guilty (Wu and Lebreton, 2011), they would more likely exhibit bad behaviors according to their context. In our opinion, the only

buffer for these harmful actions can be their cognitive distortions, especially their helplessness levels.

Here below, we argue our main variables in the context of proposed model.

**CWB**

CWB is defined as any intentional behavior on the part of an organizational member viewed by the organization as contrary to its legitimate interests (Gruys and Sackett, 2003). Bennett and Robinson (2000) have referred to CWB’s as a “pervasive and expensive” problem. Indeed, beside the economic and social costs of these abusive behaviors, they have notably negative effects (physical aggression and violence against other people in the work environment etc.) in the workplace (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Klotz and Buckley 2013; Whelpley and McDaniel, 2016). According to Spector et. al (2006), CWB can be intentional or unintentional. These behaviors harm or intend to harm organizations and/or organization stakeholders. 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 and Schuler, 2004).

CWB’s can be the result of a complex interaction between the person and the environment (Martinko et al.; 2002). In a similar vein Bushman et al. (2001) suggested that the reason of engaging CWB may be giving a response to provocations at work. So, it can be said that CWB can be accepted as a tool of individualistic struggle against the demands of new management models (HRM,TQM) which create high stress over the workforce (Ersoy-Kart et al.; 2013). But as O’Boyle et al. (2011) pointed out, these inappropriate work behaviors could be attributed to traits in characters, moral maturity, personality, perceptions, motivations and the interactions among these person-centered variables. Salgado (2002) asserts that CWB’s can be defined as toxic actions oriented to the organization as well as its members.

According to Robinson and Bennett (1995) CWB’s can be classified into four categories differing in terms of severity, and the target of behaviors. These behaviors include wasting time and effort, stealing from the organization, disclosing confidential company information, sabotaging organizational efforts, being rude to others, and making threats (Shoss et al.; 2016). This framework is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The Model of Counterproductive Work Behaviors (Robinson and Bennett, 1995)

|        | Organizational  | Interpersonal   |
|--------|---|---|
| Severe | <b>Property deviance (A)</b><br><i>serious organization directed offences</i>     | <b>Personal aggression (B)</b><br><i>serious interpersonally directed offences</i>  |
| Minor  | <b>Production deviance (C)</b><br><i>minor organizationally directed offences</i> | <b>Political deviance (D)</b><br><i>interpersonally directed but minor offences</i> |

Recently numerous studies paid attention to identify the potential causes of CWB’s. According to Bowling et al (2010), personality traits are one of the main variables which predict these behaviors. Hafidz et al. (2012) asserted that CWB is an act based on individual choice, so it is likely to be influenced by personality traits. A wide range of researches focused to identify these personal trait antecedents of CWB. Cullen and Sackett (2003) suggested that most of the consistent predictors of CWB’s are the Big Five Traits. Paulhus and Williams (2002) suggested that the Dark Triad of three personality traits – Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy- are much more important during the prediction of CWB’s. These three traits are known as “aberrant personality” at work. Ersoy-

Kart et al. (2013) found that the levels of primary and secondary psychopathy were correlated with all types of CWB's. These results indicated that all CWB's would become prevalent, when both primary and secondary psychopathies increased. But there were no significant or weak correlations between CWB Types with Machiavellianism and narcissism. Therefore in the present study, it was predicted that psychopathy is related to total CWB scores.

### **Psychopathy and Linkages with CWB**

Psychopathy is a personality construct characterized by impulsivity, arrogance, manipulateness, serial lying and low levels of anxiety, empathy, guilt, and a lack of empathy, callousness, or remorse (Ersoy-Kart et al., 2013; Skeem et al., 2011; Hare, 2003). Psychopathy involves two distinct dimensions termed as primary and secondary psychopathy (Benning et al.; 2003). Both psychopathy types engage in antisocial behavior (Johnson et al.; 2016). According to Skeem et al (2011), primary psychopathy (PP) has a moderate genetic component, is associated with callous and manipulative behavior, superficial relationships, and a lack of negative affect. Secondary psychopathy (SP) is associated with antisocial lifestyles and behaviors (Hare et al., 1991) and is associated with neuroticism, impulsivity, emotional reactivity, risky decision-making, and aggression (Lynam et al., 1999; Dean et al., 2013; Lyons, 2015). Considering Spencer and Byrne's (2016) emphasis that to some extent primary psychopathy and secondary psychopathy are in conflict, it is thought that primary psychopathy yields different behavioral consequences in work settings. Accordingly in the present study it is supposed that only primary psychopathy is related with CWB. As Johnson et al (2016) asserted, research on the effects of employees' psychopathic traits at work is very limited and speculations are still growing. Therefore, it is hoped that this present study contributes to the existing literature.

### **Cognitive Distortion (Helplessness) as a Contributor of CWB**

Cognitive distortions (CD's) are systematic logic errors in the individual's mind (Pişkin et al., 2014). Researchers suggest that CD's can be observed in normal individuals, but depressive individuals perceive stressful situations more negatively and exaggeratedly than healthy ones (Fair, 1986). As known, according to social-cognitive theories, the interpretation of social events is related to behavioral outcomes (Bacchini et al., 2016). Strohmeier et al (2016) argued that behaving in accordance with a cognitive distortion may lead to a narrowed behavioral repertoire and increased emotional distress. The activation of cognitive distortions, or thinking errors are seen as a maladaptive response brought about by a discrepancy between an individual's expectation of events and reality (Pretzer and Beck, 2007). According to Murad (2002), CD's are strongly related to aggressive behavior. It is observed that individuals who take refuge behind CD's have a more external locus of control and lower self-respect, internalize loneliness, are weaker at coping with stress, and are more prone to depression and anxiety. They can be described as possessing a tendency to blame themselves for negative unwanted events that have occurred in their lives, (self-blame), feeling unable to control important aspects of their lives (helplessness), lacking perseverance in tasks requiring an expectation of a positive future outcome (hopelessness), and expressing a tendency to view the world as a dangerous place (preoccupation with danger) (Brown, et al; 2009).

## **THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

In the present study we expect that the cognitive distortions-helplessness may moderate the relationship between counter productive work behavior and primary psychopathy personality trait. Based on the past research findings, theoretical explanation reported in the literature review, and our expectations, we hypothesized the following:

- H1. There is a relationship between Primary Psychopathy (PP) and Counter Productive Work Behaviors (CWB).
- H2: There is a relationship between PP and Helplessness (H).
- H3. There is a relationship between CWB and H.
- H4. The relationship between CWB and PP is moderated by H.
- H5. The relationship between PP and CWB differs according to the amount of Helplessness Level.

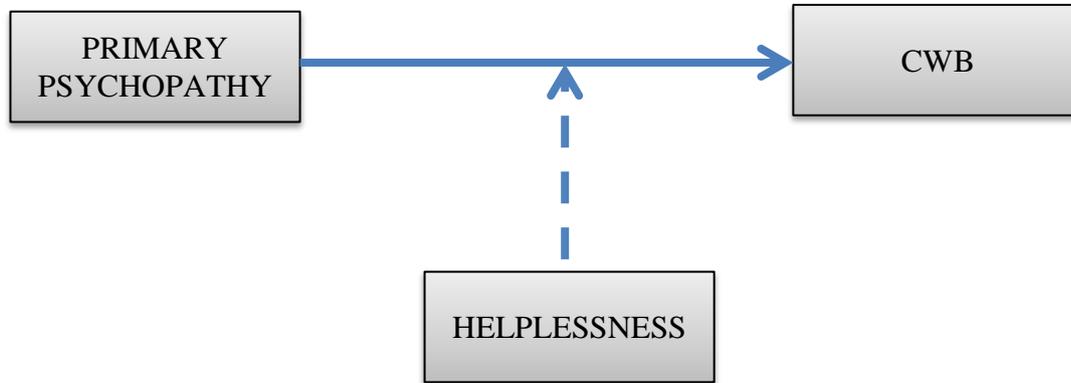


Figure 1. Depicts the research model

Figure 1. Research model of primary psychopathy, counterproductive work behavior and Helplessness / *Dashed lines indicate moderation hypotheses.*

To test the hypotheses stated above, a study was conducted with university staff in Ankara, Turkey. Participants completed a survey that contains the measure of CWB, psychopathy and cognitive distortion scales. Also demographic variables were included in the survey battery.

**METHOD**

Data were collected from 150 administrative and academic staff working at Turkish universities. There were 70 females (46.7%) and 80 males (53.3%) with mean ages 32.62 and 36.86, respectively. Amongst them, 64% were under 35, whilst 36% were above 35. As can be seen in Table 1, slightly more than half of the participants were administrative staff (52.7%) and slightly less than half of them were working as academics (47.3%). 90 % of the respondents had a university degree or master degree.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the respondents (n=150)**

|               | n  | %    |                        | n  | %    |
|---------------|----|------|------------------------|----|------|
| <b>Gender</b> |    |      | <b>Education Level</b> |    |      |
| Male          | 80 | 53,3 | High School            | 15 | 10   |
| Female        | 70 | 46,7 | ndergraduate           | 61 | 40,7 |
| <b>Age</b>    |    |      | Graduate               | 74 | 49,3 |
| Under 35      | 96 | 64   | <b>Profession</b>      |    |      |
| Above 35      | 54 | 36   | administrative staff   | 79 | 52,7 |
|               |    |      | academic staff         | 71 | 47,3 |

## MEASURES

In order to collect the data, the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector, et al., 2006), Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale – LSRP (Levenson et al.; 1995), and Cognitive Distortion Scale (Yurica and DiTomasso, 2002) were used. Additionally, a demographic information form was completed by the respondents. The instruments and demographic information forms were distributed to the participants by the researchers. More detailed information about the measuring instruments used in the study is presented below.

**The Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist – CWB:** The CWB Checklist was developed by Spector et al. (2006) to measure negative worker behaviors intended to give harm to others. Scale items are gathered under 5 dimensions as abuse, production deviance, sabotage, theft, and withdrawal. The scale consisted of 33 items and each item has statements ranging from “1=never” to “5= every day” in Likert type where high points mean that CWB’s are seen very often. The scale was adapted into Turkish culture by Öcel (2010). The results of factor analysis revealed four dimensional construct for Turkish population, explaining 65.15% of total variance. These dimensions are as followed: Abuse (17 items), Theft (6 items), Withdrawal (6 items) and Sabotage (3 items). Öcel (2010) also reported that Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of the scale was .97, test-retest reliability coefficient was .92 and split-half reliability coefficient was .95.

**Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale - LSRP:** LSRP developed by Levenson, et al. (1995) consists of 26 items and measures primary and secondary psychopathy. Each item consists of a statement which the participant reads and then endorses on a four point scale (“disagree strongly”, “disagree somewhat”, “agree somewhat” and “agree strongly”). Validity and reliability of the Turkish version of the scale were examined by Engeler and Yargıç (2007). They found that the internal consistency of the scale for primary psychopathy as .82, whilst alpha coefficient for secondary psychopathy as .63.

**Cognitive Distortion Scale:** The 40-item CD Scale developed by Yurica and DiTomasso, 2002 assesses five factors: self-criticism, self-blame, helplessness, hopelessness, and preoccupation with danger. The higher total scores reflect a higher endorsement of cognitive distortions. Ağır (2007) reported a high internal consistency of the scale for a Turkish sample (Cronbach’s alpha ranging from 0.88 to 0.91).

## RESULTS

The main aim of the present study was to explore whether helplessness moderates the relationship between CWB and primary psychopathy. But at the beginning of the analysis, we computed all the correlations among dependent variable (CWB) and independent variables (Psychopathy and Cognitive Distortions). For all analysis an alpha value of .05 was chosen to indicate the significance. The analyses were conducted with SPSS 18.0.

### Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

The means, standard deviations, and correlations among the research variables are presented in Table 2.

As can be seen in the Table 1, counter productive work behaviors’ total score was positively correlated with all of the five cognitive distortion sub scales and also with primary and secondary psychopathy scores. Thus Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, and Hypothesis 3 are supported.

**Table 2**  
**All variables' means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix**

|                              | Mean  | SD    | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     | 6     | 7     | 8 |
|------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. CWB (total)               | 36,56 | 10,97 | -     |       |       |       |       |       |       |   |
| 2. Primary Psychopathy       | 37,27 | 4,64  | ,642* | -     |       |       |       |       |       |   |
| 3. Secondary Psychopathy     | 24,31 | 3,40  | ,543* | ,536* | -     |       |       |       |       |   |
| 4. Self-criticism            | 15,29 | 4,73  | ,588* | ,511* | ,556* | -     |       |       |       |   |
| 5. Self-blame                | 18,08 | 5,50  | ,452* | ,540* | ,523* | ,796* | -     |       |       |   |
| 6. Helplessness              | 18,08 | 5,75  | ,453* | ,450* | ,531* | ,762* | ,820* | -     |       |   |
| 7. Hopelessness              | 15,87 | 6,15  | ,458* | ,439* | ,451* | ,888* | ,807* | ,888* | -     |   |
| 8. Preoccupation with danger | 17,28 | 5,57  | ,455* | ,519* | ,586* | ,777* | ,801* | ,777* | ,780* | - |

\* $p < .05$

The influences of psychopathy and cognitive distortion level on CWB were used to analyze the effects of independent variables, especially the moderating role of helplessness between primary psychopathy and total CWB. With other words, to test the hypothesis that counters productive work behaviors which are the function of psychopathic personality trait and cognitive distortions levels, and more specifically whether cognitive distortion (helplessness) moderates the relationship between psychopathic personality (primary psychopathy) and CWB, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted.

### Moderator Regression Analysis

Before the regression analysis, to avoid potentially problematic high multicollinearity with interaction term, the independent variables (primary psychopathy and helplessness) were centered, and the interactions between them were then calculated (Aiken and West, 1991). The regression involved two steps: All of the independent variables were introduced into the regression equation to test the main effects (step 1), and the interaction terms were introduced into the regression equation to test the moderating effects (step 2). In the first step, two variables were included: Primary psychopathy and helplessness. These variables accounted for a significant amount of variance in counter productive work behaviors,  $R^2 = .44$ ,  $F(2-147) = 59,04$ ,  $p < .05$ . Next, the interaction term between primary psychopathy and helplessness was added to the regression model, which accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in CWB,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.38$ ,  $p < .05$ . These results supported the hypothesis and indicated that the interaction between primary psychopathy and helplessness was significantly associated with counter productive work behaviors. Afterwards, we used the process macro option of SPSS and found that overall model was significant,  $F(3-146) = 8.48$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .82$ .; Helplessness  $b = 0.19$ ,  $t(146) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ; primary psychopathy  $b = 0.33$ ,  $t(146) = 2.54$ ,  $p < .05$  and Interaction  $b = 0.12$ ,  $t(146) = 4.62$ ,  $p < .05$ . The regression equation for CWB is displayed as follows:  $CWB = constant + 0.19 (helplessness) + 0.33 (primary psychopathy) + 0.12 (Helplessness * Primary Psychopathy)$ .

We first aimed to test whether Helplessness level of respondents moderates the relationship of primary psychopathy with CWB (Hypotheses 4). Because the interaction term was statistically significant, we computed simple slopes test for a more thorough examination of the moderation phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2003). Interactions were plotted using the method recommended by Aiken and West (1991).

We estimated the simple slopes of the relation between CWB and primary psychopathy, for low Helplessness (lower than  $-1$  SD) and for high Helplessness (higher than  $+1$  SD). For low Helplessness, the simple slope between CWB and primary psychopathy had negative value ( $b = -0.37$ ,  $t(146) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .05$ ) which means that the negative relationship between PP and CWB becomes stronger, by  $\Delta\gamma_{11} = -.37$  units as staff's helplessness decreases by one unit. For high Helplessness the same relation was positive ( $b = 1.03$ ,  $t(146) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ). So, the positive relationship between PP and CWB becomes stronger, by  $\Delta\gamma_{11} = 1.03$  units as staff's helplessness increases by one unit. To sum up, the results revealed significant cross-level interaction effects of PP and helplessness level on CWB in university staff. Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 5 are supported. The resulting simple slope plot is depicted in Figure 2. Examination of the interaction plot showed an enhancing effect that as primary psychopathy and helplessness increased, counterproductive work behaviors increased. But when primary psychopathy increased, but helplessness decreased, counterproductive work behaviors decreased also. At low primary psychopathy, CWB's were at minimum level when helplessness increased. As helplessness decreased, CWB's were at an average level. In brief, the results of the hierarchical regressions showed that helplessness played a moderating role between PP and CWB.

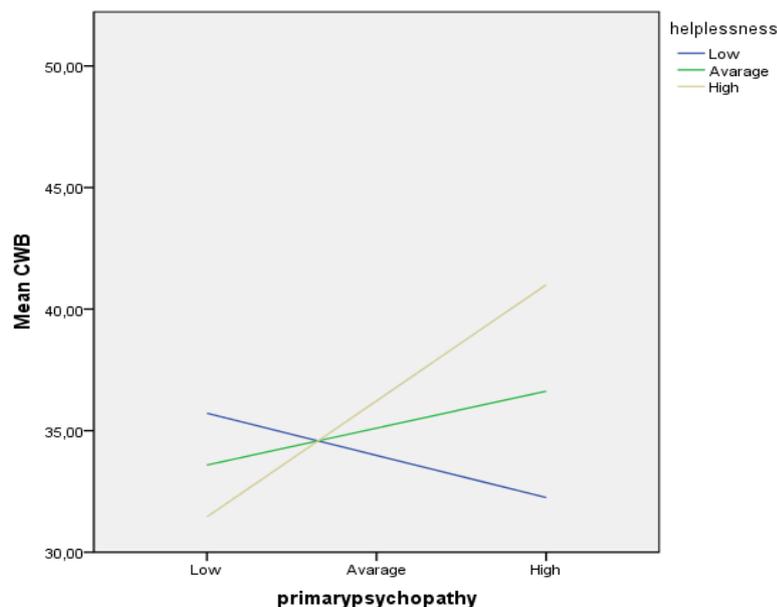


Fig. 2. The moderating function of Helplessness on the relationship between PP and CWB

## DISCUSSION

Our research model shows the effect of cognitive distortion type “helplessness” as a moderator on the relationship between primary psychopathy and counterproductive work behaviors.

Due to the increasing level of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) at organizations, it has become an important topic in organizational research in recent years. According to Fox, Spector and Miles (2001), these behaviors may harm the organization by directly affecting its

functioning or property, or hurt employees by reducing their effectiveness. Recently, a lot of scientific researches were made to identify the potential causes of CWB's. For instance, Bowling et al (2010) found out that personality traits are one of the main variables that predict these behaviors. Hafidz et al. (2012) also suggested that CWB is likely to be influenced by personality traits. In addition to these studies, according to Paulhus and Williams (2002), three personality traits which are Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy have an enormous effect on CWB's. It is important to indicate that Ersoy-Kart et al. (2013) found that the levels of primary and secondary psychopathy are all correlated with all types of CWB's. Also, according to Ersoy-Kart et al. (2013); Skeem et al. (2011) and Hare (2003), psychopathy is characterized by impulsivity, arrogance manipulateness, serial lying and low levels of anxiety, empathy, guilt, and a lack of empathy, callousness, or remorse. Also, studies were made to indicate that cognitive distortion (helplessness) also contributes to CWB. While the study of Pişkin et al. (2014) suggests that cognitive distortions (CD's) are systematic logic errors in the individual's mind, other researchers imply that CD's can be observed in normal individuals, but depressive individuals perceive stressful situations more negatively and exaggeratedly than healthy ones (Fair, 1986).

According to Johnson et al (2016), research on the effects of employees' psychopathic traits at work is very limited and speculations are still growing. Thus, as indicated before, this study was made to contribute to the existing literature expecting that helplessness moderates the relationship between counter productive work behavior and primary psychopathy (PP) personality trait. Within the scope of this study, it is also supposed that only primary psychopathy is related with CWB. Based on the past research findings, theoretical explanation reported in the literature review, and our expectations, we hypothesized 5 hypotheses and to test these, a study was conducted and data were collected from 150 administrative and academic staff working at universities in Ankara, Turkey. After the correlation analysis, it was found that counter productive work behaviors' total score was positively correlated with all of the five cognitive distortion sub scales which are self-criticism, self-blame, helplessness, hopelessness, preoccupation with danger and also with primary and secondary psychopathy scores. This finding is also consistent with Murad's (2002) study which suggested that CD's are strongly related to aggressive behaviour.

In addition to this, we aimed to test whether Helplessness level of respondents moderates the relationship of primary psychopathy with CWB or not and in order to do this, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted. After the analysis, it was found that when helplessness is at its highest level, even if psychopathy is at a high level, CWB seems to be at a high level. Therefore, the cognitive distortion level of helplessness makes the relationship between psychopathy and CWB positive and weak. Within this framework, in the case that helplessness is at its highest level, when psychopathy increases, CWB increases. However, when a person does not show any distortion level of helplessness but show primary psychopathy behaviors, the related person may show CWB more easily. It means that the cognitive distortion (helplessness) represses the tendency of CWB for people who depict the level of primary psychopathy.

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