RESEARCH ARTICLE

Equity Sensitivity and Justice-Related Work Outcomes: Incremental Validity over Big Five Personality Traits

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Abstract

One individual difference that emerged over the years is equity sensitivity. It was posited that this construct may be a central factor in predicting work outcomes in reactions to inequity. However, its conceptual overlap with already established dimensions of personality has been insufficiently taken into consideration so far. The present study examines the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting counterproductive work behaviors and perception of organizational justice over the Big Five personality traits. The study sample consisted of 223 Romanian working adults. Results showed that, although equity sensitivity had a significant relationship with counterproductive work behaviors after controlling for the Big five personality traits, its incremental validity was small, with little practical utility. Moreover, the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting justice dimension above the Big-Five personality dimensions was not supported. Theoretical and practical implications of equity sensitivity for personnel selection are discussed.

Keywords

Introduction

Equity sensitivity is a personal characteristic reflecting how people respond to situations of inequity (Huseman, Hatfield, & Miles, 1987). It represents people's tolerance for under-reward or over-reward in their transactions with the organization and relevant others (King, Miles, & Day, 1993). This individual difference has been studied in association with various attitudes and behaviors at work (Huseman et al., 1987), research indicating relationships with both counterproductive work behaviors and perceptions of organizational justice (Bourdage, Goupal, Neilson, Lukacik, & Lee, 2018; Scott & Colquitt, 2007). Given these findings, some authors have suggested that this construct may be a central factor in selection and employee incentive strategies (Miles, Hatfiled, & Huseman, 1989). However, equity sensitivity is associated with already established

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dimensions of personality from the Five-Factor Model (Bing & Burroughs, 2001; Scott & Colquitt, 2007) and Big Five traits also predict counterproductive work behaviors and perceived organizational justice (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007; Törnroos et al., 2019). Because it was suggested that this construct may be a central factor in the workplace (i.e., related to important work outcomes; Miles et al., 1989; Grant, 2013), these statements should be supported by data, being crucial to establish whether equity sensitivity can be considered a valid predictor of organizational outcomes.

Our study aims to explore the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting important work outcomes (counter-productive work behaviors, distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice) above the Five-Factor Model. This research has both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it broadens our scientific understanding in the domain of individual differences at work. Given that the Five-Factor Model partially omits relevant dimensions of personality (e.g., Lee, Ashton, & de Vries, 2005), personality characteristics not covered by the Big Five model should be studied (Hough & Furnham, 2003). From a practical perspective, if there is an increment of equity sensitivity in explaining counterproductive work behaviors and organizational justice dimensions, practitioners in this field may consider assessing both personality and equity sensitivity in high-stakes situations (i.e., selection and promotion). At the same time, it is possible that the increase in predictive validity is too small to be worth the financial cost associated with the use of the measure. If equity sensitivity does not have incremental value over the Big Five in predicting organizational outcomes, measuring both personality and equity sensitivity in research and practice may be redundant.

The Nature of Equity Sensitivity

Equity theory (Adams, 1963; 1965) states that individuals seek to attain a sense of fairness in their dealings with the organization and relevant others. They are intolerant to situations in which their rewards (e.g., pay, titles) are either too small or too high in relation to their inputs (e.g., performance). In other words, when employees believe that their outcomes are smaller than the inputs, or that their outcomes are greater than the inputs, they experience distress. However, classical equity theory does not take into account how individual differences impact the way people perceive equity. Studies suggests that certain demographic and psychological factors affect how individuals allocate rewards for themselves and / or others and also how they respond to unfair treatment (Huseman et al., 1987). One of these variables is equity sensitivity. Individuals high in equity sensitivity are called "Benevolents". They are more input-oriented (i.e., givers), and tolerate under-reward more easily (King et al., 1993). By contrast, "Entitleds" (i.e., individuals low in equity sensitivity), are more outcome oriented (i.e., takers), and have higher tolerance for over-reward situations (King et al., 1993). Finally, average scores on equity sensitivity reflect more "equity sensitive" individuals, i.e. those who comply most strictly to the idea of equity.

The Incremental Validity of Equity Sensitivity over the Big Five Model

Past studies reveal that equity sensitivity negatively predicts work deviance (Bourdage et al., 2018). Counterproductive work behaviors have also been associated with equity sensitivity (Scott & Colquitt, 2007). With regard to justice dimensions, equity sensitivity was related to the perception of procedural justice and interactional justice (Kickul, Gundry, & Posig, 2005; Scott & Colquitt, 2007). Studies considering more traditional personality predictors have shown that Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Emotional stability are strong predictors of counterproductive work behaviors (Berry et al., 2007; Dalal, 2005). Further, referring to justice perceptions influenced by characteristics of the perceiver, personality traits such as Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, and Openness have been

associated with organizational justice (Barsky & Kaplan, 2007; Törnroos et al., 2019).

Although some empirical evidence on the association between equity sensitivity and personality traits exists (e.g., Bing & Burroughs, 2001; Bourdage et al., 2018; Scott & Colquitt, 2007; Woodley, Bourdage, Ogunfowora, & Nguyen, 2016), research regarding the role of both personality and equity sensitivity in predicting work outcomes is scarce. In this sense, one criticism that may arise against equity sensitivity refers to the lack of studies related to incremental validity. Thus, before studying the relevance of this construct in predicting important work outcomes, the incremental validity of equity sensitivity above the Big Five should be rigorously explored. If equity sensitivity is an important and relevant characteristic, its unique contribution in explaining additional variance in work outcomes should be emphasized. If equity sensitivity does not have incremental value over the Big Five in predicting organizational outcomes, measuring both personality and equity sensitivity in research and practice may be redundant, and measuring only personality may be a more efficient choice.

There are cases when organizations have adopted different predictors whose incremental validity over the more traditional and rigorously examined measures has not been proved (Salgado, Viswesvaran, & Ones, 2002). Some authors have suggested that one area for further examination is studying the incremental utility of equity sensitivity (e.g., Sauley & Bedeian, 2000). So far, only one study has explored the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting work outcomes over the Big Five. Lee (2013) found that equity sensitivity still had a significant relationship with transformational leadership, after the model controlled for the five personality dimensions. Therefore, we propose the following research question.

Research question: Does equity sensitivity contribute additional variance in the prediction of justice-related work outcomes over the Big Five personality dimensions?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 223 Romanian working adults, with 168 females (71.7%) and 63 males. They came from a wide variety of occupations: 7.6% from health / social sector, 3.1% from defense, 17% from commerce, 4.9% from goods production, 8.5% from information and communication, 6.7% from finance and insurance, 11.2% from science and technology, 13.5% from education, and 27.5% from other fields. The mean age for the participants was 25.57 years ($SD = 7.27$), with a range of 18–63 years. 95 (42.6%) of employees had a tenure of less than one year, 73 (32.7%) of employees had a tenure between 1 and 3 years, 18 (8.1%) of employees had a tenure between 3 and 5 years, 19 (8.5%) of employees had a tenure between 5 and 10 years, and 18 (8.1%) of employees had a tenure of over 10 years in their current organization. Participants filled out the questionnaire through an online form and they were motivated to complete the form by the chance to win 30 euros. Measures were collected at one time point.

The post-hoc power analysis that we performed using GPower revealed that in order to test the incremental validity of equity sensitivity over and above Big Five traits, for a medium effect size $f^2 = .15$, $\alpha = .01$ (we applied Bonferroni correction, as we tested 5 hypotheses) and a power $1 - \beta = .80$, we would have needed 127 participants. Our final sample is bigger than the one calculated with GPower (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), therefore increases the representativity and it made possible to detect even smaller effect sizes.

Measures

Personality was measured with the Romanian version of the Big-Five from IPIP (Goldberg. 1992). This scale consists of 10 items for each factor. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example of an item (for Extraversion) is "I know how to captivate people". Reliabilities reported by Iliescu, Popa, and Dimache (2015) in the Romanian adaptation of the IPIP, ranged from .65

(Openness to experience) to .82 (Neuroticism).

Equity sensitivity was measured with the Equity Preference Questionnaire (EPQ; Sauley & Bedeian, 2000). It consists of 8 positively keyed items and 8 negatively keyed items, measured via a five-point rating scale with values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example of a positively keyed item is ''I feel obligated to do more than I am paid to do at work.'' An example of a negatively keyed item is ''I prefer to do as little as possible at work while getting as much as I can from my employer''. Researchers have found that Cronbach's alpha ranges from .80 to .86 (Miller, 2009; Shore & Strauss, 2008).

Counterproductive work behaviors were measured with the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C) 10-item version (5 items targeting the organization and 5 targeting people) proposed by Spector, Bauer, and Fox (2010). An example of an item is "I complained about insignificant things at work". The ratings were measured on a five-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (daily). The coefficient alpha of the CWB-C reported by Spector et al. (2010) was averaged .78 for the agreement and frequency employee forms and .89 for the two supervisor forms.

Organizational justice was measured with the Organizational Justice Scale (Colquitt, 2001), which contains 20 items, on a 5-point scale from 1 (to a small extent) to 5 (to a large extent). The scale measures four justice dimensions, namely procedural, distributive, informational, and interpersonal justice. An example of an item (for distributive justice) is "Does your (outcome) reflect the effort you have put into your work?". Reliabilities reported by Colquitt (2001) are .92 for distributive justice, .78 for procedural justice, .79 for interpersonal justice, and .79 for informational justice.

Analytical Strategy

All statistical analyses were performed using lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) in R version 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2016). For establishing the construct validity of the measures, we used Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA; Brown, 2015) for equity sensitivity, counterproductive work behaviors and justice dimensions, and Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM; Asparouhov & Muthen, 2009) for personality measures. As "CFA approach of fixing many or all cross-loadings at zero may force a researcher to specify a more parsimonious model than is suitable for the data" (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009, p. 398), we used a less restrictive approach in order to test the validity of the 50-item IPIP representation of the Goldberg (1992) markers for the Big-Five factor structure. Due to the constraints imposed by the CFA (being "too restrictive to make it a useful tool for personality research"; Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1990, p. 523), we considered Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM; Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009) as a more appropriate choice. An important characteristic of ESEM is that it perfectly combines EFA and CFA analysis. Also, the presence of cross-loadings can be stated in the model (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009). Another strategy that we adopted was the inclusion of correlates uniqueness (CU's). Following Marsh's (2013) approach, we added correlated uniqueness for negatively worded items. The rationale behind this procedure is that for self-report surveys there can be a potential artifact associated with item wording (Marsh, Scalas, & Nagengast, 2010). Equity sensitivity's incremental validity over personality factors in predicting work outcomes was conducted using structural equation modeling (SEM).

Results

The descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, internal consistencies) and the inter-correlations among the measured variables are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables included in the study*

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Organizational justice	3.91	.65	(.91)											
2. Procedural justice	3.62	.73	.81**	(.77)										
3. Distributive justice	4.10	.88	.71**	.48**	(.88)									
4. Interpersonal justice	4.28	.83	.73**	.40**	.32**	(.86)								
5. Informational justice	3.87	.92	.85**	.52**	.48**	.65**	(.86)							
6. Conscientiousness	3.79	.50	.21**	.18**	.19**	.09	.17**	(.70)						
7. Agreeableness	3.93	.49	.22**	.20**	.22**	.14*	.13*	.37**	(.70)					
8. Neuroticism	2.46	.64	-.26**	-.21**	-.16*	-.23**	-.20**	-.27**	-.30**	(.80)				
9. Openness	4.00	.52	-.01	.03	.02	-.04	-.06	.32**	.30**	-.08	(.71)			
10. Extraversion	3.59	.58	.13*	.14*	.14*	.02	.09	.28**	.25**	-.36**	.28**	(.76)		
11. Equity sensitivity	3.80	.55	.14*	.17**	.09	.09	.07	.39**	.43**	-.13*	.20**	.13*	(.82)	
12. Counterproductive work behavior	1.67	.52	-.19**	-.05	-.13*	-.21**	-.22**	-.36**	-.33**	.21**	-.13*	-.07	-.24**	(.77)

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent Cronbach alpha values. SD = Standard deviation; *p < .05, **p < .001.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling

Table 2 includes the CFA analyses for equity sensitivity, counterproductive work behaviors, and justice dimensions and the ESEM analysis for the Big-Five factor structure. In order to establish our model's goodness of fit, we used the cut-off criteria provided by Hu and Bentler (1999).

The fit indices for the five-factor model (8 corelated errors were included in the model)

showed an acceptable fit with the data ($CFI = .90$; $TLI = .90$; $RMSEA = .04$). Organizational justice's four-factor model displayed a good fit to the data ($CFI = .96$; $TLI = .96$; $RMSEA = .05$). The single factor model for counterproductive work behaviors (4 correlated errors were included) displayed a good fit to the data ($CFI = .94$; $TLI = .92$; $RMSEA = .06$). Finally, equity sensitivity's one-factor model (including 6 correlated errors) displayed an acceptable goodness of fit ($CFI = .90$; $TLI = .88$; $RMSEA = .06$).

Table 2. *Exploratory structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis of the measures*

Measures	Framework	Model	λ² (df)	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA (90% CI)
Big Five	ESEM	5 factors (8 corelated errors)	4153.63* (1225)	.90	.90	.06	.04 (.03 - .04)
Organizational justice	CFA	4 factors	2043.11* (190)	.96	.96	.05	.05 (.04 - .06)
Counterproductive work behaviors	CFA	1 factor (4 correlated errors)	358.25* (45)	.94	.92	.06	.06 (.02 - .09)
Equity sensitivity	CFA	1 factor (6 correlated errors)	781.90* (120)	.90	.88	.07	.06 (.04 - .08)

Note. $\chi2$ = Satorra-Bentler chi square; df = degrees of freedom; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation. * p < .001.

The Incremental Validity of Equity Sensitivity over Big Five Personality Traits

Table 3 summarizes the results of the analyses examining the incremental validity of equity sensitivity over personality dimensions in predicting work outcomes measured in the current study. The Big-Five personality factors were included in the first step of the analysis. Further, in the second step of the analysis, equity sensitivity was added.

In the first step, our results indicate that the personality traits from the Big-Five model accounted for approximately 21.3% of the variance in CWB: $R^2 = .213$; $F(5, 215) = 11.62$; $p < .001$. Adding equity sensitivity in step 2 explains an additional 1.7% of the

variance in CWB ($\Delta R^2 = .017$; $p < .05$). However, using an effect size calculator for hierarchical multiple regression (Soper, 2018) we showed that the effect size of the resulted increment in the explanatory power of the model was small ($f^2 = .022$). Further, the five personality traits accounted for approximately 7.9% of the variance in distributive justice: $R^2 = .079$; $F(5, 215) = 3.70$; $p < .01$. Including equity sensitivity in the step 2 resulted in an insignificant increase in the model's explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = .001$; $p > .05$). Regarding procedural justice, the initially added personality traits accounted for approximately 8.1% of the variance in this variable: $R^2 = .081$; $F(5, 215) = 3.80$; $p < .01$. Including equity sensitivity in step 2 did not result in a significant increase in the model's

explanatory power (ΔR^2 = .005; $p > .05$). Personality traits accounted for approximately 7.3% of the variance in interpersonal justice: R^2 = .073; $F(5, 215) = 3.41$; $p < .01$. Adding equity sensitivity in step 2 did not result in significant increase in the explanatory power of the model (ΔR^2 = .001; $p > .05$). Finally, approximately 8% of the variance in informational justice was explained by the personality traits from the FFM model: R^2 = .08; $F(5, 215) = 3.51$; $p < .01$. Equity sensitivity's inclusion in the step 2 did not result in any improvement in the model's explanatory power (ΔR^2 = 0; $p > .05$).

Table 3. *The SEM estimation of the equity sensitivity' incremental validity over personality traits*

Step	Independent variable	Counterproductive work behaviors			Distributive justice			Procedural justice			Interpersonal justice			Informational justice		
		β	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2	β	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Neuroticism	.10	.213	-	-.07	.079	-	-.14	.081	-	-.22**	.073	-	.16*	.080	-
	Extraversion	.14			.05			.03			-.07			-.01		
	Openness	-.00			-.08			-.04			-.09			-.13		
	Agreeableness	-.24***			.17*			.14			.10			.08		
	Conscientiousness	-.30***			.12			.10			.05			.14		
2	Neuroticism	.10	.230	.017*	-.07	.080	.001	-.14	.086	.005	-.22**	.075	.001	-.16*	.080	.000
	Extraversion	.14*			.05			.03			-.07			-.01		
	Openness	-.00			-.08			-.04			-.09			-.13		
	Agreeableness	-.18*			.19*			.11			.09			.08		
	Conscientiousness	-.26***			.13			.08			.04			.14		
	Equity sensitivity	-.15*			-.05			.08			.05			.00		

Note. * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study explored the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting counterproductive work behaviors and organizational justice dimensions (e.g., distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational) after controlling for the personality dispositions. Our results show that the incremental validity of equity sensitivity on work outcomes above the five-factor personality dimensions is limited. First of all, we only found support for the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting counterproductive work behaviors over the Big-Five personality traits. Even so, the increase in validity was considerably small, providing little practical utility. Second, we did not find significant evidence regarding the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting justice dimension above the Big-Five personality dimensions. Equity sensitivity explained a trivial proportion of variance in all four types of perceived justice, after we controlled for the personality dispositions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study contributes to the literature by enlarging our scientific understanding in the domain of personnel selection, by exploring the relevance of a personality construct, equity sensitivity, in predicting different job outcomes (Huseman et al., 1987). Over the years, a considerable attention was given to the role of personality in industrial-organizational psychology (Judge, Klinger, Simon, & Yang, 2008), one reason being the demonstrated validities of personality variables in the work context (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 1993). In order to increase the validity of personality predictors, beside the Big-Five personality traits, we should consider additional personality dimensions that are likely to exist outside the domain of the Big Five (Hough & Furnham, 2003).

Equity sensitivity emerged as a personality variable that can explain individual differences in reactions to inequity. It was suggested that this construct may be a central factor in the workplace (Miles et al., 1989). Also, based partially on this construct, the Wharton professor Adam Grant developed a theoretical framework (i.e., Give and Take styles), that reached tremendous popularity in 2013 (Utz, Muscanell, & Göritz, 2014). He posited that Give and Take styles are related to important work outcomes. His book ("Give and Take – Why Helping Others Drives Our Success"; Grant, 2013) was cited by leading financial and management publications (Mäthner & Lanwehr, 2017) and his TED talk on this subject being one of the most popular. However, our findings cast doubt on the importance of equity sensitivity in predicting counterproductive work behaviors and justice dimensions, its impact and applicability in the workplace being reduced. In this sense, more studies should be provided regarding equity sensitivity's validity in predicting important work outcomes.

Our findings suggest that measuring both personality and equity sensitivity in research and some specific situations in practice (e.g., selection decisions) may be redundant. Consistent with William of Ockham principle ("Entities should not be multiplied without necessity"), including equity sensitivity in the personality (i.e., Big Five) and work-related outcomes panorama (i.e., counterproductive work behaviors and justice dimensions) is unnecessary. Even if equity sensitivity still had a significant relationship with counterproductive work behaviors after the model controlled for the Big Five personality traits, the explained percentage of variance in counterproductive work behaviors was so small, that, from an economic utility point of view, the financial cost associated with this measure in combination with the Big Five is not worth it. However, extreme scores on equity sensitivity measure could be an indicator for the risk of counter-productive work behaviors (Woodley & Allen, 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

This study also has some limitations. First, the number of job outcomes included in the study was relatively low. Thus, future studies should

explore the incremental validity of equity sensitivity in predicting other important work-related criteria (e.g., task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, etc.), above the five factor dimensions. Second, we used self-reports questionnaires in order to measure our study variables. One risk associated with the self-report measure is common method bias (Tehseen, Ramayah, & Sajilan, 2017). However, Harman's Single-Factor Test (Chang et al., 2010) revealed a 11 factors solution, accounting for 41 % of the total variance. The one factor solution explained only 11% of the variance. One factor did not capture most of the variance. Therefore, our results suggest that common method bias is not an issue for the validity of this study. Yet, future studies may consider multiple sources of reporting in order to avoid this risk. Third, the sample on which the research was conducted was unbalanced, containing a high proportion of women and relatively young employees, which makes the generalization of conclusions problematic (Haladyna & Downing, 2004). Further research should be based on samples that reflect better the population on which the results are generalized.

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