

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# **The do and don'ts of supervisor behavior. Supervisor personality as a predictor for subordinate job insecurity and citizenship behaviors**

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ADRIANA PETRIȘOR

*Department of Psychology at the West University of Timișoara, Romania*

LAURENȚIU P. MARICUȚOIU

*Department of Psychology at the West University of Timișoara, Romania*

FLORIN ALIN SAVA

*Department of Psychology at the West University of Timișoara, Romania*

### **Abstract**

Supervisor behavior can be easily interpreted in a positive or negative key; therefore, subordinate perceptions regarding their supervisor behavior can be biased by numerous personal variables. In the present study, we collected data from 20 supervisors and 402 subordinates, and we investigated the relationships between these two perspectives. The supervisors completed two popular self-reported personality scales (i.e., a Big Five scale and a questionnaire that assessed psychopathic tendencies), while their subordinates responded to scales that assessed their level of job insecurity and their self-reported organizational citizenship behaviors. Our multilevel analyses indicated significant relationships between subordinate variables (i.e., job insecurity, organizational citizenship behaviors) and their manager agreeableness or their manager primary psychopathy. In addition, multilevel structural equation models confirmed that subordinate job insecurity partially mediated the relationship between supervisor primary psychopathy and subordinate citizenship behaviors. These findings confirmed the theoretical assumptions of the social learning theory, which anticipated the relationships between supervisor behaviors and employee behaviors.

### **Keywords**

supervisor personality, Big Five, psychopathy, job insecurity, organizational citizenship behavior.

Having a management position has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the managers have the possibility to improve how employees interact with each other and to lead their subordinates towards the achievement of higher standards (De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Koopman, 2005). These positive interpersonal influences were usually described using terms such as

transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990) or transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). On the other hand, the fact that managers must influence others' behavior to reach team goals or personal goals could easily be interpreted in a negative way. Research studies on the "dark side of leadership" suggested that employees who attribute psychopathic characteristics to their

supervisors are less satisfied with their job and reported increased work-family conflict (Mathieu, Neumann, Hare, & Babiak, 2014). Regardless of its positive or negative nature, existing evidence suggested that supervisor behavior is related to the subordinate attitudes and behaviors.

When analyzing supervisor behavior, numerous research studies focused on the relationship between the supervisor personality and subordinate attitudes and behavioral intentions. These studies reported that positive subordinate attitudes (e.g., high job satisfaction or high affective commitment) are associated with high levels of supervisor agreeableness, emotional stability, extraversion, and low levels of conscientiousness (Smith & Canger, 2004). In a similar vein, Mathisen, Einarsen, and Mykletun (2011) concluded that employee reports of supervisor bullying behaviors are usually attributed to low conscientious, emotionally unstable supervisors. However, these relationships were not always confirmed. For example, Camps, Stouten, and Euwema (2016) reported only weak relations between supervisor personality factors and the employee reports of abusive supervision. This is important because the supervisor personality could be a factor of the subordinate attitudes and behaviors that is difficult to change and can be addressed mainly through selection practices.

In the present research, we aim to provide evidence regarding the relationship between supervisor personality and employee workplace behaviors using an ecological approach. Traditionally, researchers asked employees to rate the behavior of their supervisors, and these ratings were aggregated to the management level (i.e., each supervisor had a single score, usually represented by the averaged ratings provided by one's own subordinates). This approach has some limitations because: i) this type of self-reported data is subject to common-method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Posakoff, 2003) and because ii) evaluations provided by peers are weakly correlated with self-evaluations (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). Therefore, using employee self-reported data could lead to an overestimation of the

relationships between supervisor behavior and employee outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, performance). In the present study, we collected responses from employees and their supervisors, and we assembled information from both sources. We used two well-established frameworks for describing behavior (i.e., the Big Five model and Levenson's model of psychopathy), and we investigated how these variables are related to the employee job-related perceptions (i.e., job insecurity) and the employee self-reported behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship behaviors).

### **Organizational citizenship behavior and job insecurity**

Organizational citizenship behavior is a form of extra-role performance that received increased attention in the past 20 years (Eatough, Chang, Miloslavic, & Johnson, 2011). Employees who display this type of behavior are involved in activities beyond their role (e.g., helping colleagues, providing support and solutions for problems outside their job-related activities) and can improve the overall performance of the company they work for (Eatough et al., 2011). Antecedents of the organizational citizenship behaviors include individual differences between employees (e.g., employee personality - Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009) and also employee perceptions and attitudes of the workplace such as job satisfaction (Ilies et al., 2009) or job insecurity (Shoss, 2017).

Sverke, Hellgren, and Naswall (2002) defined job insecurity as "the subjectively perceived likelihood of involuntary job loss" (p. 243) and delineated two types of consequences: stress-related consequences (e.g., poor employee well-being, low levels of job satisfaction) and performance-related consequences (e.g., poor in-role and extra-role performance, turnover intentions). In this vein, Shoss (2017) argued that job insecurity might act as a job preservation motivation that makes employees more productive and more concerned with their task performance and their citizenship behaviors. Consequently, we formulated our first hypothesis as follows:

*H1: Employees who feel insecure regarding their job will report low levels of organizational citizenship behaviors.*

### **The role of supervisor personality**

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, supervisor constant behaviors are likely to have an influence on employee well-being and behaviors. An explanation for this influence is described by Bandura's social learning theory, which stated that humans could learn simply by observing other successful behaviors (Bandura, 1969). From this perspective, subordinates observe their supervisor behaviors (e.g., whether the supervisor establishes positive interpersonal relationships) and assume that similar actions will be rewarded by their manager. If this assumption is met (i.e., the manager observes and rewards the behavior), this will reinforce the subordinates' expectations and will increase the likelihood of repeating the rewarded behaviors.

The study of manager behaviors involves the completion of specific self-reported behavioral scales (e.g., inventories of leadership styles), while other research studies use personality measures to assess the interpersonal differences between managers. In a study that used the Big Five model to characterize managers, Smith and Canger (2003) expected that subordinate positive attitudes would be associated with manager personality factors that describe good interpersonal skills (i.e., high agreeableness, high extraversion, and emotional stability). Their results suggested that manager self-reported extraversion was negatively associated with subordinate turnover intention, while manager agreeableness and emotional stability were positively associated with subordinate satisfaction with supervision. Mathisen and his colleagues (2011) reported that manager poor emotional stability was associated with reports of abusive leadership. Similarly, Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) argued that managers with low emotional stability could be perceived as having unpredictable emotional reactions, therefore their subordinates could feel unsafe regarding the quality of their collaboration with these managers. Furthermore, the positive interpersonal style of agreeable

managers could be associated with the establishment of a safe climate among the subordinates (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Based on these results, we expected to find similar associations regarding the relationships between manager personality and job insecurity, and we formulated our hypothesis as follows.

*H2a: Supervisor emotional stability and agreeableness will be negatively associated with subordinate job insecurity.*

Using the rationale of the social learning theory, it is reasonable to expect that having a highly agreeable supervisor could encourage the subordinates to manifest prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, we expected to find a relationship between supervisor agreeableness and subordinate citizenship behaviors.

*H3a: Supervisor agreeableness will be positively associated with their subordinate organizational citizenship behaviors.*

In management studies, the ideas that managers have "dark personalities" traits that help them in their career movement are not new. Beliefs regarding the narcissistic, Machiavellian, or psychopathic nature of leaders are now popular among the general population. However, research studies suggested that individuals with psychopathic traits are perceived in the most negative way (Rauthmann, 2011). Therefore, in the present research, we focused only on the psychopathic trait. Regarding psychopathy, psychologists generally agreed upon the existence of two major forms: primary psychopathy (i.e., antisocial, manipulative, selfish, and remorseless behavior) and secondary psychopathy (i.e., engagement in antisocial behavior as a result of intense emotional reactions) (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Although previous studies reported that manager psychopathic traits are positively associated with passive leadership and with less individual consideration regarding their own subordinates (Westerlaken & Woods, 2013), we have limited information regarding the relationships between this supervisor trait

and subordinate behaviors. Interestingly, although previous studies focused on how ethical leadership can have positive consequences on employee behaviors (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005), the social learning mechanisms of negative leadership seem under-researched. Because vicarious learning mechanisms are not limited to positive behaviors (e.g., agreeable or ethical behaviors), the daily interactions with a supervisor that scores high in psychopathic traits could be associated with less positive subordinate attitudes and behaviors. Based on a systematic literature review, Davis and Rothstein (2006) concluded that employees who perceive their managers as having poor integrity would also report negative job perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, we formulated our final hypotheses as follows:

*H2b: Supervisor psychopathic traits will be negatively associated with their subordinate job insecurity.*

*H3b: Supervisor psychopathic traits will be negatively associated with their subordinate organizational citizenship behaviors.*

Given the hypotheses described above, we also investigated whether the relationship between the personality of managers and the

subordinate behaviors is mediated by subordinate job insecurity. On the one hand, previous evidence suggested that agreeable and emotionally stable managers create a safe climate for their subordinates, who can perceive the managerial positive interaction style as a model for the interactions between the team members. Therefore, positive interactions with the manager will make subordinates feel secured and will encourage them to behave in a civic manner. On the other hand, it is a generally accepted fact that a climate of security at work also enhances the citizenship behaviors. Therefore, it is possible that the relationship between supervisor personality and citizenship behaviors will be stronger if the subordinates also develop a job security. Therefore, we advanced our final hypothesis as follows:

*H4: Job insecurity will partially mediate the relationship between supervisor personality and subordinate organizational citizenship behavior.*

To conclude, the present study aims to investigate the relationships between supervisor personality, subordinate perceptions regarding their job, and subordinates self-reported workplace behaviors. The hypotheses of the study are presented in Figure 1.

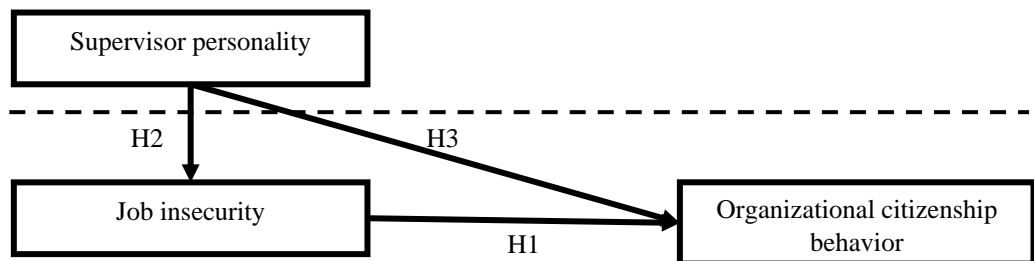


Figure 1. Hypotheses of the study

## Method

### Participants

The employee sample consisted of 402 employees (52.50% female) with an average age of 36.92 years (SD = 9.35) and an average tenure in the present company of 6.80 years (SD = 4.42). Most employees had a high school degree (54.50%), and only 18.20% had a university degree.

The supervisor sample contained 20 respondents (60% male), all of them with university degrees. Their average age was 35.10 years (SD = 5.21), their average company tenure was 7.20 years (SD = 3.47), and their average tenure for the present position was 5.55 years (SD = 2.40).

## Measures

Subordinate workplace citizenship behavior was assessed using the self-reported Organizational Citizenship Behavior Checklist (Spector, Bauer, & Fox, 2010). The participants had to report the frequency of 10 workplace behaviors using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *never* to 5 – *every day*). In the present sample, the reliability of the overall score was  $\alpha = .85$ .

Subordinate job insecurity was assessed using two popular scales: the Global Qualitative Job Insecurity Scale (De Witte et al., 2010) and the Quantitative Job Insecurity Scale (De Witte, 2000). Each scale had four items and required respondents to express their agreement using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *strongly disagree* to 5 – *strongly agree*). Regarding the internal consistency, we obtained excellent values for quantitative job insecurity ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and for qualitative job insecurity ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

Supervisor psychopathy was assessed using the 26-item Levenson Psychopathy Scale (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Supervisors had to rate each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *totally disagree* to 5 – *totally agree*). The 26 items are grouped on two scales: primary psychopathy (16 items,  $\alpha = .84$ ) and secondary psychopathy (10 items,  $\alpha = .69$ ).

Supervisor personality was assessed using the 15-items checklist that assessed the Big Five personality dimensions (Mowen, 2000). Supervisors had to rate each item using a 7-point Likert scale (1 – *does not describe me at all* to 7 – *it describes me completely*). Given the small sample size and the small number of items for each dimension, the internal consistency of the scales had acceptable values: neuroticism ( $\alpha = .64$ ), introversion ( $\alpha = .85$ ), openness ( $\alpha = .54$ ), agreeableness ( $\alpha = .69$ ), conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .69$ ).

## Procedure

All participants were informed regarding the purpose of the present research study, and then they completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires. The first author collected all data and ensured the anonymity of these

responses (i.e., only the first author had access to data containing the identity of respondents). Supervisors completed all measures individually, in the presence of the first author. Then, each supervisor scheduled the moment for the completion of the questionnaires by the subordinates. The subordinates were informed regarding the purpose of the study and were invited to the canteen to complete the questionnaires, in groups of up to 5 members. Although the first author knew the name of their supervisor, we did not collect any data regarding the identity of the respondents.

## Data analysis

Because our dataset contains responses from employees and their supervisors, the employee responses from a single team (i.e., with a common supervisor) are not independent one from another and reflect their shared experiences as a workgroup. Initial analyses regarding the dispersion of variance between the employee and the team level (i.e., the computation of the intra-class correlation coefficient) indicated that about 11.80% of the variance of the citizenship behavior and 12.70% of the variance of the job insecurity is located between work teams. Therefore, we used multilevel modeling to account for the interdependence of the employee responses. In our multilevel analyses, employee responses are located at the first level, and supervisor responses are located at the second level. Because the number of the level 2 clusters is rather small to allow for investigations of potential cross-level interactions (i.e., 30 to 40 clusters are optimal, according to the guidelines formulated by González-Romá, 2019), we only estimated the fixed slopes of our multilevel models. All predictors were centered around the mean of the entire sample (i.e., *grand mean centering*), and we used the R-package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012) for all analyses.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

In our preliminary analyses, we computed the correlation matrices at the subordinate level and at the supervisor level.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables, at both levels of analysis.

	Employee level					Supervisor level					m	SD		
	m	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8			9	10
1. Organizational Citizenship Behavior (employee)	33.71	6.59	.85	-.295	-.456*	-.582**	-.246	.084	.221	.232	.399†	-.181	33.63	2.75
2. Quantitative Job Insecurity (employee)	9.46	1.83	-.267**	.91	.792**	.096	.089	.114	-.236	-.230	-.258	-.062	9.48	0.40
3. Qualitative Job Insecurity (employee)	7.64	3.06	-.410**	.779**	.93	.512*	.248	.323	-.182	-.418†	-.483*	-.251	7.67	0.85
4. Primary psychopathy (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	.84	.442†	.373	-.027	-.282	-.578**	-.014	42.05	6.50
5. Secondary psychopathy (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	.69	.020	-.099	-.419†	-.649**	-.580**	23.95	3.85
6. Emotional stability (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.64	-.068	-.199	-.152	-.011	7.00	2.71
7. Introversion (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.85	.144	.213	-.180	3.70	1.42
8. Openness to experience (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.54	.526*	.377	14.55	2.14
9. Agreeableness (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.69	.291	16.00	1.92
10. Conscientiousness (supervisor)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.69	17.05	1.79

Note. Employee-level correlations are presented below the diagonal (N = 402), and supervisor-level correlations are presented above the diagonal (N = 20). † < .10 \*p < .05 \*\*p < .01

Results presented in Table 1 suggested that the two forms of job insecurity were strongly correlated at both levels (i.e., correlation values about .78) and supported our first hypothesis, as low levels of organizational citizenship behaviors were significantly associated with high levels of qualitative job insecurity ( $r(400) = -.410, p < .001$ ), and with high levels of quantitative job insecurity ( $r(400) = -.267, p < .001$ ). Regarding subordinate job insecurity, we found that only qualitative job insecurity had significant relationships with manager primary psychopathy ( $r(18) = .512, p = .022$ ) and with manager agreeableness ( $r(18) = .483, p = .031$ ). Therefore, our data supported H2a and H2b only in the case of qualitative job insecurity, not in the case of quantitative job insecurity. Finally, we found that subordinate

citizenship behaviors had significant negative relations with supervisor primary psychopathy level ( $r(18) = -.582, p = .022$ ) and non-significant relations with supervisor agreeableness ( $r(18) = .399, p = .081$ ). Therefore, only H3b was supported by our data.

### Main analyses

Because our hypotheses were supported by the data only in the case of qualitative job insecurity, we tested our multilevel models using only this form of employee perception (see Table 2 for an overview of the results). At the employee level, results confirmed that job insecurity is a negative predictor of citizenship behavior ( $B = -.844, SE = .096, z = -8.833, p < .001$ ), thus supporting H1.

Table 2. Estimates of the multilevel SEM analyses

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Direct effects</i>				
Intercept E.OCB	33.673	.475	70.823	<.001
Intercept E.QualJI	.001	.159	.007	.995
<i>Level 1 effects</i>				
E.QualJI => E.OCB	-.844	.096	8.833	<.001
<i>Level 2 effects</i>				
S.PrimPsych => E.OCB	-.239	.093	-2.566	.010
S.Agreeab => E.OCB	.060	.316	.188	.851
S.PrimPsych => E.QualJI	.067	.026	2.609	.009
<i>Indirect effects</i>				
<i>Crosslevel indirect effect</i>				
S.PrimPsych => E.QualJI=>E.OCB	-.057	.023	-2.500	.012

Note. E.OCB = employee organizational citizenship behavior; E.QualJI = employee qualitative job insecurity; S.PrimPsych = supervisor primary psychopathy; S.Agreeab = supervisor agreeableness

Regarding H3, we found that subordinate citizenship behaviors are predicted only by the supervisor primary psychopathy ( $B = -.239, SE = .093, z = -2.566, p = .010$ ), not by supervisor agreeableness ( $B = .060, SE = .316, z = .188, p = .851$ ). Regarding H2, our analyses

confirmed that subordinate qualitative job insecurity can be predicted by the supervisor level of primary psychopathy ( $B = .067, SE = .026, z = 2.609, p = .009$ ). Finally, our mediation analyses presented in Table 3 supported H4 (indirect effect  $B = -.057$ ,

$SE = .023, z = -2.500, p = .012$ ). Therefore, we can conclude that subordinate job insecurity partially mediated the relationship between

supervisor primary psychopathy and subordinate citizenship behaviors.

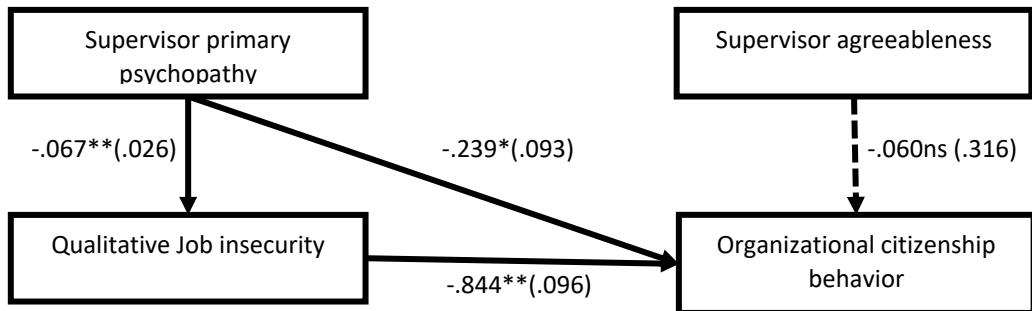


Figure 2. Multilevel SEM model (CFI = .995, TLI = .968, RMSEA = .033)

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present research study was to investigate the relationships that supervisor personality (i.e., assessed using the Big Five model and Levenson psychopathy scale) have with employee job perceptions (i.e., job insecurity) and with employee workplace behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship behavior). Building on Bandura’s (1969) social learning theory, we anticipated that supervisor emotional stability, agreeableness, and psychopathy are the personality variables that are most relevant for their subordinate perceptions and behaviors.

Our results confirmed most of the associations anticipated in our hypotheses. We found that supervisor agreeableness and low primary psychopathy are associated with their subordinate organizational citizenship behaviors and with their subordinate qualitative job insecurity. These findings are in line with previous research studies that reported that manager agreeableness and emotional stability are negatively associated with subordinate retreat intentions (i.e., intentions to quit their job) and positively associated with subordinate positive evaluation of the manager (Smith & Canger, 2003). As the managers display positive interpersonal behaviors (i.e., more agreeable and less psychopathic), we found that their subordinates are more likely to report higher

levels of extra-role behaviors and feel more secured regarding the stability of their job characteristics. From the perspective of the social learning theory (Bandura, 1969), we can speculate that subordinates observed the positive interpersonal behavior of their supervisor, interpreted it as a desirable alternative, and engaged in similar positive behaviors.

Interestingly, the two forms of subordinate job insecurity displayed different correlation patterns with the supervisor personality dimensions, as only qualitative job insecurity was associated with some of the manager traits. Because the perceived probability of losing the job (i.e., quantitative job insecurity, De Witte, 2000) was not related to the supervisor behaviors, we can assume that these subjective evaluations are based on information that is either from other management levels (e.g., top management), based on information regarding the company as a whole (e.g., news regarding the economic performance of the company), or information specific to the region the employees live (e.g., the general unemployment level in the area).

In addition to the investigation of the correlations described above, we also investigated which personality perspective (i.e., the Big Five factors or Levenson psychopathy model) is more relevant to predict subordinate perceptions and behaviors. Our multilevel regression analyses suggested

that the "dark trait" (i.e., primary psychopathy) outperformed the Big Five factors in predicting the subordinate perceptions and behaviors. This result suggested that negative supervisor behaviors could have a stronger impact on employee perceptions and behaviors, as compared with positive supervisor behaviors. This type of negativity bias is well-known in the psychology of emotion research field (Rozin & Royzman, 2001), but it is less explored in organizational settings. From the negativity bias hypothesis, employees are inclined to give more weight to negative supervisor traits (i.e., as we found in our analyses) and, when working for a supervisor with high scores in primary psychopathy, are biased towards ignoring the supervisor positive behaviors when they occur (i.e., negativity dominance – Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

Finally, our mediation analyses indicated that some of the covariances between supervisor psychopathic behaviors and employee citizenship behaviors are mediated by the employee expectancies that their tasks will change. This result suggested that supervisor focus on their own objectives and goals could generate job-related uncertainties in their employees, and this could ultimately lead to fewer extra-role behaviors. Previous studies suggested that high levels of job insecurity are negatively associated with in-role and extra-role behaviors because the employees do not identify with the organization when they are uncertain regarding the content of their jobs (Piccoli et al., 2017). Although we did not assess subordinate identification with the organization, future research studies could investigate this variable as a potential mediator between supervisor psychopathic traits and subordinate citizenship behaviors.

The findings of the present research study have two major practical implications. First, practitioners responsible of managerial selection processes should be aware of the existence of correlations between supervisor personality and subordinate attitudes or subordinate behaviours. Based on our findings, future selection processes could define low agreeableness or high primary psychopathy as counter-indications for a successful future supervisor. The second

practical implication regards the fact that negative personality traits (i.e., primary psychopathy) are more relevant for predicting subordinate attitudes and behaviours, as compared with positive personality traits (i.e., agreeableness). This finding could be relevant for the training of supervisors, as they should exert more self-control when it comes to interacting in negative manners with their subordinates.

### **Limits**

The results of the present research study should be interpreted with caution, as there are three major limitations that should be taken into account. First, the cross-sectional nature of our study prevents us from formulating causal conclusions. While the existence of significant correlations is a condition for the existence of causal relations, longitudinal research studies are needed to provide robust evidence regarding the direction of this effect. Second, although the subordinate sample was consistent, the manager sample was limited. This influenced our ability to obtain significant results at the second level of our analyses. As a consequence, we overlooked some medium associations because we did not have the statistical power to reach their acceptable probability levels. Therefore, although we focused our results only on the strongest associations, other relationships might be relevant in a more powerful study. Finally, another limitation is that we did not control for employee variables that might be relevant predictors for their citizenship behavior (e.g., employee personality – Ilieș et al., 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In the present study, we identified some promising relations between the supervisor self-reported behaviors and their subordinate perceptions and behaviors. We found that supervisor negative behaviors (i.e., primary psychopathic behaviors) are better predictors for subordinate perceptions and behaviors, as compared with supervisor positive behaviors (i.e., agreeable behavior). This result is particularly important because it suggested that discouraging supervisor negative

behaviors is more important, as compared with encouraging their positive behaviors.

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