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Personal Intelligence and Student Employees

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Abstract

Personal intelligence involves the capacity of individuals to accurately reason about personality and personality-related information that is related to themselves and others (Mayer, 2008). One setting that may particularly benefit from research on personal intelligence is the workplace. To understand employees' logic, Peters and colleagues (2021) employed a narrative evaluation tool adapted from Allen (2017) to assess the perceived sophistication employees' use to describe an interaction they had with a difficult or challenging coworker. They found that judges could reliably detect variations in the sophistication employees used, and that it was related, $r = .43$, $p < .001$, to a measure of personal intelligence. Their results were intriguing, but more confidence regarding their findings could be added through replication and extension of the work. Previous findings were replicated, which makes for a more compelling case that personal intelligence is detectable in employees and is related to what we think of as personal intelligence. Understanding personal intelligence in the workplace can enhance the capabilities of the human resource professionals to select personnel, which will ultimately improve their hiring process.

KEYWORDS: PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE, WORKPLACE, SOPHISTICATED.

Introduction

Personality is a complex system that concerns parts of an individual's psychological life (Mayer, 2005). Most definitions of personality refer to an operation of mental systems, but more specifically, it is a psychological process that emerges from a combination of motives, feelings, and thoughts. For example, personality is linked to certain traits such as energetic or apathetic, which can be used to describe a person. There is a wide array of measures that evaluate certain traits and dimensions of personality. The purpose of this study was to examine personal intelligence and counterproductive work behavior in the workplace. This present study consists of such measures and other tests to study personal intelligence, counterproductive work behavior, and reasoning about a coworker in a group of student employees.

Measures of Personality Relevant to the Study

The Big Six Personality Traits

The Big Six personality traits are Neuroticism, Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience, and Honesty-Humility. The HEXACO-60 is a short personality inventory that measures these six dimensions of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2009). Each dimension contains traits with characteristics indicating high and low levels of the corresponding factor. The HEXACO factors were originally developed with factor analyses of personality adjective ratings. Later, an inventory was created to provide a more focused assessment of the factors. Within this inventory is a series of statements concerning the personality of a target person. Specifically, participants indicate the degree to which he or she agrees or disagrees with each statement. Results from responses indicate that higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience factors suggest greater intensity of engagement in varying domains such as social, task-related, and idea-related (Ashton & Lee,

2009). Current research uses the HEXACO model to study various topics in psychology such as personal intelligence and workplace deviance (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

Personal Intelligence

Personal intelligence involves the capacity of individuals to accurately reason about personality and information that is related to themselves and others (Mayer, 2008). Specifically, personal intelligence is defined as a mental ability. According to the theory of personal intelligence, this mental ability consists of problem-solving in four areas. The first area is the ability to recognize personally relevant information from introspection and observations. Subsequently, the second area is the capacity to form this relevant information into accurate models of personality. The third area is the ability to use personality information to guide one's choices. The fourth area is the systematization of goals, plans, and life stories for positive outcomes (Mayer, 2008). These problem-solving areas are connected and form a continuous cycle of learning, understanding, and changing.

To explore whether personal intelligence could be objectively measured, Mayer and colleagues (2012) developed the Test of Personal Intelligence (TOPI). This ability-based test consists of multiple-choice questions, with answers keyed to well-established findings from personality literature. In other words, since this test measures ability, every question on the TOPI has four options and one of them is correct. Current literature suggests individuals exist on a spectrum from low to high personal intelligence (Mayer, 2008). Differences in personal intelligence, as measured by the TOPI, have shown many compelling relations to real-life criteria, such as counterproductive work behavior (Mayer & Skimmyhorn, 2017).

Personal Intelligence in the Workplace

One setting that may particularly benefit from research on personal intelligence is the workplace. A specific type of behavior that exists in the workplace is counterproductive work behavior, which is categorized as intentional behavior intended to harm an organization and its members (Spector et al., 2006). Recent literature analyzes counterproductive work behavior by subscales such as sabotage, withdrawal, production deviance, theft, and abuse. Some research indicates that specific underlying motives like injustice and aggression can be shared across all five scales (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Although, some evidence suggests that there are differences in the causes of each scale. One such example includes varying organizational conditions (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). Overall, counterproductive behaviors may be due to personality qualities, or in response to work stressors and injustice; the behaviors often are related to anger (Spector et al., 2006). In an initial study of workplace behavior, Mayer and colleagues (2018) found that employees who scored higher on a test of personal intelligence experienced more workplace social support and engaged in almost no counterproductive work behavior such as incivility and theft.

Sophistication

Allen (2017) also studied personal intelligence, while incorporating a new measure of sophistication. Specifically, she asked participants about a time they learned about someone's personality. Participants answered the questions by providing stories or narratives about their experiences. She then developed a sophistication-rating system where independently trained judges evaluated differences in the kinds of learning people wrote about. High sophistication ratings reflected the participant's ability to modulate their, "perception of others and how they acted according to their evaluations" (Allen, 2017, p. 17). By employing the Sophistication

Coding Sheet, Allen (2017) found judges detected differences in sophistication and that it significantly related to ability-based personal intelligence.

Current Study

Counterproductive work behavior and poor relations with coworkers are known issues that can disrupt the workplace (Spector et al., 2006). The current study examines key psychological variables that may be related to such problematic behavior.

This present study examines personal intelligence, counterproductive work behavior, and reasoning about a coworker in a group of student employees. Part of the work replicates a pilot study by Peters et al. (2021). That study examined narratives written by study participants about a challenging coworker. Peters found that judges who examined the narratives could reliably detect variations in the sophistication employees used to understand personality, and that their sophistication was related to personal intelligence, $r = .43$, $p < .001$.

Here, we tested whether sophistication ratings of narratives about challenging coworkers were related not only to personal intelligence, but also to counterproductive work behavior using the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (Spector et al., 2006). In addition, we tested all the measures' relations with such measures of benchmark personality traits such as Honesty, Emotionality, and Extraversion and their relation to personal intelligence and other measures. To address the latter, we added the HEXACO–60 measure (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

Hypotheses

The current study tested the following hypotheses:

1. Regularly-found relationships among variables will be replicated here. These include that ability-based personal intelligence will positively correlate about $r = .10$ to $.20$ with

Agreeableness and Conscientiousness of the HEXACO–60; it will correlate about $r = .40$ to $.50$ with verbal intelligence, as measured by the Wordsumplus-14.

2. A factor analysis of judge's ratings of sophistication will yield a recognizable factor of sophistication about personality.
3. The central hypothesis is that ability-based personal intelligence will correlate positively with sophistication ratings and negatively with counterproductive work behavior.
4. Sophistication ratings also will correlate negatively with counterproductive work behavior at about the $r = -.20$ level.

Methods and Measures

Subjects and Screening

Initially, 114 participants signed up to take the Qualtrics survey. Of those, 23 student employees logged on to the survey but did not complete any of the measures and four student employees were flagged and removed for repeatedly choosing the same answer throughout the survey or signs of non-responsiveness. The final sample consisted of 87 student employees (78 women, 8 men, and 1 other) predominantly female, white, and earned under \$15,000 per year retained after screening for non-responsiveness.

Measures

The current study employed measures of personal intelligence and workplace behavior and attitudes. Student employees were asked to complete a survey that consisted of an informed consent form, demographic questions, the Interaction with Difficult or Challenging Employees Survey, the Test of Personal Intelligence Brief-20, the Wordsumplus-14 test, the Self-Estimated Personal Intelligence Scale, the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist, the HEXACO–60, and an opportunity to provide comments.

The Interaction with Difficult or Challenging Employees Survey (Peters et al., 2021; see Appendix A). This survey asked participants to describe a difficult interaction with a coworker. This measure consists of six multiple choice questions and five open-ended questions.

The Test of Personal Intelligence Brief-20 (TOPI-BRIEF-20, Mayer et al. 2019). This 20-item short form provides a quick ability-based measure of personal intelligence. An item of the type on the test is:

- A person is witty, comical, and amusing. Most likely, he also could be described as:
- a. Hilarious
 - b. Neurotic
 - c. Intelligent
 - d. Handsome

The Wordsumplus-14 test (Cor et al., 2012). This test is a 14-item verbal intelligence test. An item of the type on the test is:

- ANIMOSITY:
- a. Hatred
 - b. Animation
 - c. Disobedience
 - d. Diversity
 - e. Friendship.

The Self-Estimated Personal Intelligence Scale (SEPI-16, Mayer et al., 2017). This scale is a 16-item self-judgement measure to assess personal intelligence. An item of the type on the test is:

- I read people's intentions well:
- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Disagree a little
 - c. Neither agree nor disagree
 - d. Agree a little
 - e. Strongly agree.

The Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C, Spector et al., 2006). This measure inquires about the respondents' frequency of a targeted counterproductive work behavior on their current job. An item of the type on the test is:

Purposely did your work incorrectly:

- a. Never
- b. Once or twice
- c. Once or twice per month
- d. Once or twice per week
- e. Every day.

The HEXACO–60 (Ashton & Lee, 2009). This short personality inventory assesses the six dimensions of the HEXACO model of personality structure. The subscales of interest for the current study include Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience. An item of the type on the test is:

I rarely express my opinions in group meetings:

- a. Strongly disagree
- b. Disagree
- c. Neutral (neither agree nor disagree)
- d. Agree
- e. Strongly agree.

Coworker Narrative Coding Sheet (Allen, 2017; see Appendix B). This sheet is an adapted version of the Sophistication Coding Sheet used in prior studies. The raters employed this measure to detect variations in the judged sophistication that employees use to describe their difficult or challenging coworker. In other words, raters used this sheet to evaluate the narrative descriptions that participants provided for the Interaction with Difficult or Challenging Employees Survey.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through SONA, an online participant recruitment tool. A link to the Qualtrics survey was limited to participants who are 18 years or older and work at least five hours per week. Participants who completed the survey in its entirety received one SONA credit. Participants were given the opportunity to comment on the survey as an alternate non-research activity. To earn the equivalent SONA credit, participants were instructed to contact the principal investigator. No participants chose the alternative experience.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Developing Rater Scales for Sophistication. We first assessed the general sophistication of the student accounts of their coworkers. To do so, we employed Peter's et al., (2021) scales for the judges' sophistication ratings. The coding sheet was divided into seven categories labeled Empathy, Balance, Attribution of the Episode, Attention to Specific Traits, Attention to Motivation and Goals, Adequacy of the Respondent's Coping Response, and Rater's Overall Subjective Impression. The first two categories, Empathy and Balance, were related to cognitive complexity. The remaining categories besides Rater's Overall Subjective Impression was related to the theory of personal intelligence. The seven categories were then divided into fifteen items, which can be viewed in Table 1 discussed below (Peter's et al., 2021).

We next checked inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability indicates the degree to which raters agree with each other. This analysis can be appropriately assessed by a two-way mixed-effect, average measures intraclass correlation. The calculation for all ratings was .88, respectively, indicating that judge's agreement was high.

To create scales from the ratings, an exploratory factor analysis testing up to a three-factor solution was run in SPSS with a maximum likelihood factor method and Oblimin rotation. We used the two-factor solution here. Both factors appeared related to Sophistication. The first, labeled "Attentive to Traits" loaded items such as, "Mentioned Personality Traits". The second, labeled "Balanced Perspective", included items such as "Attributed interaction to...a balance between the person and the situation." (See Table 1). For both scales, we added items that loaded $> +/- .30$ on the factor. As shown in Table 1, item 9 was negative, so it was reversed scored when testing correlations.

Table 1*Three Factor Exploratory Factor Analysis with a ML Extraction and Oblimin Rotation of the Coworker Narrative Coding Sheet*

Rating	Description of Rating	Two-Factor Solution	
		I	II
1	Made a connection between personality traits and behaviors	.67	
2	Mentioned personality traits	.91	
3	Understood their coworker's goal/traits/motives could conflict with one another		.71
4	Mentioned what their goals and motives may have been		.71
5	Provided a description of a person's positive traits or attributes		.49
6	Provided a description of a person's negative traits or attributes	.93	
7	Provided a description of a person's negative and positive traits or attributes		.34
8	Chose a constructive coping response; likely to improve the situation		.54
9	Chose a poor coping response; likely to worsen the situation		-.47
10	Attributed the interaction to something about the coworker	.69	
11	Attributed the interaction to something about the situation		.80
12	Provided a sophisticated balance between the person and situation		.81
13	Expressed empathy for the person and/or the person's situation		.80
14	Demonstrated very good understanding of their coworker		.90
15	Demonstrated a lack of understanding with their coworker		

Factor loadings above .70 in bold.

Descriptive Statistics of the Key Variables

Table 2 shows our descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and reliabilities. Most of the values were in the expected range for all scales, except for the reliability of the TOPI-BRIEF-20 and Wordsumplus-14. For example, the reliability of the TOPI-BRIEF-20 was a bit lower than previously reported but still sufficient for these research purposes (Mayer et al., 2017). Additionally, the reliability of the Wordsumplus-14 was somewhat below typically reported levels, but sufficient for the work here (Cor et al., 2012). Contrarily, the reliability of the SEPI was 0.84, which was in the expected range.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Measure	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
TOPI-BRIEF-20	87	15.40	2.86	0.73
SEPI-16	87	3.63	0.56	0.84
Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist	87	1.20	0.25	0.90
Wordsumplus-14	87	6.93	2.32	0.61
Coworker Narrative Coding Sheet				
Attentive to Traits	87	14.90	4.47	0.88
Balanced Perspective	87	29.01	9.36	0.89
HEXACO-60 Scales				
Agreeableness	87	3.18	0.59	0.75
Conscientiousness	87	3.70	0.64	0.83
Openness to Experience	87	3.13	0.65	0.75

Test of Hypotheses

Did general relations replicate earlier relations? (Hypothesis 1) As shown in Table 3, some, but not all correlations were in the expected range. For instance, although TOPI scores correlated with the Wordsumplus (a measure of vocabulary) as expected at $r = .37$, and with Conscientiousness $r = .20$, it failed to significantly correlate with Agreeableness, $r = -.003$.

Table 3

Correlations for Measures

Measure	Intelligence Measures		Self-Est. PI	CWB	Attentive	Balanced
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. TOPI-BRIEF-20	-					
2. Wordsumplus-14	0.37***	-				
3. SEPI-16	0.06	-0.10	-			
4. Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)	-0.18	-0.02	-0.22*	-		
5. Sophistication: Attentive to Traits	0.27*	0.17	-0.12	0.23*	-	
6. Sophistication: Balanced Perspective	0.04	0.10	-0.04	-0.10	0.05	-
7. Agreeableness	-0.00	-0.10	0.26*	-0.37***	-0.15	0.09
8. Conscientiousness	0.20	0.13	0.36***	-0.26*	0.01	0.10

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

Did a factor analysis of judge's ratings of sophistication yield a recognizable factor of sophistication about personality? (Hypothesis 2) As shown in Table 1, both the Attentive to Traits and Balanced Perspective factors of the 2-factor solution reflected sophistication about personality.

Did ability-based personal intelligence correlate positively with sophistication ratings and negatively with counterproductive work behavior? (Hypothesis 3) As shown in Table 3, ability-based personal intelligence correlated with sophistication at $r = .27^*$, and negatively with counterproductive work behavior at about the $r = -.20$ level.

Did Sophistication ratings correlate negatively with counterproductive work behavior at about the $r = -.20$ level? (Hypothesis 4) As shown in Table 2, the factor model yielded two factors of sophistication. The first, Attentive to Traits factor correlated positively with counterproductive work behavior, $r = .23^*$. The second, Balanced Perspective factor, however correlated negatively albeit non-significantly with counterproductive work behavior, $r = -.10$, contrary to our prediction. The hypothesis was partially supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine Counterproductive work behavior and poor relations with coworker in the workplace (Spector et al., 2006). To do so we replicated and extended earlier findings from Peters et al. (2021) study.

We found that raters could reliably detect variations in the Attentiveness to Traits and Balanced Perspective used in describing their difficult coworker and Attentiveness to Traits was significantly related to ability-based personal intelligence.

Some of our findings were consistent with what relevant theory predicted: That personal intelligence plays a role in the workplace behavior. For example, personal intelligence correlated $r = -.18$ with counterproductive workplace behavior.

Some of our findings were not consistent with our expectations. We intended to assess the correlation between a sophistication scale and personal intelligence, but our factor analyses suggested there were two factors rather than one involving Sophistication. Only one of the two scales of Sophistication we examined correlated with TOPI scores. It was not clear why.

Limitations

In terms of the generalizability of our results, our sample of 87 participants is less than desirable. Most participants were white and female, which does not provide an accurate representation of the population we are interested in, which is the workplace. Further research should expand upon the findings to make a more accurate determination of our results.

Conclusions

Understanding personal intelligence in the workplace can potentially enhance the capabilities of human resource professionals to select personnel, which will ultimately improve their hiring process. Studies such as the present one also can assist HR departments in identifying potential weaknesses in employee perceptions of one another, and guide training in the area. With the addition of an adapted sophistication-rating system, the current study will further the psychological research communities understanding of personal intelligence in the workplace. Since previous findings were replicated as predicted, it will make for a more compelling case that person intelligence is detectable in employees, and it is related to what we think of as sophistication.

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Appendix A. Interaction with Difficult or Challenging Employees Survey

ccinst1 INSTRUCTIONS: Please think of someone at work who can be challenging or difficult to work with. We will ask you several questions about them below, referring to the person as the "target person."

cc1 How long have you worked with this target person?

- Less than a month (1)
- Between a month and 6 months (2)
- 6 months to a year (3)
- 1 to 2 years (4)
- More than 2 years (5)

cc2 How often do you interact with this person in person? (Please choose the alternative closest to how often you see the person)

- Every day (1)
- Every few days (e.g., once or twice a week) (2)
- Once or twice a month (3)
- Less than once a month (4)

cc3 How often do you interact with this person online? (Please choose the alternative closest to how often you see the person)

- Every day (1)
- Every few days (e.g., once or twice a week) (2)
- Once or twice a month (3)
- Less than once a month (4)

ccinst2 Now, please think of one recent episode in particular with the target person that was especially challenging or difficult in terms of dealing with the target person, and that you believe turned out reasonably well.

cc4 Please describe the challenging situation was you faced with the target person in a few sentences or so:

cc5 What, specifically, did you find especially challenging or difficult about the person in this situation?

cc6 What did you do in the situation? How did you respond to the target individual, if you did?

cc7 Why do you think the target individual acted in this way?

cc8 More generally, is there anything you could add about the target individual's personality—their behaviors, traits, and characteristics—to further describe them?

ccinst3 Thinking back to the episode you just described:

cc9 How satisfied were you with the outcome?

- Strongly dissatisfied (1)
- Mostly dissatisfied (2)
- Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied (3)
- Mostly satisfied (4)
- Strongly satisfied (5)

cc10 How satisfied do you believe the target person was with the outcome?

- Strongly dissatisfied (1)
- Mostly dissatisfied (2)
- Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied (3)
- Mostly satisfied (4)
- Strongly satisfied (5)

cc11 How confident are you about the accuracy of your descriptions and evaluation of this person?

- Not confident at all about my accuracy (1)
- Slightly confident about my accuracy (2)
- Somewhat confident about my accuracy (3)
- Fairly confident about my accuracy (4)
- Highly confident about my accuracy (5)

Appendix B. Coworker Narrative Coding Sheet

Specifics of Coworkers Personality

1. To what extent did the person make a connection between personality traits and behaviors (e.g., stubbornness influencing decision-making)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Little			Somewhat			Very Much

2. To what extent did the person mention personality traits (e.g., ambition)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
No Mention			Somewhat			Clear Mention

3. The person expressed understanding of how a person's goals, traits, or motives could differ/conflict with one another (e.g., a coworker who feels pressure to impress their boss leads to them demonstrating rude behavior).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Little			Somewhat			Very Much

4. The person mentioned what their goals and/or motives may have been in their interaction (e.g., hitting the numbers, impressing their boss).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
No			Somewhat			Clear
Mention						Mention

Balance of Viewpoint

5. The person provided a description of a person’s positive traits(s) or attribute(s) (e.g., optimistic, passionate).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

6. The person provided a description of a person’s negative traits(s) or attribute(s) (e.g., demanding, disorganized).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

7. The person provided a balanced description of both a person’s negative and positive trait(s) or attribute(s) (e.g., passionate, but demanding).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

Effectiveness of Respondent's coping

8. The person chose a constructive coping response; likely to improve the situation (e.g., active listening, effective communication).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Poor			Neither poor			Constructive
Response			nor constructive			Response
			response			

9. The person chose a poor coping response; likely to worsen the situation (e.g., yelling).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Constructive			Neither poor			Poor
Response			nor constructive			Response
			response			

Responsibility

10. To what extent did this person attribute the interaction to something about their coworker (e.g., traits, motives, etc.)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

11. To what extent did this person attribute the interaction to something about the situation (e.g., communication, work responsibilities, etc.)?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

12. To what extent did this person provide a sophisticated balance between the person and the situation (e.g., easy upbringing influencing snide behavior).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

Empathy

13. The person expressed empathy; “feels” for the person and/or the person’s situation.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

Overall impression

14. The person demonstrated very good understanding of their coworker; describes highly plausible connections between the person and the situation (e.g., the impulsive behavior the coworker exhibited led to an incomplete assignment).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much

15. The person demonstrates a lack of understanding with their coworker; misses or incorrectly interprets the person and/or the situation (e.g., misunderstood why the coworker was ignoring work procedures).

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very			Somewhat			Very
Little						Much