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An Exploratory Approach to College Student Counterproductivity

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Abstract

Although counterproductivity (e.g., shirking responsibilities or lying to supervisors) is a focal topic for many industrial/organizational psychologists, the broader social psychology literature has historically focused on more serious and uncommon forms of individual-level deviance, often in terms of its relation to criminal activity or psychopathology. Additionally, sociologists study intentional harmful behaviors that individuals engage in but use the term deviance in lieu of counterproductivity. Regarding students, there has been some work that addresses the more common phenomenon of counterproductivity at school, such as lying to teachers and cheating on tests. Nevertheless, each of these domains, in criminal justice, social psychology, clinical psychology, sociology, etc. has largely taken a siloed approach with little cross-pollination. This paper adds to the sparse literature on student counterproductivity by identifying important contemporary forms of counterproductive student behavior (CSB) and developing a scale. Results indicated that CSB is multidimensional and reflective of four forms: cheating, dishonesty, lack of focus/participation, and poor quality work. The implications of such findings include a more psychometrically-sound instrument to assess student counterproductivity, thereby aiding scientists, but also a more nuanced understanding of how potential interventions could be crafted to help students engage in adaptive problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Introduction

Whether deviance, rule-breaking, or counterproductivity, undesirable individual-level behaviors have long been a topic of interest to social scientists. Indeed, the study of undesirable or norm-violating behavior is not uncommon or new, although the labels to which scientists attach, the foci in which they examine, and the implications of their findings are largely a product of their disciplines. Detailing this multidisciplinary literature is beyond the scope of the current paper, however, the study of counterproductive student/academic behavior has drawn largely from research into counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs) in the psychological and management literatures. Counterproductive work behavior refers to intentional performance-related behavior that causes harm to some stakeholder (e.g., the employer, the customer, co-workers, community). Counterproductive student behaviors (CSBs) are similarly intentional behaviors that run counter to the interests of stakeholders (e.g., the academic institution, classmates, the student). Although the costs of CWBs have been frequently monetized (e.g., billions of dollars globally; Murphy, 1993), it may be harder, and perhaps less appropriate, to put a monetary value on the impact of student counterproductivity. Nevertheless, it is apparent that academic dishonesty, destruction of property (the school's or classmates'), and harassment cause harm to various stakeholders. Students engaging in CSBs could seriously harm themselves and others, cost the school, themselves, and/or their parents large amounts of money, and potentially undermine the academic progress of classmates. Therefore, the implications of CSBs on a college campus are multitudinous.

Student academic performance has most typically been conceptualized as academic progress via task completion or grade attainment, and therefore operationalized most commonly via grade-point-average (GPA). Similarly, job performance has typically been conceptualized via task performance, or behaviors related to the essential tasks of a given role, and consequently operationalized via supervisor ratings of performance. Yet over the past several decades, the

criterion domain of job performance has been expanded to include other performance-related behaviors that are not necessarily task-related, such as counterproductive work behaviors (Bowling & Gruys, 2010). Yet, this distinction has only recently begun to emerge in studies of student academic performance, where researchers have pulled almost entirely from the study of CWBs (e.g., Credé & Niehorster, 2009; Meriac, 2012) to investigate counterproductive student behaviors. While informative, one major limitation of this research has been a reliance on modifying existing CWB measures for measuring CSB. The goal of this project is to create a measure of CSB. The most used instrument, the Inventory of Counterproductive Behavior (Hakstian, Farrell, & Tweed, 2002), has many items that are unrelated to the school or academic environment, and researchers typically just pull items deemed most relevant. It is widely acknowledged among psychometricians and methodologists, however, that construct measurement is a rigorous and iterative process that should start with careful specification of the construct domain and adequate sampling from that domain (see Hinkin, 1998). Therefore, there is a need to develop an instrument that is created specifically for measuring CSB and captures many of the modern behaviors that may not have been considered in previous scales (e.g., cheating in online tests).

In summary, the study of counterproductive student behaviors is a relatively new area that is of great relevance to higher education institutions. While the practical implications of student counterproductivity is noted, the scientific progress of its study is limited by poor measurement, and the current project therefore aims to fill this gap by providing scientists with a more psychometrically-sound measure of CSB.

Methods

First, a class project involving USC Upstate students resulted in the creation of a preliminary CSB scale. Nine students in a psychological testing course generated fifteen items based on a definition of counterproductive student behavior as intentional behavior that harms the self, other students, faculty and staff, student groups, and/or the institution. Afterwards, items that were identical or nearly identical were trimmed, and remaining items were evaluated on their content validity, and items receiving content validity ratios (as rated by their other eight classmates) above 90% were retained (Lawshe, 1975). Additional items were added by the second author after examining the breadth of CSB captured by the existing items. A final 60-item scale was left for further testing.

This 60-item scale was administered to 455 anonymous undergraduate students. The typical participant was female (76%), white (60%), in their first year (45%), enrolled full time (92%), and did not prefer online classes to in person classes (38% vs. 35% that did). Careless responding was evaluated based on three attention check items embedded throughout the survey, whereby 288 participants had passed all three checks (e.g., please select “never” for this item).

Participants were provided with the randomized 60 items describing counterproductive student behaviors and asked to indicate how frequently they engaged in the behavior over the last 12 months using a scale anchored from 1 (never) to 7 (daily), with an option for “not relevant” if the item was not possible or appropriate for their academic circumstances. The data gathered from the participants’ answers to the items on the survey was then used in a factor analysis performed with the IBM SPSS statistics software to identify a factor structure for our CSB scale.

Results and Discussion

To identify a factor structure for our CSB scale, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis. First, a preliminary item reduction eliminated items with fewer than 5% of respondents reporting due to low base rates and items that failed to correlate at .40 and above with any other item. Then, principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation was used. For the final instrument, only items that loaded above .40 onto a factor and did not cross-load onto multiple factors were retained. This process of creating a pattern matrix of the oblimin rotation method with retained items revealed four factors: cheating (11 items, $\alpha = .89$), dishonesty (7 items, $\alpha = .87$), lack of focus and/or participation (5 items, $\alpha = .63$), and poor-quality work (2 items, $\alpha = .81$; see Table 1).

Considering behaviors performed at any frequency, from once or twice a year to daily, the five most frequently reported behaviors were: looking up irrelevant things in class (74.9%), skipping class intentionally (72.3%), turning in poor quality work that did not reflect their potential/ability (66.9%), turning in sloppy work (59.8%), and looking for exam materials online (55%). These findings indicate high pervasiveness of poor quality work, lack of focus and/or participation, and cheating.

Additionally, the findings of the survey include other significant and notable frequencies. For instance, 51.1% reported partying with friends instead of studying for an exam at least once in the past year. This frequency is notable because it suggests a high incidence of partying among college students and that partying takes priority over academic responsibilities for students engaging in this particular behavior. 48.9% reported cheating on an assignment at least once in the past year, which is a remarkably high admittance to cheating considering the possibility that other participants may have had motivations to answer the question dishonestly despite the survey being anonymous. Therefore, this frequency, despite being significantly high in itself, is likely an underestimate of cheating in college students. 40.1% reported asking other

students who have already taken an exam about the contents of that exam at least once in the past year. This statistic is important because it shows a high rate of cheating in this specific collaborative form, which is not always acknowledged or recognized as frequently as other forms of cheating. 31% reported insulting a peer at least once in the past year, which reveals an unexpectedly high occurrence of a negative behavior being directed towards fellow students. 15.6% reported taking online classes just to cheat in the past year, which is significant because it reveals that students in the sample had motives of cheating when selecting online classes rather than for its convenience. Each of these frequencies are informative of specific CSBs that may or may not have loaded onto the factor groupings but are significant frequencies regardless.

The implications of both the individual frequencies and the 4 factors or groupings of CSB items including cheating, dishonesty, lack of focus and/or participation, and poor-quality work are that they can be used for the development of the first CSB measure. A CSB measure can be used to provide a better understanding of classroom management, academic dishonesty, expansion of student performance criteria domain, and to distinguish between types of CSBs including their possibly differing antecedents, such as personality and situational circumstances.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to develop a preliminary counterproductive student behavior scale. Findings revealed that there were four different types of CSBs that students engage in: poor quality work, lack of focus/participation, dishonesty, and cheating.

A couple of limitations of the study bear mention. First, our sample consisted of 455 anonymous undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina Upstate. While this is an adequate sample size for our factor analysis, it only included students from this particular university which could influence the occurrence of the CSBs studied due to the social environment on campus, institutional rules and expectations, and how the code of student

conduct is discussed and enforced. Second, the student participants may have been motivated to answer the survey questions dishonestly due to several reasons. The participants may have answered dishonestly in fear that their answers could be connected back to them and, due to the nature of the study being that it studies their counterproductive behaviors, get them in trouble with the university. While it was made clear to the participants that the survey is anonymous, some may have still had an apprehension about answering all questions completely honestly. Thus, it is likely that our findings of the frequencies of CSBs are a conservative underestimate, which is common in the study of counterproductivity and deviant behaviors. Additionally, the student participants may have started answering the questions quickly due to there being a somewhat high number of questions on the survey, which could have led to careless responding. However, the survey consisted of three attention checks for the purpose of being able to identify and eliminate participants that were carelessly responding.

We sought to integrate various contemporary forms of CSB to develop a more exhaustive scale that can aid researchers in understanding student counterproductivity. As this study has found multiple forms that CSB can manifest, we believe future research should proceed to explore the dispositional and situational antecedents of CSB, particularly when those antecedents vary by CSB type. To expand the findings of this study, future research using this instrument with different samples may explore the antecedents of CSBs. Our understanding of CSBs and the four types identified by this study would benefit from research investigating differing antecedents, such as personality and situational features. It may be that some forms of CSB are more influenced by personality and dispositional variables while other forms are more influenced by environmental phenomena, such as school climate. Additionally, samples gathered from other colleges and types of higher education institutions (e.g., community colleges, private colleges, etc.) will establish the generalizability of our findings across the higher education population.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1.

Standardized Factor Loadings for Retained Items

Items	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
Turned in sloppy work	.61			
Turned in poor quality work that did not reflect your true potential or ability	.50			
Bought illicit drugs on campus		.69		
Disrupted class due to talking, being on the phone, or other off-task behavior		.56		
Showed up late for scheduled meetings with professor or classmates		.55		
Attended class late excessively		.45		
Stolen supplies		.45		
Had a student falsify your attendance			-.76	
Provided falsified information to administration			-.73	
Stolen ideas from someone and stated them as your own			-.71	
Exaggerated on your report of group participation why you contributed little to no work			-.70	
Did not do your part in a group project			-.69	
Taken credit for the work of a classmate			-.53	
Knowingly plagiarized assignments			-.50	
Cheated on an assignment				.78
Asked other students who have already taken the exam for information on the content of said exam				.71
Cheated on an exam or test				.70
Received help from others on homework assignments that were intended to be completed independently				.66
Allowed another student to cheat off you				.63
Copied the work of a classmate				.62
Looked for exam materials online				.57
Cheated off a classmate				.57
Looked up answers on a cellphone while taking an exam				.57

Taken online classes just to cheat	.48
Insulted a peer	.42

Note. Factor 1 = poor quality work, 2 = lack of focus/participation, 3 = dishonesty, and 4 = cheating.