negotiation and conflict management research

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Counterproductive Work Behavior and Conflict: Merging Complementary Domains

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Abstract

Scholarship on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and related constructs (e.g., deviance, bullying, harassment, aggression, incivility, mobbing, revenge) has advanced the understanding of the factors that drive employees to engage in harmful actions at work and illuminated the effects of such behavior on individual, group, and organizational outcomes. Despite the many parallels between CWB and conflict processes as well as scholars' calls for better integration, there has been surprisingly little cross-fertilization between these areas. Accordingly, the goal of this special issue is to provide an outlet for research and theory that have investigated CWB with a conflict lens. In this overview of the special issue, I begin by briefly describing the nature of CWB and possible reasons for the lack of integration with conflict research. I then provide an overview of the articles in this special issue and conclude with a synthesis and suggested future research questions.

There has been substantial progress in understanding counterproductive behavior in organizational settings in recent years. Scholarship in this area is characterized by a shared interest in better understanding the individual and situational factors that drive employees to engage in harmful actions at work—both toward other employees and toward the organization—coupled with an interest in examining the effects of such behavior on individual, group, and organizational outcomes. This research has appeared under a variety of construct labels including counterproductive work behavior (CWB; Sackett, 2002; Spector & Fox, 2005), deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, 1997), aggression (Neuman & Baron, 2005), bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003), harassment (Raver & Nishii, 2010), social undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), emotional abuse (Keashly & Harvey, 2005), mobbing (Leymann, 1996), mistreatment (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), revenge (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001), and retaliation (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). We adopted the term *CWB* as an overarching label for these negative behaviors within this special issue; CWB is defined as "volitional acts that harm or intend to harm organizations and their stakeholders (e.g., clients, coworkers, customers, and supervisors)" (Spector & Fox, 2005, pp. 151–152). As a construct that encompasses the *dark side* of employee behavior, CWB describes the full scope of deviant, aggressive, dysfunctional, abusive, uncivil, and undermining employee behaviors in organizational contexts. It is a burgeoning area of scholarship that has moved from being a peripheral topic 15–20 years ago to one that is well represented in most top organizational journals within the field.

Despite the substantial research progress that has been made, there has been surprisingly minimal integration of research on CWB with research on conflict processes in organizations. The parallels between the conflict literature and counterproductive actions in organizations have not gone without notice;

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indeed, several scholars have discussed the importance of conflict processes as part of their models of interpersonal mistreatment (e.g., aggression, incivility, bullying, mobbing, retaliation) in the workplace (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Aquino, 2000; Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Zapf & Gross, 2001). Likewise, research on the predictors of enacting CWB has demonstrated that experiencing high levels of interpersonal conflict at work is positively associated with enacting CWB, both against other employees and against the organization (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). However, theoretical and empirical integration between these bodies of work remains the exception rather than the norm, and many members of the conflict management research community remain unacquainted with scholarship in this domain.

This state of affairs has prompted at least two prior *calls to action* to address this oversight and encourage better integration (Raver & Barling, 2008; Van de Vliert, 2010). A few years ago, a colleague and I published a review of the literature on the dark side of interpersonal behavior in organizations with the goal of encouraging greater synthesis with the conflict literature. When commenting about the divide between these literatures, we argued

> …decades of research and theory on conflict and conflict resolution can offer valuable insights into this emerging body of research. What has emerged in recent years are two parallel literatures that often address similar questions about antecedents, processes, and outcomes of negative interpersonal relations at work. We argue that one could learn a great deal from greater cross-fertilization between these areas of research. (Raver & Barling, 2008, pp. 211–212)

In a similar vein, Van de Vliert (2010) published a commentary in *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* (NCMR) on the need for conflict scholars to pay greater attention to the burgeoning body of work on workplace bullying, an important interpersonally-directed CWB, and noted, "Surprisingly, IACM [International Association for Conflict Management] members are preoccupied with priorities other than power-laden and protracted processes of bullying. Indeed, the ferry between the conflict island and the bullying island carries few passengers…" (Van de Vliert, 2010, p. 87).

This special issue of *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* represents an answer to these calls for synthesis, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to present the first special issue dedicated to integrating scholarship on CWB and conflict. Because many readers of *NCMR* may be more familiar with conflict research than with CWB research, I begin my overview by briefly describing the nature of CWB as well as some of the key research trends in this domain. Following this review, I briefly review the connection between conflict and CWB and discuss some possible underlying reasons why conflict and CWB literatures have not heretofore been consistently synthesized. I then turn to the ways in which the articles in this special issue address key limitations in the research literature and thus provide progress toward integration. Finally, I conclude with a synthesis and suggested research questions that conflict scholars may pursue to further advance scholarship on the dark side of organizations.

A Brief Overview of Counterproductive Work Behavior

Much of the early research on CWB focused upon specific types of CWB, and separate domains of research emerged for each type. Examples included theft from the company, excessive absenteeism, shirking or work withdrawal, workplace violence, sexual harassment, and bullying. Beginning in the mid-1990s, scholars increasingly recognized that the nomological networks of many counterproductive behaviors are similar, they covary, and CWB can be reliably measured as an overarching construct that incorporates many types of employee misdeeds (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Sackett, 2002). One driver of this trend was Robinson and Bennett's (1995) influential multidimensional scaling study, which showed that deviance (CWB) could be reliably categorized as being either organizationally (*CWB-O*) or interpersonally (*CWB-I*) directed. Examples of organizationally-directed CWB include stealing from the company, withholding effort (shirking), lying about hours or work activities, sabotaging equipment, having excessive absenteeism, and bad-mouthing the company. Examples of interpersonally-directed CWB include making threats, using aggressive gestures, spreading rumors, ostracizing peers, making sexually or ethnically inappropriate comments, and engaging in deception to harm someone's career. This categorization of CWB into organizationally-directed versus interpersonally-directed (or personal) types has been upheld in much of the current research literature (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2007).

Research in this domain has also historically been divided based upon whether the researcher adopted the perspective of the *target* (e.g., experiencing incivility, bullying, aggression, harassment) or the perspective of the *actor* (e.g., enacting CWB, deviance, workplace aggression). Indeed, separate literatures have developed for these two perspectives (see Fox & Spector, 2005, for reviews). Despite calls for increased integration between target and actor perspectives (Raver & Barling, 2008), and with few exceptions (Glomb, 2002), there has been an unfortunate tendency to depict people as *either* a perpetrator *or* a target without the recognition that dyadic spirals of conflict may make one party a perpetrator at one moment yet a target at the next moment (see Andersson & Pearson, 1999, for theory). This division of people into actors or targets fails to incorporate insights into conflict escalation (e.g., Pruitt, 2008), which highlights the use of increasingly harsh tactics during a sequence of ongoing social exchanges (i.e., dispute-related aggression; Felson & Tedeschi, 1993). The need for increasing attention to dynamic, social interactionist perspectives is a theme to which I will return below.

With regard to nomenclature, CWB is an overarching label that can be used for either actor or target perspectives, yet most scholars tend to use the terms CWB or deviance when studying the predictors of *engaging* in negative behaviors but adopt an alternative construct label (e.g., incivility, bullying, mobbing, harassment) when studying the predictors or outcomes of *experiencing* mistreatment. In my earlier review of the literature in this domain (Raver & Barling, 2008), I adopted the term *workplace aggression* to encompass the interpersonal side of CWB, at least in part because it fits equally well with the perspective of actors or targets (cf. Hershcovis, 2011; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Hershcovis et al., 2007). Although this construct label is consistent with the broader social scientific literature on human aggression as any behavior that harms or attempts to harm others (Neuman & Baron, 2005), laypeople and researchers unacquainted with the scholarly definition of aggression often believe that aggression refers only to overt (and often violent) acts of mistreatment. It is perhaps for this reason that scholars and practitioners continue to adopt various alternative construct labels (e.g., incivility, bullying, generalized harassment, social undermining) to reflect experiences of mistreatment. This has unfortunately led to a fragmented literature that can be difficult to follow if one is not closely familiar with all of the construct labels and the nuances of their distinctions (see Raver & Barling, 2008, for a review).

Given the extensive research on enacting and experiencing CWB that has accumulated over the past two decades, a full review of the evidence on the antecedents and consequences of CWB is well beyond the scope of this article. There are numerous literature reviews and edited volumes (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Fox & Spector, 2005; Kidwell & Martin, 2005; O'Leary-Kelly, Duffy, & Griffin, 2000; Raver & Barling, 2008; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998) as well as separate meta-analyses for actor (Hershcovis et al., 2007) and target (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010) perspectives to which I refer interested readers.

Conflict and Its *Hot* Versus *Cold* Nature

Conflict has been described and defined in many ways, but Putman and Poole (1987) concluded that most conflict definitions share three elements: (a) interdependence among parties, (b) perception by at least one of the parties that there is some degree of opposition or incompatibility among the goals of the parties, and (c) some form of interaction between the parties. Thomas (1992) provided this synthesized definition of conflict: "The process that begins when one party perceives that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that he or she cares about" (p. 653). Based upon this definition, it is clear that conflict is a broad term that encompasses many forms of interpersonal mistreatment at work (e.g., bullying, aggression, harassment) because at least one party is negatively affecting something that the other party cares about. In other words, interpersonally-directed forms of CWB may be construed as specific types of conflict at work. However, it is also important to keep in mind that not all conflict involves harm or the intent to harm. Therefore, conflict can exist without qualifying as CWB. In addition, although organizationally-directed CWB is not typically studied as a type of conflict, it actually coincides with this definition if one of the parties (individual or organization) engages in tactics that negatively affect something that the other party cares about.

Like Van de Vliert (2010), I have been perplexed by the divide between conflict research and CWB research and have wondered why the body of research that has emerged on interpersonal mistreatment between employees has largely been conducted by scholars with little expertise on conflict or conflict resolution in organizations. One possibility is that the literature on interpersonal mistreatment and counterproductive actions in organizations has approached the phenomenon with a particular set of assumptions that may be at odds with the set of assumptions that are held by many conflict scholars. In particular, research within the domain of CWB suggests that interpersonal conflict is an affectively-laden, emotionally *hot* experience for employees and that it is predominantly associated with negative outcomes for employees and their organizations. From the perspective of employees, interpersonal conflict at work is one of the most frequently cited sources of stress and strain, and it has significant negative ramifications for employees' health and well-being (Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2008). When employees report that they regularly experience interpersonal conflict, they have a tendency to act out against others in the organization through CWB (see Kessler, Bruursema, Rodopman, & Spector, this issue).

In contrast, conflict scholars have long argued that conflict is not inherently negative (e.g., Baron, 1991; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Robbins, 1978), but instead there are several contingencies including the type of conflict and contextual influences (de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). In addition, conflict research has been heavily influenced by the cognitive revolution since the 1980s (e.g., Bazerman, 1998; Bazerman & Carroll, 1987; Bazerman, Curhan, Moore, & Valley, 2000), which has emphasized the importance of *cold* cognitive processes within conflict to a greater extent than hot affective processes. It is possible that these underlying differences may be a source of the disconnect between these domains of research, yet both perspectives are valid and offer important research insights. One of the keys to advancing scholarship in both domains will be to increasingly recognize the ways in which conflict and CWB may be hot *and* cold (emotional and rational or instrumental) and to investigate the personal, relational, and organizational contingencies driving these effects. Delving into the specific cognitive and emotional processes that emerge in situations of conflict or when faced with the decision of whether to enact CWB is also important. Fortunately, the research included within this special issue makes important strides toward these goals. I now turn to an overview of the research presented within this volume of *NCMR*.

Contributions in the Special Issue: Building Rapport Between CWB and Conflict

This special issue begins with a focus on counterproductive behavior in the context of conflict resolution with Gaspar and Schweitzer's review and theoretical model on deception in negotiation. This article presents a comprehensive review of the current evidence on the factors that motivate deception in negotiation and then builds upon this review to offer the emotion deception model (EDM), a theoretical model that emphasizes the central role of emotions in determining whether negotiators will engage in deception. This review and theoretical model provide an excellent example of the type of integration that I believe are essential for advancing scholarship on CWB and conflict. The theoretical model integrates affective influences on the deception decision along with a rational weighing of the costs and benefits of deceiving one's negotiation partner. As seen in their review, there are numerous situational factors that tend to motivate deception in negotiations (e.g., power, group norms, elasticity of information), and negotiators are clearly influenced by economic incentives as well. Nonetheless, Gaspar and Schweitzer have highlighted how negotiators may or may not engage in deception, despite these situational and economic factors, based on negotiators' current and anticipated emotions. For example, negotiators' anticipation of guilt they will feel after deceiving their counterpart may curtail the use of deception despite situational pressures toward its use. However, emotions are also an outcome of the deception decision, and to the extent that their actual emotions may be different than anticipated, negotiators' future deception decisions may be impacted. Thus, the authors provide a dynamic model of specific emotional influences on the decision to engage in deception. Detailed process models of the emotional dynamics involved in enacting CWB are rare, so this theoretical model offers considerable promise for guiding future research in this area.

In the second article, Kessler et al. also maintain a focus on affective influences on the decision to enact CWB, yet the context shifts to informal interpersonal conflicts at work. The authors have drawn from Spector and Fox's (2002) job stressor model and the evidence showing the detrimental consequences of conflict for employees' health and well-being (Spector & Bruk-Lee, 2005) to argue that conflict operates as a stressor, which has subsequent effects on negative emotions felt by employees. An important contribution of this survey-based field research is that the authors have integrated leadership theory; they proposed and found that transformational leadership is associated with lower conflict and downstream benefits for reduced CWB, whereas passive–avoidant leadership operates as yet another stressor in conjunction with conflict and increases CWB. This connection between leadership, conflict, and CWB highlights the larger organizational context in which CWB is embedded and how agents of the organization (supervisors or managers) may either provoke or attenuate the incidence of CWB against the organization *and* against other employees (albeit the CWB-O effects were stronger). These arguments and findings align with theories by Kelloway, Francis, Prosser, and Cameron (2010) and by Lawrence and Robinson (2007) who argued that employees may engage in CWB as a means of resisting unjust organizational authority and powerlessness.

In the third article, Shallcross, Ramsay, and Barker have offered a fascinating in-depth qualitative analysis of the experience of mobbing, which is an instance of severe workplace conflict that has spiraled out of control. In an attempt to better understand how this phenomenon emerges, especially with regard to the role of the organization and power differentials, they adopted the perspective of mobbing targets and built theory based upon numerous case incidents from multisource data. One of the first insights that emerged from their analysis is that nomenclature is very important from the perspective of targets; targets rejected the labels *bullying* and *aggression* and instead gravitated toward the term *mobbing* due to the collective and institutionally-sanctioned way in which they were subtly victimized over a period of time at work before being ostracized and ousted from the workplace. Shallcross et al.'s analysis also revealed that targets experienced a process of moral exclusion where they were increasingly treated as *deserving targets* while the organization accumulated power and influence over the target. Their results supported the five phases of mobbing that were originally identified by Leymann (1996), but they also revealed a sixth phase wherein targets attempt to come to grips with the reality of the situation and to regain some control through tactics such as building support, pursuing litigation, or engaging in deontic retaliation. It is at this last stage where we see the dynamic nature of this escalated conflict between the individual and the organization and the connection between victimization and CWB-O. Overall, this study provides numerous insights into organizational power dynamics, injustices, retaliation, and cognitive adaptations throughout the mobbing process.

The special issue concludes with an in-depth qualitative case study by Llorente, Luchi, and Sioli that used Druckman's (1986) turning point analysis framework to analyze the precipitants (causes) and departures (effects) of turning points in a dysfunctional labor–management dispute. The dispute between workers and management at Kraft Foods Argentina began as a task-related disagreement regarding how to best handle employees' health during the H1N1 health crisis in 2009, yet it escalated to the point of extreme counterproductive behaviors including setting bonfires on the plant's property, using retaliatory layoffs, picketing that caused the closure of the Pan American Highway, and occupying a plant that ended in violence and arrests. Based upon this intriguing case, the authors highlight the importance of several underlying causes of these incidents including differential political ideologies, unresolved task conflicts, and managerial distrust. Furthermore, their analysis highlights how the absence of dialogue among the parties during the mandatory conciliation process led to further distrust and conflict escalation through increasingly severe acts of CWB. This interesting application of the turning points framework highlights the importance of addressing unresolved conflicts early in the process with effective leadership to be able to prevent such dysfunctional relationships and severe negative outcomes. Several practical implications for leaders are readily apparent.

Synthesis and Moving Forward

The authors of the four articles within this special issue have successfully pursued several of the key directions mentioned above (discussed in greater depth by Raver & Barling, 2008) as well as offered multiple new insights into the literatures on CWB and conflict. First, the theory and research presented herein has moved beyond establishing descriptive relationships between constructs; the authors offered dynamic models of the specific processes of how, why, and under what conditions that interpersonal and organizational conflicts become counterproductive. The richness of the qualitative data offered by Shallcross et al. and Llorente et al. is particularly beneficial for identifying the dynamic ways in which the conflict parties' actions are interrelated and reciprocal such that neither a target nor an actor perspective alone would be able to capture the interplay between the parties. The CWB literature is replete with descriptive, survey-based field studies so this level of richness and process specificity is refreshing and insightful. Second, the articles in this special issue prioritized the examination of cognitive and emotional processes that determine whether one will engage in CWB (Gaspar & Schweitzer; Kessler et al.) and also how one will interpret and respond to pressure tactics from organizations (Llorente et al.; Shallcross et al.). Consistent with the discussion above, this trend toward the examination of hot emotional reactions to conflict along with the cold rational cognitive processing provides a useful lens to be able to integrate CWB and conflict research and also provides new insights into the ways in which employees sometimes regain control through calculated deontic retaliation (Llorente et al.; Shallcross et al.). A final important theme that characterizes these articles is the strong emphasis on the role of the organization and its context in promoting CWB. Employees are likely to engage in CWB against the organization and its members when faced with ineffective or absent leadership, rational or economic incentives to deceive others, injustices, and organizational distrust, among others. It therefore becomes apparent that conflict and CWB are not inevitable; instead, organizations have a great deal of influence over the degree to which their employees either react against the organization (e.g., Kelloway et al., 2010; Lawrence & Robinson, 2007; Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006) or work with the organization to help it be effective.

Moving forward, I encourage CWB researchers to continue to adopt a conflict lens when examining the dynamics of counterproductive behavior within organizations. Likewise, I encourage conflict scholars to pick up the baton and bring their theoretical, methodological, and practical knowledge on conflict processes to bear on the important issue of understanding and preventing CWB. In an attempt to jump-start research in this area, I have provided below several research questions that are not yet answered but could be effectively addressed through the integration of the CWB and conflict literatures:

(1) When a work environment is characterized by the regular exchange of counterproductive behaviors between coworkers, what is the role of bystanders to these negative dynamics? To what extent can coworkers help to prevent conflict escalation instead of being drawn into it?

(2) To what extent are established negotiation and conflict resolution techniques effective for intervening in situations of interpersonal mistreatment between employees? Which strategies offer the greatest potential for ensuring that cases of workplace aggression, bullying, or harassment are deescalated?

(3) In what ways do employees' conflict frames (e.g., relationship vs. task; emotional vs. intellectual; cooperate vs. win) influence employees' reactions to injustices and subsequent use of counterproductive actions, both against other employees and against the organization?
(4) To what extent does CWB (interpersonally and organizationally directed) from one member of a work group stimulate group conflict or retaliation from coworkers? Does this *bad apple* provoke the emergence of group-wide task conflict, relationship conflict, or process conflict?
(5) What are the larger societal, organizational, or group characteristics that foster CWB? How do these characteristics differ from those that foster conflict at various levels of analysis?
(6) With the increased organizational recognition and legislation for workplace bullying and harassment in many nations over the past decade, to what extent are employees now reframing their interpersonal conflicts as instances of bullying or harassment? What are the personal, group, organizational, and societal implications of this shift?

These questions are a mere subset of the dozens of research questions that deserve attention, and I encourage creativity in pursuing new directions. Ultimately, the articles in this special issue represent an important step in the right direction, but it is just one step. Over the next several years, I hope to see the emergence of much research on the ways in which counterproductive behaviors in organizations and conflict are inextricably related.

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