



## **INFLUENCE OF PERSONALITY TRAITS ON ACCEPTABILITY OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR: A STUDY IN INDIAN CONTEXT**

**Dr. Tavleen Kaur**

Assistant Professor, Department of Human Resource Management & Soft Skills  
ICFAI Business School IFHE,  
Survey No. 156/157, Dontanpalli Vi8llage, Shankarpalli Mandal  
Rangareddy District 501504, Hyderabad, India.

**Ritesh Kumar Dubey**

Research Scholar, Department Of Finance  
ICFAI Business School IFHE,  
Survey No. 156/157, Dontanpalli Vi8llage, Shankarpalli Mandal  
Rangareddy District 501504, Hyderabad, India.

### **ABSTRACT**

*Employees frequently face ethical dilemmas in organizations. Employees' reaction to ethical dilemma is greatly influenced by personality traits. It therefore becomes very important for practitioners and researchers to understand the relationship between personality traits and ethical (unethical) decision making. The present research talks about the ethical dilemmas at workplace or also called as counterproductive work behavior (CWB). The purpose of this paper was to examine the influence of various personality traits like locus of control, Machiavellianism, Perceived role of ethics and Social responsibility (PRESOR) and gender on acceptability of CWB. 279 students enrolled in post graduate program at large Business School participated in the study. Locus of control, Machiavellianism and gender were found to have a positive significant relation with the acceptability of counterproductive behavior. However, PRESOR had an inverse significant relation with CWB. The results suggest that individuals having an external locus of control, high on Machiavellianism and males*

*consider counterproductive behavior acceptable. However individuals who perceive role of ethics and social responsibility do not consider CWBs acceptable.*

**Keywords;** *LOC, Machiavellianism, Counterproductive work behavior*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

One of the areas that have been of great interest to both practitioners and researchers is how managers take ethical decisions when faced with an ethical dilemma at workplace. According to Jones (1991) an ethical decision is “*A decision that is both legally and morally acceptable to the larger community*”. Employees frequently face ethical dilemmas at workplace and how employees react to these ethical dilemmas is greatly influenced by personality (Hunt and Vitell 1986; Trevino 1986; Jones 1990; Mudrack 1993; Riess and Mitra 1998). Some of the ethical dilemmas that an employee faces frequently are: Is it ethical on the part of employees to take away few office supplies? Is it acceptable to use office car for personal use? Is it acceptable to use office phone to make personal calls? Is it right on part of employees to inflate cab bills or accommodation bills when on a business trip? These counterproductive workplace behaviors can have stern consequences. Up to 89% of employees have engaged in counterproductive behavior at workplace (Moretti; 1986). Studies have shown that between 35% -75% of employees have admitted to stealing from employers, which resulted to an approximate loss of \$50 billion to organizations in the United States. As indulgence in counterproductive workplace behavior can amount to huge losses to an organization and as most of the employees today face these dilemmas, it becomes imperative to analyze and understand the antecedents or determinants of such behaviors in an organization.

CWB can take many forms: difficult personalities that hamper team development and team cohesion, theft by employees that damages an organization’s well being, etc. Robinson and Bennet (1995) created a typology of counterproductive behaviors. The behaviors are categorized into 1) Production deviance, which includes behaviors like leaving early from the office, intentionally working slow or taking long breaks. 2) Property deviance includes destruction of equipments or theft of property. 3) Political deviance, includes showing favoritism, gossiping or blaming others and 4) Personal aggression, which includes behavior like harassment, verbal abuse and threat.

There are many factors that can lead to counterproductive behavior at workplace. These factors vary from personal factors, situational constraints or work environment. Personality traits or

individual differences play an important role in evaluation of ethical dilemmas. Ferrell and Gresham (1985) suggest that personality traits are likely to affect ethical (unethical) decision making. The extant literature on relationship between personality traits and acceptability of CWB has majorly focused on Big Five personality traits, Narcissism, need for achievement, negative affectivity etc. However, literature on relationship between equally important personality variables like Machiavellianism, locus of control and acceptability of CWB is relatively less and inconclusive.

The changing nature of business, development and advancement has mounted pressure on managers to put best of their efforts towards achievement of organizational goals. Some of the managers have been successful to act as a catalyst whereas some have become more vulnerable to CWB. A lot of research has been carried out in the American and European context to analyze the antecedent or determinants of CWBs. However, research in Asian continent especially in the context of India is negligible. The organizational culture of Indian companies is very different from rest of the world and the ways Indians are oriented towards ethics and morals is very different from rest of the world. Therefore there is a need to understand CWB and its relationship between individual traits especially Locus of control, Machiavellianism, PRESOR (PRESOR) and Gender in Asian context.

CWB can be influenced by a number of psychological dimensions or individual variables like gender, personality, age, etc. Apart from these variables, other individual difference variables like Locus of control, Machiavellianism, Perceived role of ethics and responsibility and Gender also influence acceptability/non-acceptability of CWB. Locus of control is a personality trait that predisposes the individual to make either internal or external attributions. As attributions are likely to predict behavior, examining locus of control will help us understand whether an individual would consider counterproductive behavior as acceptable or not. Similarly Machiavellianism is another important personality variable that is likely to impact acceptability/non acceptability of CWB. People high on Machiavellianism are less emotionally attached with others and are more practical in their approach. People high on Machiavellianism feel ends are more important than means. Therefore they are more likely to accept CWB. PRESOR too can influence CWB. An individual's beliefs about ethics govern his/her behavior. If an individual perceives ethics and social responsibility are not important it is likely that he/she will indulge into counterproductive behavior and vice versa. Last but not the least gender too can influence CWB. The previous literature suggests that females have a different ethical

framework from males (Chunco and Hunt1985). Males are overt and more expressive, whereas females are more covert.Males are more practical in their approach whereas females are emotionally oriented. Thus it is expected that males will consider CWB more acceptable as compared to their female counterparts.

The present study examines how personality characteristics influence the acceptance/rejection of CWB. The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of personality variables namely Locus of control, Machiavellianism, PRESOR and lastly gender on the ethical judgment regarding questionable practices at workplace.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:**

CWB includes but is not restricted to rule breaking, day dreaming on the job, withholding efforts, damaging property, theft, etc. (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt; 1993). CWB are those behaviors which are not aligned with organizational goals and hamper the success of an organization.Jones (1990) identified 10 counterproductive behaviors (take home few office supplies, use company telephone for a personal long distance call, use office car to make a personal trip etc.) In this study he examined the attitude of 134 business students on 10 counterproductive behaviors. Students were divided into 2 groups. The first group was asked to assume the role of employees and the second was asked to assume that they are president of the company and were asked to fill the questionnaires. Out of 10 items developed by Jones he found some difference in acceptability in 6 of them. The employee group considered the use of office machine for making personal supplies as ethical. The president group did not accept staying at expensive hotels when on office trip as ethical. Employees were found to consider “use of copy machine to make personal copies” as acceptable whereas president group was found to be indecisive about the same. Both the groups did not accept use of company telephone for making personal calls or use of office car for personal trips as ethical. The results suggested that employee group were more lenient on these issues whereas president group was more protective for the company. Thus if an organization can identify employees based on their personality (locus of control & Machiavellianism), they can reduce the CWB at their workplace.

There are many factors that can lead to indulgence in CWB ranging from situational constraints, individual differences like gender, age and personality variables like extraversion, conscientiousness, and narcissism etc.The prospective employees also use social performance as

a yardstick or a tool to gauge an organization's concern for its employees. Organizations which are socially responsible are more likely to have employees who will not indulge into counterproductive behaviors. Employees form an image and identity about an organization and this identity guide their own behavior. If an organization is presumed to be high on social responsibility by an employee it is likely that the employee will refrain from indulging into counterproductive behaviors. On the other hand if the employee presumes that the organization is only concerned about the ends rather than the means, it is likely that the employee will indulge into counterproductive behavior (Ones & Viswesvaran; 1998, Turban & Greening 1997).

Personality traits too have been found to influence acceptability/non acceptability of CWB. According to Cullen and Sackett (2003) personality can be considered as direct determinant of CWB. The authors are of the opinion that certain traits like agreeableness exhibit an unfavorable attitude toward aggressive acts, which in turn makes it likely that such an individual will not indulge into CWB. Salgado (2002) examined the relationship between Big Five personality and CWB. The authors used four categories of CWB namely Absenteeism (measured by absence or lateness to work), Accidents (measured by accidents and injuries taking place at work), Deviant behaviors (measured by theft, admissions to theft, actual theft, disciplinary problems), and Turnover (measured by voluntary quits and discharges). The authors argued that agreeableness, emotional stability and conscientiousness would predict all the CWB. However, the results suggested that none of the big five personality trait predicted absenteeism and accidents. Conscientiousness and agreeableness were found to be valid predictors of deviant behavior. All the big five personality traits were found to predict turnover.

Another personality variable that has been found to have a direct relation to CWB is Narcissism. Narcissists have a strong tendency to exhibit superiority over others. High narcissists are more aggressive. Penny and Spector (2002) in their paper suggested that narcissists are more likely to face situations that challenge their self appraisals. In response to these challenges they are likely to experience negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, etc. It was found that people high on narcissism reported experiencing anger more frequently and also reported engaging in CWB than people low on narcissism. Rallapalli et al (1994) examined the role of ten other personality traits namely need for achievement, need for affiliation, need for autonomy, need for social desirability, need for aggression, need for complexity, need for innovation, risk propensity, problem solving and emotion solving. Results suggest that individuals having high need for autonomy are more likely to believe that doing something questionable or even illegal is not

wrong as compared to people low on need for autonomy. Individuals high on need for innovation and high risk propensity are more likely to break the rules and involve into questionable practices. Need for aggression was found to be positively correlated to acceptance of questionable practices. Individuals using problem solving coping style tend to believe that it is not appropriate to benefit oneself from an illegal activity. People having high problem solving skills tend to be more socially responsive. Thus the authors concluded that ethical behavior is embedded in an individual's personality traits.

Apart from these personality traits, Locus of Control and Machiavellianism are also important constructs to be studied, as they too are likely to be direct determinants of acceptability of CWB. Locus of control describes the degree to which an individual believes that reinforcements are contingent upon his/her behavior (Joe; 1971). It is the extent to which an individual believes he/she is responsible for the outcome. Some people believe that they control their fate; however, there is another set of people who believe luck, chance or some unknown outside factor controls their fate. Individuals who believe that they control their fate have internal locus of control. Internal locus of control refers to individuals who believe that reinforcements are contingent upon their own behavior, capacities or attributes. People having internal locus of control generally take responsibilities for their actions (Trevino 1986). Individuals who believe their fate is controlled by external forces like luck/chance are said to have external locus of control. External locus of control refers to individuals who believe that reinforcements are not under their personal control but rather are under the control of a powerful luck, chance, fate, etc. They believe the outcomes are unpredictable because of great complexity of the forces surrounding them (Joe 1971). Individuals having an external locus of control do not take responsibility for their actions. They do not see a direct relation between their behavior and organization's performance. People with external locus of control are expected to consider counterproductive behavior at workplace as acceptable. The extant literature on relationship between locus of control and CWB is inconclusive. In a study by Reiss and Mitra (1998) they categorized workplace behaviors as extra and intra organizational. Intra organizational behaviors are internal workplace behaviors whereas extra organizational behaviors are behaviors when on a business trip. The authors found that individuals having an external locus of control consider both intra and extra organizational questionable behaviors as more acceptable as compared to employees having internal locus of control. On the other hand Bass, Barnett and Brown (1998) did not find any relation between external locus of control and ethical judgments.

Machiavellianism refers to the degree to which an individual is practical in his/her approach. Highly Machiavellian individuals are primarily driven by self interest. Individuals high on Machiavellianism take rational decisions when facing an ethical problem. A highly Machiavellian individual is said to have a cool syndrome which makes him/her emotionally detached from others and therefore they are more unethical (Christie&Geiss 1970). An individual high on Machiavellianism might use manipulative, persuasive and deceitful behavior for self interest (Hunt and Chonko 1984). Vitell et al (1991) examined the influence of Machiavellianism and ethical ideologies on perceptions of unethical consumer practices especially in elderly consumers. The study suggests that elderly consumers are more Machiavellian as compared to other consumer segment and they are more ethical as compared to other groups. The study reveals that elderly consumers are high on Machiavellianism and are subjectivists. According to subjectivists ethics is a matter of personal choice. Elderly consumers consider almost all types of questionable practices as unethical. The study suggests that perception of ethical/unethical consumer practices is influenced by ethical ideology, Machiavellianism.

An individual's perception regarding importance of ethics and social responsibility governs his/her behavior. It is a necessary but may not be a sufficient condition for an individual to accept/reject CWB. Singhapakdi et al (1995) suggested that for marketers to act ethically and responsibly they must consider ethics and social responsibility important. The study suggests that marketers generally believe that ethics and social responsibility are important components of organizational effectiveness. However, whether these perceptions will govern an individual's behavior has not been examined. It is likely that if an individual perceives ethics and social responsibility to be important, then he/she will not indulge into CWB.

Another individual difference variable that has been examined in various ethical studies is Gender. The extant literature has majorly focused on relationship between Machiavellianism & Locus of control, whether or not female have internal locus of control or they are low on Machiavellianism. Vitell et al (1991) found that females are low on Machiavellianism as compared to males. The study suggests that females consider questionable consumer practices as unethical. Forte (2005) interestingly found that women score less on internal locus of control than males which is not consistent with previous studies which say that females are more ethical than males. Similarly Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991) did not find any gender to be a determinant of ethical behavior. Hegarty and Sims (1979) did not find any significant relationship between

gender and CWB. Previous studies have shown mixed results regarding the influence of personality variables on ethical/unethical decision making and due to inconsistent results produced by previous studies there is a need for further investigation into the relationship between personality traits and ethical decision making. As it is evident from the extant literature the relationship between personality variables like Locus of Control, Machiavellianism and CWB and between gender and CWB is inconclusive. Moreover most of the studies mentioned have been conducted in the marketing context where the respondents were consumers. It also becomes imperative to examine whether or not the ethical judgments' would change when the respondents are asked to assume the role of employees

### **3. HYPOTHESES**

The present study examines how Locus of control, Machiavellianism, PRESOR and Gender influences acceptability/unacceptability of certain questionable behaviors at workplace. Locus of Control can be a significant personality trait in influencing ethical behavior of an individual. People having an internal locus of control generally take responsibilities of their actions. However, people having external locus of control do not take responsibility of their actions. They do not see a direct relation between their behavior and organizational performance. Thus individuals having external locus of control are likely to consider CWB acceptable. Machiavellianism too can be a significant predictor as it refers to the degree to which an individual is practical in his approach. Individuals high on Machiavellianism give more importance to ends than means. They are primarily driven by self interest. As individuals high on Machiavellianism have a cool syndrome where they are emotionally detached from others make them more vulnerable and susceptible to CWB. Thus individuals high on Machiavellianism are more likely to consider CWB acceptable. Lastly gender is expected to influence acceptability of CWB. Males are more likely to express their overt aggression than females. The previous literature suggests that females have a different ethical framework from males (Chunco and Hunt 1985). Males are more practical in their approach whereas females are emotionally oriented. Thus it is expected that males will consider CWB more acceptable as compared to their female counterparts. From the above arguments we can deduce:

*H1: Individuals having External locus of control will consider CWB acceptable*

*H2: Individuals high on Machiavellianism will consider CWB acceptable.*

*H3: Males will consider CWB acceptable*



*H4: Individuals who perceive role of ethics and social responsibility (PRESOR) as important will not consider CWB acceptable*

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

**4.1 Subjects:** Two hundred and seventy nine, final year management students enrolled in a large business school who were ready to venture into employment were subjects of this study. A total of 279 usable questionnaires were returned. 165 were males and 114 were females.

### **4.1.1 Measurements**

**4.1.1.1. Work locus of Control:** To measure the locus of control of the respondent work locus of control scale developed by Paul Spector 1998e.g. (“A job is what you make of it”) was used. The scale contains 16 items which were measured on a 6 point Likert scale (1= disagree very much to 6=agree very much). Eight of the items were reverse coded.

**4.1.1.2 CWB:** To measure the counterproductive behavior scale developed by Viswesaran 1998 (“using organizational services for personal use”, “Padding the expense account upto 10%”). The scale consists of 18 items which were measured on a 6 point Likert scale ranging from 1= totally unethical to 6= not at all unethical.

**4.1.1.3. Machiavellianism:** To measure score on Machiavellianism, MACH IV scale developed by Christie 1970 e.g. (“the best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear”) was used. The scale consists of 20 items which were measured on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree.

**4.1.1.4. PRESOR :** To measure PRESOR, PRESOR scale was used e.g. (to remain competitive in a global environment, firms will have to disregard ethics and social responsibility”). The scale consisted of 13 items which were measured on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree.

## **5. RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics (Table 1) for the measures are CWB (Mean= 1.96, S.D=.554), LOC (Mean 4.63, S.D=.263), MACH IV(Mean= 4.12, S.D= .262), PRESOR (Mean=4.57, S.D=.480), GENDER (Mean=.59, S.D=.492). The correlation shows that CWB is positively related to LOC, Machiavellianism and Gender and negatively related to PRESOR. To test the hypotheses multiple regression analysis was conducted where CWB was the dependent variable and LOC, Machiavellianism and Gender were the independent variables. The results of regression analysis are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis1 stated that individuals having an external locus of control would consider counterproductive behavior as acceptable. The results show that individuals

having an external locus of control consider counterproductive behavior as acceptable ( $\beta=.129$ ,  $p=.029$ ). Therefore hypothesis 1 was accepted. Hypothesis 2 says that individuals high on Machiavellianism consider counterproductive behavior acceptable. The results show that Machiavellianism had a positive and significant impact on acceptability of CWB ( $\beta=.156$ ,  $p=.006$ ) and therefore hypothesis 2 was accepted. Hypothesis 3 says that males consider counterproductive acceptable. Dummy variables were used for gender, 1 for males and 0 for females. The results show that males consider counterproductive behavior as acceptable ( $\beta=.257$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Therefore hypothesis 3 is accepted. Hypothesis 4 stated that individuals who perceived role of ethics and social responsibility (PRESOR) as important will not consider CWB as acceptable ( $\beta=-.249$ ,  $p=.000$ ). The negative correlation ( $-.249$ ) between CWB and PRESOR suggests that individuals high on PRESOR will not consider CWB as acceptable. Therefore hypothesis 4 is also accepted. All the hypotheses were accepted such that individuals having external locus of control will accept CWB, individuals high on Machiavellianism will accept CWB, males will accept CWB and lastly individuals who perceive role of ethics and social responsibility as important will not consider counterproductive behavior as acceptable.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and correlations**

Variable	Mean	Std.Dev	CWB	LOC	MACH-IV	PRESOR	GENDER
<b>CWB</b>	1.96	.554	1.000	0.070	0.143	-0.249	0.205
<b>LOC</b>	4.63	.263	0.070	1.000	0.039	-0.057	-0.307
<b>MACHIV</b>	4.12	.262	0.143	0.039	1.000	0.018	-0.053
<b>PRESOR</b>	4.57	.480	-0.249	-0.057	0.018	1.000	0.016
<b>GENDER</b>	0.59	.492	0.205	-0.307	-0.053	0.016	1.000

**Table 2: Regression Analysis**

Dependent Variable: CWB			
Independent variable	$\beta$	t	p-value
<b>LOC</b>	.129	2.193	.029*
<b>MACH</b>	.156	2.794	.006**
<b>PRESOR</b>	-.249	-4.448	.000***
<b>GENDER.</b>	.257	4.377	.000***
<b>F</b>	11.72		.000***
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.14		

\*/\*\*/\*\* denote significance at the 95% / 99% / 99.9% level

## 6. DISCUSSION& FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of the current study was to examine the antecedents/determinants of CWB. In other words the study tried to examine the factors that lead to acceptance of CWB. The study examines the likely influence of Locus of control, Machiavellianism, PRESOR on acceptance of CWB. The study also examines if males are more likely to accept CWB. Individuals having external locus of control do not take responsibility of their actions. They do not see a direct relation between their behavior and organizational performance. Thus individuals having external locus of control are likely to consider CWB acceptable. The prediction was supported as hypothesis 1 was accepted. The study predicted that individuals high on Machiavellianism are likely to accept CWB. Individuals high on Machiavellianism are more pragmatic in their approach and for them ends are more important than means. Highly Machiavellian individuals are primarily driven by self interest. Individuals high on Machiavellianism take rational decision when facing an ethical problem. A highly Machiavellian individual is said to have a cool syndrome which makes him/her emotionally detached from others and therefore they are more unethical. The prediction was supported as individuals high on Machiavellianism were found to consider CWB acceptable thus leading to acceptance of hypothesis 2.

The study also examined the role of gender in influencing acceptance of CWB. Males are more likely to express their overt aggression than females. The previous literature suggests that females have a different ethical framework from males (Chunko and Hunt1985). Males are more practical in their approach whereas females are emotionally oriented. Thus it is expected that males will consider CWB more acceptable as compared to their female counterparts. The prediction was supported, males were found to consider CWB acceptable. Thus hypothesis 3 was accepted. Lastly the study tried to investigate the influence of PRESOR (PRESOR) on acceptance of CWB. A necessary but not sufficient condition for an individual to act ethically is that he/she must perceive ethics and social responsibility as important. Only when one considers ethics and social responsibility important he/she will not indulge into counterproductive behavior. It was thus predicted that individuals who perceive role of ethics and social responsibility as important will not indulge into CWB. The results suggest that individuals, who perceive ethics and social responsibility important, do not consider CWB acceptable. Thus hypothesis 4 was also supported.

The respondents of the current study were high on Machiavellianism, had external locus of control and were also high on PRESOR. The future study can examine whether or not individuals having internal locus of control do not consider counterproductive behavior acceptable. Similarly future research can also investigate if individuals low on Machiavellianism do not consider CWB acceptable. Since the current study focused on males and examined their influence on acceptance of CWB, future research can also check if females do not consider CWB acceptable. Future research can also examine the interaction effect of gender and Machiavellianism, gender and locus of control on CWB. Another avenue of future research is that these relationships can be tested in other Asian countries to increase the generalizability.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The result of the study shows that different people perceive ethical situations differently and their ethical behavior is influenced by their personality traits. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of personality variables and gender on acceptability/ unacceptability of counterproductive behavior at workplace. The individual variables included in the study were locus of control and Machiavellianism. Locus of control, Machiavellianism and gender were found to be positive significant relationship with counterproductive behavior. However negative significant relation was found between PRESOR and CWB. The results suggest that individuals having an external locus of control, and high on Machiavellianism consider counterproductive behavior acceptable. The results are in consistence with the previous research (Hegarty and Sims; 1978, Trevino 1990). The study found that males are more unethical, they accept counterproductive behavior. The result is consistent with Chonko and Hunt (1985). The study also sets various managerial implications. Through work locus of control a manager can know the kind of employees working in the organization and formulate the strategies of reducing the counterproductive behavior accordingly. The recruitment managers' right at the time of selection can assess these traits in the candidates and can draw likely conclusions. It is important for managers to know the relationship between counterproductive behavior and personality traits.

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