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Political Skill Moderates the Success of Psychopaths at the Workplace

N. Schütte

G. Blickle

R. Frieder

Old Dominion University

F. Schnitzler

J. Heupel

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**POLITICAL SKILL MODERATES THE SUCCESS OF PSYCHOPATHS
AT THE WORKPLACE**

ABSTRACT

On one hand, psychopaths tend to be callous, emotionally deficient, aggressive, self-promoting, impulsive, and pursuant of unmitigated agency regardless of the extent to which it comes at the expense of others. On the other hand, by all accounts, psychopaths tend to be charming, seductive, self-confident, composed, risk-seeking, and adept at impression management (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to reconcile these contrasting positions by examining whether (non-violent) psychopaths truly can be “successful” in the workplace. Drawing on socioanalytic theory (Hogan, 1983), we hypothesized that psychopaths in possession of political skill would be better able to package, conceal, and/or restrain their desires to get ahead in such a way as to be perceived as less counterproductive and more adaptive. Results provided support for these hypotheses. Implications for theory, practice, and future research are provided in light of a number of notable strengths and limitations.

Keywords: Psychopathy, political skill, counterproductive work behavior, adaptive performance

POLITICAL SKILL MODERATES THE SUCCESS OF PSYCHOPATHS AT THE WORKPLACE

When most people hear the term “psychopath,” infamously ruthless and remorseless killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, and Ted Bundy rise quickly to mind. However, what if you came to realize that “psychopaths” actually are the high-performing, leadership-occupying coworkers among us? Although this might seem far-fetched or even implausible, it has been estimated that as many as three million employees in the workforce are, by all estimates, psychopaths. Moreover, as many as 3.5% of top executives are believed to score highly on standardized psychopathic personality indices (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010).

Of course, the type of “killing” these employees and high-ranking executives engage in is not the kind that will confine them to a lifetime in high-security prisons and mental institutions. Instead, organizational psychopaths make a killing in the board room, using their provocative oratory skills, glib charm, composure under pressure, and unapologetic callousness to gain the upper hand in high-stakes social interactions, such as bargaining agreements and salary negotiations (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Dutton, 2012).

From a forensic standpoint, psychopathic personality was originally considered a forensic disorder characterized by remorselessness, impulsivity, emotional apathy, antagonism or aggressiveness, criminal activities, and the adoption of a parasitic lifestyle (Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999). However, the personality-based approach (Cleckley, 1988) has suggested that psychopathy is characterized by callousness, remorselessness, dishonesty, lack of forethought, and inability and/or failure to establish close interpersonal relationships. This latter approach deemphasizes those criminal or antisocial behaviors typically attributed to psychopaths, such as theft and physical aggression (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). Moreover, whereas criminality is indeed a correlate, and perhaps a likely consequence, of psychopathic personality, it is not believed to be a core characteristic (Cooke & Michie, 2001).

In recent years, psychopathic personality has begun to be examined in non-forensic, non-violent populations. For instance, recent meta-analytic research has found that psychopathy is both conceptually distinct from the other dark triad traits (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism), and a substantial predictor of job performance and various counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., O'Boyle, Forsyth, Banks, & McDaniel, 2012; Wu & LeBreton, 2011). Nonetheless, when one examines the psychopathic personality literature more closely, there is an interesting dichotomy that emerges (Hall & Benning, 2006).

On one hand, psychopaths tend to be callous, emotionally deficient, aggressive, self-promoting, impulsive, and pursuant of unmitigated agency regardless of the extent to which it comes at the expense of others. On the other hand, by all accounts, psychopaths are charming, seductive, self-confident, composed, risk-seeking, and adept at impression management (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Unfortunately, research has yet to integrate these competing perspectives. How do employees with psychopathic personalities attain and excel in gainful employment opportunities, presumably rising into roles of increasing importance and visibility? How can individuals capable of being so charming, also be so unrelenting in their self-interested pursuits? Put more simply, can a person with a psychopathy personality be successful in the workplace?

To this end, we draw on socioanalytic theory to reconcile this apparent contradiction. Specifically, utilizing socioanalytic theory (Hogan, 1983), we examine the interactive effects of psychopathic personality and political skill on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) and adaptive performance. Consistent with forensic and non-forensic research on psychopathy, we suggest that individuals with psychopathic personalities are driven by a strong desire to get ahead, and should do so with disregard for getting along; thus, psychopathy should be related to maladaptive but not adaptive work behaviors.

Nonetheless, psychopathic individuals who are in possession of political skill should be better suited to package and present their desires to get ahead so as not to be seen as

acrimonious and entirely agentic. In other words, individual differences in political skill should impact the extent to which psychopathic individuals are successful in pursuing their underlying motives such that they are viewed as engaged in adaptive as opposed to maladaptive (i.e., counterproductive) work behaviors.

The present examination of psychopathic personality and political skill in the workplace boasts numerous contributions to both literatures. First, this investigation is one of the only studies to explicitly examine whether and how psychopaths can be successful within the workplace. Although the term “successful psychopath” has been used to refer to those individuals possessing the quintessential *non-violent* characteristics of psychopathy (Cleckley, 1988; Hall & Benning, 2006), we examine whether (non-violent) psychopaths can truly be “successful” in the workplace.

Relatedly, this research contributes to the non-forensic psychopathic personality literature in that we begin to examine *how* psychopathic individuals may be successful at work. If psychopaths can be successful (i.e., functional) at work, Hall and Benning (2006) raised the question as to whether this meant that these psychopathic individuals were just “less extreme” versions of their forensic psychopathic peers, or whether “successful psychopaths” are those who possess certain compensatory mechanisms (e.g., socialization) that allow for more functional manifestations of their psychopathic tendencies. As such, this is the first study to examine an explicit compensatory mechanism (i.e., political skill) that might assist psychopaths in presenting, regulating, mitigating, and perhaps resisting aberrant behavioral expressions characteristic of their psychopathic personalities.

Additionally, this manuscript contributes to the scant body of research examining psychopathic personality in organizational settings, and to our knowledge represents one of the first quantitative studies to examine successful psychopathy at work. Further, this research contributes to socioanalytic theory as we examine one of the more extreme and acrimonious personalities driven by the motive to get ahead. Generally, motives to get ahead or get along

have been operationalized with the Big 5 personality traits. Conceptualizing psychopathic personality from a socioanalytic perspective as “high motive to get ahead and low motive to get along” extends the generalizability and reach of socioanalytic theory’s explanatory power.

Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of research suggesting that political skill is a social competency that stands to benefit the individual in its possession, as well as organizational bystanders (Ferris, Treadway, Perrewé, Brouer, Douglas, & Lux, 2007). Specifically, if political skill aids psychopathic individuals in regulating, controlling, and/or packaging some of their aberrant, acrimonious, and malevolent desires to get ahead, this stands to benefit both psychopaths (in terms of successful/functional adaptation of their personality at work), as well as psychopaths’ coworkers and employer (in that such bystanders will not be subjected to relentless and merciless psychopathy).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Socioanalytic Theory

Socioanalytic theory (Hogan, 1983) suggests that there exist two basic motives underlying individuals’ personalities: the desire to get ahead and the desire to get along. Individuals who are motivated to get ahead desire power, status, and control over resources (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). As such, they achieve this motive by seeking recognition, maximizing their visibility, engaging in competition, and pursuing additional responsibilities (Hogan & Holland, 2003). Contrarily, individuals who are motivated to get along wish to feel supported, liked, and accepted (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). As such, they achieve this motive by being friendly, cooperative, and compliant (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Not surprisingly, these motives often represent opposing forces, such that one’s ability to be seen as friendly, cooperative, and compliant runs counter to one’s ability to seek power, status, and recognition (Hogan, 1983).

Nonetheless, according to socioanalytic theory, differences exist both in the strength or extent to which individuals possess these motives as well as individuals’ strategies and/or

capabilities to pursue these motives (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). In essence, one's motives to get ahead and/or get along reflect individuals' interpersonal aspirations (i.e., what one aspires to do; Hogan & Shelton, 1998). However, not everyone who aspires to get along and/or get ahead is equally equipped to do so. Accordingly, whether individuals are successful at pursuing either or both of these basic motives will depend on their social competence (i.e., social skill).

Social skill refers to individual differences regarding *how* one goes about pursuing their motives. As such, individuals who are socially skilled are more capable of translating their basic motives (i.e., their aspirations) into purposeful and, more importantly, successful action (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Given the widespread evidence establishing its role as an important workplace-specific social competency (e.g., Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, in press), we examine whether political skill is capable of transmitting psychopaths' remorseless and agentic desires to get ahead into more well-received peer evaluations. First, however, we turn to a brief review of psychopathic personality.

Psychopathy

Originally studied within forensic settings among individuals incarcerated for some of the most heinous crimes in history, psychopathy represents a collection of traits considered malevolent, exploitive, agentic, and callous (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999). More specifically, psychopathy is characterized by amoral conduct, manipulateness, remorselessness, arrogance, low levels of fear and anxiety, ego-centrism, impulsiveness, selfishness, and pursuit of unmitigated agency (Boddy, 2006; Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Given that psychopaths are highly self-confident, they often engage in grandiose and arrogant displays of self-promotion (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006; Lynam & Widiger, 2007).

Individuals with psychopathic personalities tend to be charming, outgoing, cool under pressure, and willing to take risks (Hare, 1999; LeBreton et al., 2006), which are

characteristics they deploy to successfully influence others. Moreover, a hallmark of psychopaths is their lack of empathy, guilt, and remorse. Psychopaths are unable to forge meaningful personal relationships with others, largely due to their disregard for norms of social exchange (O'Boyle et al., 2012), their serial deceit, and maliciousness towards others (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999). Thus, as a testament to their paucity of the more communal traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), psychopaths are able to use and abuse others as stepping-stones to achieve their own self-interests and personal needs without any regard for the harm, pain, or discomfort they cause to such victims.

Accordingly, we suggest psychopaths will be more likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), which are those discretionary employee behaviors that violate organizational norms, run counter to an organization's best interest, and threaten employees' or the organization's well-being (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Not surprisingly, psychopaths have demonstrated a strong proclivity for destructive (Baysinger, Scherer, & LeBreton, 2014), hostile, and deceptive behavior (Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999). In support, research has linked psychopathy to heightened instances of plagiarism and cheating, and reduced likelihood to help classmates (Levenson, Kiehl, Fitzpatrick, 1995). What's more, psychopaths seem unaffected by punishment; thus, even if engaging in counterproductive behaviors might result in punishment, they are likely to engage in such behaviors as a means to satiate their needs (Cleckley, 1988; Hare, 1999).

Further, their unrelenting pursuit of personal desires combined with their blatant disregard for organizational norms, distaste for responsibilities, rules, and deadlines, and lack of loyalty to their employer or coworkers (O'Boyle et al., 2012) paints psychopaths as the quintessential purveyor of counterproductive work behavior. Moreover, their inability to form meaningful interpersonal connections, maliciousness towards others, and decreased levels of fear and anxiety have been thought to increase psychopaths' participation in CWBs, such as theft, sabotage, and bullying. Therefore, we posit the following:

Hypothesis 1: Psychopathic Personality is positively associated with (other-rated) counterproductive work behavior.

Given that psychopathic personality presents an interesting dichotomy of traits, we do not anticipate that psychopathy will be directly associated with adaptive work behaviors (i.e., adaptive performance). Considered a form of performance distinct from task and contextual performance, adaptive performance is defined as individuals' ability to respond to anticipated or sudden changes in task, situation, or environmental demands by altering their behavior (Pulakos, Arad, Donovan, & Plamondon, 2000).

As such, research has found that those individuals who were able to remain calm and collected (i.e., emotionally stable), as well as those who were approach- and challenge-oriented, reward-seeking, and exploratory (i.e., extraverted), were more likely to engage in adaptive performance (Pulakos et al., 2002; Huang, Ryan, Zabel, & Palmer, 2014).

Psychopaths not only are composed under pressure, but also they experience little fear or anxiety, and they tend to be outgoing, charismatic, and risk-seeking (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Thus, one would perhaps expect a positive relationship between psychopathy and adaptive performance. Nonetheless, psychopaths tend to be impulsive, egocentric, and sometimes even malicious towards others (Cleckley, 1988), which seems to suggest that psychopaths may not demonstrate adaptive performance in situations demanding more thoughtful, information-processing strategies or interpersonal connections (Huang et al., 2014).

In summary, we have argued that psychopathic personality should be positively related to maladaptive (i.e., counterproductive) work behavior, but not to adaptive work behavior, per se, although psychopaths tend to stay composed under pressure. In what follows, we draw on socioanalytic theory (Hogan, 1983) to examine whether political skill enables psychopaths to exhibit more functional behaviors at work (i.e., less counterproductive behaviors and heightened adaptive performance). Additionally, O'Boyle et al. (2012, p. 571) concluded after

their meta-analyses that "... most of the effect sizes reported indicated moderation," thereby suggesting the existence of individual difference moderators.

Interaction of Psychopathy x Political Skill on Maladaptive and Adaptive Performance

Political skill is a comprehensive amalgamation of social competencies reflecting "the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives" (Ferris, Treadway, et al., 2005, p. 127). This set of social competencies is comprised of four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, apparent sincerity, and networking ability. Social astuteness refers to the uncanny ability to observe, understand, and accurately interpret one's own behavior, the behavior of others, as well as social interactions, whereas interpersonal influence reflects individuals' ability to utilize such observations and keen understanding to adapt one's behavior in situationally appropriate and influential ways (Ferris et al., 2005). The apparent sincerity dimension of political skill suggests that such individuals are able to disguise ulterior motives and present themselves in a sincere and trustworthy manner. Finally, politically skilled individuals are adept networkers in that they are well-suited to establish and position themselves among powerful coalitions of influential others.

Not surprisingly, both single-study and meta-analytic research has established political skill as a powerful and consistent predictor of various types of work performance and other important workplace outcomes (Munyon et al., in press). For instance, political skill has been positively related to individuals' self-evaluations (e.g., self-efficacy), situational appraisals (e.g., control, understanding), as well as various other-rated evaluations (e.g., reputation, OCB, leadership ability) (Munyon et al., in press). As further testament to its predictive power, political skill has been found to be predictive of managerial performance above and beyond the influence of leadership self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and self-monitoring (Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006). Additionally, research has found that political skill

predicts job performance above and beyond personality and general mental ability (Blickle, Kramer et al., 2011).

Moreover, political skill has also been found to serve as an important boundary condition across a number of contexts. For instance, arguably as a function of their efficacy perceptions, resource availability, and acuity for navigating uncertainty, politically skilled individuals have been shown to experience less strain when faced with stressful situations (Perrewé et al., 2004). Additionally, a convincing body of research suggests that the success or failure of impression management tactics is largely dependent on the political skill of the individuals deploying such tactics. Specifically, research has found that politically skilled individuals utilizing impression management tactics received more favorable supervisory ratings than their less politically skilled counterparts engaged in the same impression management tactics (Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007), whereas politically skilled individuals who employed modesty as a self-presentation strategy experienced heightened levels of career satisfaction and positional attainment than their non-politically skilled peers (Blickle, Diekmann, Schneider, Kalthöfer, & Summers, 2012).

Relatedly, recent research employing socioanalytic theory has found that political skill is a useful social competency that helps individuals to package and present their motives to get along and get ahead into organizational successes. Researchers have argued that as a function of their acute understanding of others as well as the intricacies of social interactions, their uncanny ability to appear sincere and trustworthy, and their unmatched behavioral versatility, politically skilled individuals are thought to appropriately package and/or disguise their motives (to (not) get along and/or get ahead) in ways that are well-received by others. In support, Blickle and colleagues (Blickle, Wendel, & Ferris, 2010) found that car salespeople who were both motivated to get ahead (as operationalized by extraversion) and politically skilled reported heightened levels of car sales on average than their less-politically skilled peers. Similarly, research has found individuals motives to get ahead (Blickle, Fröhlich, et al.,

2011) and to get along (Blickle, Fröhlich, et al., 2011; Meurs, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2011) were more strongly related to positive performance ratings when individuals demonstrated heightened levels of political skill.

Psychopaths are driven by a strong, ruthless, and unscrupulous desire to get ahead, which *if left unchecked*, will be pursued at the expense of peripheral others', as well as the organization's, best interests. However, according to socioanalytic theory, "good social skills can and do coexist with deeply flawed personalities – where flaws are defined in terms of insecurity and selfishness, strange and irrational goals, and a disposition toward treachery and deceit (Leary, 1995)" (Hogan & Shelton, 1998, p. 135). As such, psychopaths in possession of political skill should be more capable of translating their unrelenting desire to get ahead in such a manner as to be perceived by coworkers to be less engaged in maladaptive (counterproductive) performance and more engaged in adaptive performance.

Therefore, this is to say that it is not implausible that individuals can be both psychopathic and politically skilled; in fact, this notion that excellent social skill at work, namely political skill, can temper psychopaths' impulsivity, suppress or conceal their self-interested desires, and/or mask their emotional destitution provides a plausible explanation as to how some psychopaths are able to function in modern organizations, at times even achieving executive status (Babiak & Hare, 2006).

Psychopaths are often characterized as cunning, arrogant, ego-driven, impulsive, thrill-seeking, and empathy-deficient (Cleckley, 1988; Decuyper, Pauw, Fruyt, de Bolle, & de Clercq, 2009; Hare, 1999; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Thus, without political skill, it is likely that organizational bystanders would perceive non-politically skilled psychopaths to be engaged in maladaptive or counterproductive work behaviors (CWB). In support, research has suggested that psychopaths are predisposed to destructive or antisocial behavior (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and are disinclined to reduce others'

suffering or to behave in a manner that is pleasing to others (LeBreton, Binning, & Adorno, 2006).

However, socioanalytic theory suggests that individuals who are socially skilled will adjust their behavior based on what is situationally appropriate (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Therefore, equipped with a comprehensive set of social competencies, politically skilled psychopaths should not be perceived by others to engage in greater amounts of counterproductive behavior. Specifically, we suggest that politically skilled individuals' social astuteness provides them an immense self-awareness that enables them more precise understanding of how others experience them.

Further, as a function of their social astuteness and interpersonal influence, politically skilled individuals are behaviorally flexible and able to adapt to situations as they deem most effective (Ferris et al., 2007); thus, politically skilled psychopaths should be both more aware of what is obviously counterproductive and consequently not engaged in such overtly counterproductive behaviors. Instead, politically skilled psychopaths are hypothesized to either engage in fewer counterproductive behaviors (as a function of their impulse control and social awareness) and/or when they do behave counterproductively, they should be better able to disguise such behavior.

Taken together, this awareness of self and others combined with an ability to *appear* sincere, trustworthy, and devoid of ulterior motives should help psychopaths to present their motives to get ahead in a manner that is, or appears to be, less impulsive, ruthless, and insensitive to others, or more simply put, less counterproductive. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

Hypothesis 2: Political skill moderates the psychopathic personality–counterproductive work behavior relationship. Specifically, if political skill is low (high), there is a positive (null) relationship between psychopathic personality and (other-rated) counterproductive work behavior.

Psychopaths are motivated by an unrelenting desire to get ahead and pursue this motive without any regard for the collateral damage they inflict on those around them (Wu & LeBreton, 2011). We argue that one way psychopaths can achieve this desire for power, status, and control over resources is by demonstrating or appearing to demonstrate adaptive performance; nonetheless, we hypothesize that only those politically skilled psychopaths will be able to do present their ambitions to get ahead successfully, as doing so requires the realization that adaptation is functional as well as the use of appropriate (i.e., restrained) self-promotion strategies. Adaptation ensures these individuals' organizational survival as well as the satiation of such individuals' basic desires.

Researchers have suggested that “a need to acquire and maintain status and power (ambition) will lead one to be *sensitive to* and adjust to environmental change” (Huang et al., 2014; p. 165, italics added for emphasis). As argued, psychopaths are indeed ambitious, even if their ambitions to get ahead come at an immense cost to others. Therefore, without political skill, psychopaths are thought to be unaware of the need to adapt to changing demands. Moreover, non-politically skilled psychopaths may not recognize the less traditional means of performance as mechanisms through which they pursue additional channels to get ahead (e.g., by way of self-promotion impression management strategies).

However, politically skilled psychopaths should be better positioned to proactively recognize when previously effective behaviors become obsolete, and thus should adapt their behavior to what is more effective at receiving desired outcomes in the present day (Huang et al., 2014). Specifically, as a function of their social astuteness, politically skilled psychopaths should be sensitive to the need to adapt their behavior so as to ensure their organizational survival and goal pursuits (Wihler, Blickle, Ellen, Hochwarter, & Ferris, in press). Additionally, as a function of their interpersonal influence, politically skilled psychopaths should be better able to package their adaptation in a way that is seen by others as beneficial to the department or the organization as a whole (Wihler et al., in press).

Further, by way of their apparent sincerity, politically skilled psychopaths should be able to appear as if their adaptive behaviors are undertaken to aid the organization's well-being and survival, even though their adaptive behaviors likely serve a self-promotion strategy. In this manner, politically skilled psychopaths are able to recognize that adaptive performance serves their motive to get ahead (e.g., via additional recognition, visibility, recognition) and helps them to package, present, and ultimately disguise these underlying motives in an effective manner. Taken together, we suggest that politically skilled psychopaths should appear to engage in higher amounts of adaptive performance as compared to their non-politically skilled peers.

Hypothesis 3: Political skill moderates the psychopathic personality–adaptive performance relationship. Specifically, if political skill is high (low), there will be a positive (null) relationship between psychopathic personality and (other-rated) adaptive performance.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

The study took place in the western part of Germany; 523 employees from a broad range of jobs were personally contacted by 27 psychology students in partial fulfilment of their study requirements. Potential participants were asked if they would like to take part in an online study of personality and social competencies in the workplace and if they would ask at least two co-workers to provide a job-related assessment of their behavior at work. Co-workers could be peers, supervisors, or staff. All participants were informed that confidentiality was preserved by using randomly generated codes. Recent research has shown that the diversity of this type of samples increases the external validity of results (Demerouti & Rispens, 2014; Wheeler, Shanine, Leon, & Whitman, 2014).

Each participant received an invitation via e-mail, including information about the study, a personal login code, and a link to the online study. After completing the self-

assessment, including measurements of psychopathy and political skill, employees were asked to enter e-mail addresses of at least two co-workers. Next, co-workers were automatically invited via e-mail to take part in the study; during this phase of the study, information regarding targets' adaptive performance, counterproductive work behaviors, and demographic information was collected. Using pseudo-anonymized randomized code (German Federal Act of Data Protection, 2010, § 3a), we were able to link target employees' self-assessments with co-worker ratings while simultaneously granting confidentiality to all participants (i.e., targets and other-raters).

Of the 523 targets, 280 (54%) completed the self-assessment and invited 854 co-workers to provide observer-ratings for the study. A total of 443 (52%) co-worker ratings were obtained. The quality of the data was checked in several steps. First, co-workers were asked to report their relationship with the target employee. The choices were subordinate, peer, supervisor, or staff. All cases where the respondents had no working contact with the target employee were dropped from further analyses. In total, 275 peers, 43 supervisors and 18 staff members took part in the study. Second, all other-raters who had jointly worked together with the target employee for less than six months were dropped in order to preserve the validity of other-ratings (Schuler, Funke, Moser & Donat, 1995). Third, all target cases with less than two other-ratings were dropped from further analyses. The final sample included 161 employee-other-rater triads. The sample consisted of 72 male and 89 female target employees. Mean age of target employees was 42 years, with mean job tenure of 10 years, and an average working time of 40 hours per week. Mean hierarchical position of the target employees within their organizations was 57 % (0 % = bottom level, 100 % = top level).

Measures

Psychopathy. Targets' psychopathic personality dispositions were assessed with the *Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised (PPI-R; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005)*; the

German version has been validated by Alpers and Eisenbarth (2008). Due to its ability to detect relatively mild levels of psychopathy traits in non-forensic samples (Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996; Lilienfeld & Widows, 2005), the PPI-R is a useful assessment tool for individuals in work place settings (Smith & Lilienfeld, 2013). The measure contains 132 items building an overall score representing eight facets of psychopathy. Target employees provided self-ratings on a four-point Likert-type scale. Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Political skill. Targets' political skill was measured with the 18 self-rating items of the *Political Skill Inventory (PSI)* (Ferris et al., 2005). A validated German translation of the *PSI* (Blickle et al., 2011; Lvina et al., 2012) was used. The *PSI* provides a total score comprising social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Target employees rated their level of political skill on a seven-point Likert-type scale. Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Counterproductive work behavior. Targets' counterproductive work behavior was assessed by other-raters with the German version (Zettler & Hilbig, 2010) of Bennett and Robinson's (2000) 19 item Workplace Deviance Scale. The measure has been widely used in related research (i.e., Mount, Ilies & Johnson, 2006) and has proven useful in the context of the dark triad (Judge, LePine & Rich, 2006). Co-workers evaluated target employees' counterproductive work behavior on rating anchors ranging from (1) "never" to (7) "daily". Due to the aggregation of both other-ratings, an estimate of inter-rater agreement was computed (r_{wg} ; James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1993). r_{wg} can vary between zero and one (LeBreton & Senter, 2008), with acceptable values above .70 (Lance, Butts, & Michels, 2006). For counterproductive work behavior r_{wg} was .89. Thus, other-rater aggregation was performed. Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the aggregated measures was $\alpha = .89$.

Adaptive performance. Co-workers assessed targets' adaptive performance using the five-item rating measure developed and validated by Blickle et al. (2011). The rating anchors ranged from 1 indicating "much worse than other persons in a comparable position," to 5

indicating “a great deal better than other persons in a comparable position.” For adaptive performance r_{wg} was .85. Consequently, other-rater aggregation was performed. Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities of the aggregated measures was $\alpha = .89$.

Control variables. Previous research has shown gender (Bowen, Swim & Jacobs, 2000) and age (Waldmann & Aviolo, 1986) to demonstrate impact on performance ratings. In addition, research has found that males tend to score higher on all three of the dark triad traits (i.e., psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Therefore, gender and age were included as controls. As a proxy for intelligence (cf., Blickle & Schnitzler, 2010), educational level ranging from (1) *left school without graduation* to (8) *doctoral degree*, was controlled. Additionally, we controlled for working hours per week, years of job tenure, and hierarchical position, because employees were sampled from a broad range of jobs (Momm, Blickle, Liu, Wihler, Kholin, & Menges, in press).

Statistical Analyses

Test of normal distribution. Due to target employees nominating which other-raters would assess them, there was a probability of a selection bias (Greco, O’Boyle, & Walter, in press). Therefore the distributions of counterproductive work behavior and adaptive performance were examined. If there was a selection bias, both distributions would have been strongly skewed. However, the scores of both variables were normally distributed (counterproductive work behavior: skewness = 2.06, kurtosis = 5.71; adaptive performance: skewness = -.41, kurtosis = .12); zero values of skewness and kurtosis represent perfectly normal distributions, skewness $> \pm 3$ and kurtosis $> \pm 7$ are indicative of non-normal distributions; Curran, West, & Finch 1996). In sum, these findings do not indicate the presence of a selection bias.

Measurement models. To evaluate the independence and distinctiveness of our scales, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (Van der Sluis, Dolan & Stoel, 2005). Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) was used to compare two different models. In the

first model, one factor was built for the target ratings (psychopathy and political skill) and another factor was built for the aggregated other-ratings (adaptive performance and counterproductive work behavior). The fit indices of this model were unsatisfactory: $\chi^2 = 271.47$, $df = 19$ ($p < .0001$), $RMSEA = .287$, $CFI = .612$, and $SRMR = .170$. In the second model, one factor for each construct was built. Fit indices were satisfactory: $\chi^2 = 15.08$, $df = 15$ ($p = .45$), $RMSEA = .006$, $CFI = 1.000$, and $SRMR = .027$. Additionally, the second model demonstrated a significantly better fit than the first model: $\Delta\chi^2 = 256.46$, $\Delta df = 4$, $p < .0001$. These results support the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the scales used.

Hypothesis testing. Based on Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003), hierarchical moderated regression analyses were conducted to examine the moderating role of political skill on psychopathy-counterproductive work behavior and psychopathy-adaptive performance ratings relationships. Political skill and both criterion variables were centered prior to analysis. In the first model (1a, 2a), psychopathic personality and political skill were entered as predictors. Based on Cortina (1993; see also Dawson, 2014), in the second model (1b, 2b), we further controlled for quadratic effects before testing the interaction effects. In the third model (1c, 2c), the psychopathic personality x political skill interaction was added. The pure interaction model without any control variables was tested in line with Becker (2005) who cautioned that control variables may hamper the analyses by unnecessarily soaking up degrees of freedom and may bias the findings related to the hypothesized. Therefore, the hypotheses were first analyzed without control variables; then, in the fourth model (1d, 2d), all control variables (following recommendations by Bono & McNamara, 2011) were included.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations, and internal consistency reliability estimates of the study variables. In line with Hypothesis 1, the correlations in Table 1 show that psychopathy is positively associated with counterproductive work behavior ($r =$

.28, $p < .01$). Table 2 and 3 report the results of the hierarchical moderated regression analyses. The main effect of psychopathy on counterproductive work behavior, as stated in Hypothesis 1, was supported. In all four models (1a-1d), psychopathy had a highly significant positive impact on counterproductive work behavior ($.24 \leq \beta \leq .29$, $p < .01$).

Insert Tables 1-3 about here

In line with Hypothesis 2, the interaction term of psychopathy x political skill on counterproductive work behavior was significantly negative ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .01$) and accounted for 5 % additional variance (see Table 2, Model 1c). After having added the control variables in Model 1d, the interaction was still significantly negative ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .01$). According to the procedure proposed by Cohen et al. (2003), the interaction was plotted at one standard deviation above and below the mean of political skill. The form of the interaction is displayed in Figure 1. As expected, for target employees low in political skill (i.e., 1 *SD* below mean), higher levels of psychopathy were associated with higher levels of other-rated counterproductive work behavior ($b = 1.06$, $p < .01$), whereas for target employees high in political skill (i.e., 1 *SD* above mean), psychopathy was not related to counterproductive work behavior ($b = .16$, *ns*). Thus, empirical findings fully supported Hypothesis 2.

Insert Figure 1 and 2 about here

Testing Hypothesis 3, the interaction term of psychopathy x political skill significantly predicted adaptive performance ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$), and accounted for 4 % additional variance explained (see Table 3, Model 2c). Control variables did not impact the significance of the interaction term (Model 2d). The form of the interaction can be found in Figure 2. As expected, for high levels of political skill (i.e., 1 *SD* below mean), there was a positive relationship between psychopathy and adaptive performance ($b = .68$, $p < .05$). When political

skill was low (i.e., 1 *SD* below mean), no relationship between psychopathy and adaptive performance was detected ($b = -.30, ns$). Consequently, we found full support for Hypothesis 3.

DISCUSSION

Contributions to Theory and Research

The purpose of this study was to examine whether individuals demonstrating psychopathic personality tendencies could be successful in the workplace. Psychopathic personality presents an interesting dichotomy in which (non-forensic) psychopaths are renowned for their self-promotion, emotional deficiency, and callous disregard for others, as well as for their cunning charm, self-confidence, and composure under pressure (Babiak & Hare, 2006; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Thus, drawing on socioanalytic theory (Hogan, 1983), we examined political skill as a comprehensive workplace competency that could reconcile this dichotomy. As such, politically skilled psychopaths were hypothesized to effectively package their unwavering exploitative agency into organizational success. Results lent strong support for our hypotheses. Specifically, psychopathy was positively and significantly related to counterproductive work behaviors (CWB), but was not significantly related to adaptive performance. Additionally, the interactive effects of psychopathy and political skill significantly predicted CWB and adaptive performance. As hypothesized, high levels of psychopathic personality and political skill were associated with significantly less socially deviant behaviors (counterproductive work behavior) and significantly more socially adaptive behaviors (adaptive performance).

Therefore, this research provides an initial step forward towards reconciling the puzzling dichotomy of “successful” or “functional” psychopaths in the workplace. As such, this study provides a few notable contributions to both the psychopathic personality and political skill literatures. First, this is one of the first studies to examine *actual employees'* psychopathic personalities within a real workplace setting. This is an important contribution

as most of the research on psychopathic personality has been conducted within forensic settings (e.g., utilizing incarcerated prisoners, psychiatric patients; Cooke & Michie, 2001), via experimental designs employing students (e.g., Baysinger et al., 2014), or has employed meta-analytic techniques to summarize findings from past “Dark Triad” studies largely examined within non-representative populations (e.g., military personnel, police officers; O’Boyle et al., 2012). More importantly, no research to date (to our knowledge) has examined conditions under which employed psychopaths can be successful, functioning employees.

Along these lines, this study is the first of its kind to examine *how* individuals with psychopathic personalities may be successful (i.e., functional) at work. It has been suggested that functionally psychopathic employees may possess the same psychopathic tendencies as compared to criminal psychopaths but possess compensatory mechanisms that restrain extreme demonstrations of these psychopathic tendencies (Hall & Benning, 2006). Results provided support for the notion that functional psychopaths are those who possess certain social competencies (i.e., political skill) that allow them to better regulate their impulses, agentic pursuits of self-interest, self-promotion, and maliciousness towards others. As such, this study represents a departure from the majority of research focusing exclusively on the deleterious effects of psychopathic personality in that we examine an individual difference which enables psychopaths’ to exhibit functional organizational behavior.

Moreover, this study provides additional support for socioanalytic theory in that results indicate that those individuals who are socially skilled are more capable of translating their basic motives (i.e., to get ahead) into purposeful and more importantly, successful action (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Additionally, this research also demonstrates that the basic tenets of socioanalytic theory hold true even for individuals characterized by some of the more aberrant personality traits, and extends this research to examine social competencies as capable of *attenuating* maladaptive behavior. Finally, this study contributes to the political skill literature in that findings provide support for the marked effect of political skill on one’s

own self, as well as how peripheral others experience or perceive politically skilled persons (Ferris et al., 2007; Ferris, Treadway, Brouer, & Munyon, 2012).

Practical Implications

These findings present practical implications with regards to selection as well as training and development. Most notably, while we found that political skill allows psychopaths to effectively package their psychopathic tendencies, we still would suggest that on the whole, psychopathy is not a desirable employee trait. This is especially true given that non-socially skilled psychopaths are more counterproductive and no more adaptive than their non-psychopathic peers. However, in certain occupations, positions, and/or at certain hierarchical levels, psychopathy may be very functional (Dutton, 2012). For instance, in occupations that require composure under pressure, quick and decisive action, hard decisions (e.g., those involving employees' employment status), seductive charm and persuasion (e.g., sales), *politically skilled* psychopaths may be best suited for success under these circumstances. Contrarily, psychopaths may be especially ill-suited for positions that require patience and thoughtful action, interpersonal sensitivity, teamwork, and compassion (e.g., nursing). Therefore, we would suggest that organizations consider screening on psychopathy when hiring for certain positions in which the possession of these tendencies would be especially practical or detrimental.

Further, while personality is considered largely innate and unmalleable, social skills are thought to be trainable (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). Thus, findings from this study also have implications from a training and development standpoint. For existing employees found to be in possession of psychopathic tendencies, it may be beneficial to provide them with opportunities to train and develop their political skill. Such training could include exercises to develop employees' own self-awareness, gain an understanding of how a target employee is perceived by others, and to demonstrate empathy and concern for others. Moreover, it's important to point out that regardless of whether individuals are psychopathic or not, political

skill has a remarkable impact on organizational outcomes for those in its possession (e.g., Munyon et al., in press). Therefore, from a practical standpoint, organizations may benefit from incorporating political skill training into existing leadership development and fast-tracked employee development programs.

Strengths and Limitations

Importantly, our findings should be interpreted with careful consideration of the following strengths and weakness. In terms of strengths, several aspects warrant trust in the observed findings. First, we employed a multi-source design in which independent variables were collected from focal individuals and criterion variables were collected from two observers (e.g., coworkers, supervisors). Consistent with recommended practice, we asked observers to provide ratings of targets' counterproductive work behaviors, as doing so helps to rule out common method bias (Fox, Spector, Goh, & Bruursema, 2007). Moreover, we felt that such individuals were well suited to validly assess the incidence of targets' CWB, because they were in close contact with targets and had worked together for at least 6 months. This allowed us to circumvent common issues that arise with CWB research, such as low response rates and range restriction due to low base rates (Greco et al., 2014).

In addition, participants were ensured that the ratings that they would be asked to provide would have no impact on job decisions. As indicated by Podsakoff and colleagues' (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012), these assurances likely increased individuals' motivation to respond accurately. Additionally, the multi-source research design provided researchers some assurance that study findings were not due to common method bias. A related strength concerns the strong interrater agreement among observers' ratings of target individuals' counterproductive work behaviors and adaptive performance. In addition, given that target individuals nominated those individuals who provided the "other-ratings," we were concerned about the possibility of a selection bias. However, we explicitly tested for skewness and kurtosis of the scales as well as for the appropriateness to consider them independently;

results indicated that our data are not particularly biased in any way. Finally, the inclusion of the quadratic main effects as control variables when testing interaction effects represents a notable strength, as Dawson (2014) suggested that failure to account for the non-linear main effects could result in falsely detected moderation especially when the independent and moderator variables are correlated.

In light of these strengths, we also wish to point out some notable limitations. Namely, despite being collected from multiple sources, the data are cross-sectional; therefore, we were unable to draw causal inferences from study findings. Additionally, the other-ratings were predominantly provided by target individuals' peers (i.e., $N = 275$) as opposed to supervisors ($N = 43$). Collecting data from other vantage points (e.g., staff) may reveal that certain raters experience psychopaths differently than others. In addition, a limitation of this study deals with our inability to collect data on the other components of the dark triad, Machiavellianism and narcissism. However, we were concerned that doing so may have provided respondents with sufficient information to infer the purpose of the study. Therefore, out of concerns for validity, in light of the tradeoff between survey length and respondent fatigue, and the empirical evidence that suggests these constructs are related, but distinct (O'Boyle et al., 2012; Wu & LeBreton, 2011), we chose not to collect data on Machiavellianism and narcissism. Finally, data were collected in the German work force; while the German culture is similar in some regards to other Western cultures (Erez, 2011), the generalizability of these findings to other cultures is tentative pending additional research.

Directions for Future Research

There exist numerous opportunities for future research, especially with regard to psychopathic personality at work. First and foremost, this research examined only two types of performance: counterproductive work behavior and adaptive performance. However, it would be interesting to examine whether the psychopathy \times political skill interaction is consistent across sales and other kind of enterprising performance as well. Moreover, what

other social competencies may help psychopaths to package and pursue their motives more successfully? Contrarily, are there individual differences (e.g., organizational cynicism, hostile attribution bias) that amplify the deleterious effects of psychopathy?

In addition, recent research examining leadership from a socioanalytic perspective found that politically skilled leaders who desired to get ahead engaged in more structuring behaviors which in turn were related to followers' satisfaction and institutional effectiveness (Ewen et al., 2014). Along these lines, it would be interesting to examine the mediating mechanisms through which the interactive effects of psychopathy and political skill engender organizational success. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine psychopaths' affective experiences at work. Do psychopaths experience job satisfaction or do they only experience satisfaction by pursuing self-interests? Can and will psychopaths demonstrate high levels of work engagement and if so, under what conditions? Relatedly, within the workplace, are there certain contexts that we find psychopaths self-selecting into and subsequently thriving in? For instance, perhaps psychopaths seek out the uncertainty and ambiguity characteristic of highly political organizations as such contexts provide them with more opportunities to pursue self-interest and amoral conduct.

Further, while the current research relied primarily on peers' (e.g., coworkers) ratings of targets, future research should examine targets' psychopathy from other individuals' perspectives (e.g., auxiliary staff, subordinates, and customers). Psychopaths may be perceived differently by individuals based on the perceived power differential, perceived distance, and relational demography between the target and the observer. In support, hierarchical position was significantly negatively related to CWB (but not adaptive performance). Thus, future research should examine *why* psychopaths may be better suited to exploit auxiliary staff members and individuals lower in the organizational hierarchy. From the criminal research on psychopathy, evidence suggests that psychopaths are able to pinpoint and exploit more vulnerable targets (Wheeler, Book, & Costello, 2009). However, in the

workplace, little is known about what psychopaths actually do within the confines of the organization to exert influence over others.

Additionally, it would be interesting to examine subordinates' perspectives of psychopathic employees. For instance, one of the most polarizing, yet widely effective, leaders was Steve Jobs, who embodied the quintessential psychopathic dichotomy: cunning and seductive, yet ruthless, lacking empathy, and hostile (Arlidge, 2011; Dutton, 2012). How does one reconcile psychopathic personality within the context of leadership? Is leader political skill the key differentiating factor here as well? Future research should examine this possibility as well as other implications of psychopathic leadership.

Moreover, with the advent of flextime and non-traditional work arrangements, how does distance affect psychopaths' ability to charm and seduce others? Finally, from a relational demography standpoint (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989), it would be interesting to examine how psychopaths interact with other psychopaths. Is there room in a workgroup or department for two psychopaths to pursue unmitigated agency (perhaps as a team?) or would they find one another to stand in the way of each other's self-interested pursuits? As is apparent, there exist numerous opportunities to examine psychopathy within the organizational sciences.

Finally, recent meta-analytic research has indicated that psychopaths may have emotion recognition deficits (Dawel, O'Kearney, McKone, & Palermo, 2012) that are believed to be linked to dysfunctions in the amygdala (Marsh & Blair, 2008). Interestingly, research has found a strong positive association between emotion recognition ability and political skill in a sample of normal employees (Momm et al., in press). Taken together, there is reason to suspect that those psychopaths with low political skill probably have high dysfunction in the amygdala, whereas psychopaths with high political skill have no amygdala impairments.

Future research should explore whether there are detectable neurological differences among politically skilled and non-politically skilled psychopaths. For instance, while the

insula and basal ganglia are responsible for detecting disgust, the amygdala is predominantly responsible for detecting fear (Adolphs, 2002; Murphy, Nimmo-Smith, & Lawrence, 2003). This might suggest that there may be a neurological or biological basis for the differences between functional (successful) and dysfunctional psychopaths. Specifically, politically skilled psychopaths may be neurologically advantaged.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether political skill holds the key to whether certain psychopaths can demonstrate functional behavior at work. Psychopathy was associated with greater instances of counterproductive work behavior. However, when individuals were both high in psychopathy and in possession of political skill, they engaged in significantly less counterproductive work behaviors and significantly more adaptive performance behaviors. In light of these findings, we hope that this study spurs continued research regarding psychopaths at work and we encourage researchers to continue to examine psychopathic personality in the organizational context.

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TABLE 1*

Mean, Standard Deviations, Alphas, and Study Variable Correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender – target	0.45	.50										
2. Age – target	41.48	12.15	.17*									
3. Educational level – target	5.83	1.63	.04	.01								
4. Working Hours per week – target	39.81	9.70	.32**	-.10	.19*							
5. Job tenure (years) – target	10.18	8.91	.14	.63**	-.07	-.07						
6. Hierarchical position – target	56.99	22.78	.14	.30**	.14	.31**	.19*					
7. Psychopathy (<i>PPI-R</i>) – target	2.15	.19	.19*	-.21**	-.02	.21**	-.21**	-.01	(.85)			
8. Political skill (<i>PSI</i>) – target	5.01	.65	.08	-.06	.09	.09	-.03	.29**	.13	(.89)		
9. Counterp. work beh. (other-raters)	1.44	.47	.15	-.21**	-.08	-.04	-.08	-.30**	.28**	-.04	(.89)	
10. Adaptive Perform. (other-raters)	3.82	.50	-.01	.00	.13	.00	-.09	.09	.07	-.03	-.28**	(.89)

Note. *N* = 161 target - other-rater triads, Gender (0 = female; 1 = male), Educational Level (1 = no formal school degree - 8 = doctoral degree),

Hierarchical Position (0 = job floor level, 100 = top tier level);

p* < .05, *p* < .01.

TABLE 2*

Hierarchical Moderated Regressions on Counterproductive Work Behavior

Variables	DV = Counterproductive Work Behavior			
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c	Model 1d
Predictors (β)				
Gender				.17*
Age				-.09
Educational level				.01
Working hours per week				-.06
Job tenure (years)				.13
Hierarchical position				-.26**
<i>PPI-R</i>	.29**	.28**	.29**	.24**
<i>PSI</i>	-.08	-.07	-.09	-.03
<i>PPI-R</i> ²		.04	.05	.07
<i>PSI</i> ²		.03	.10	.08
<i>PPI-R</i> x <i>PSI</i>			-.23**	-.23**
ΔR^2	.08	.00	.05	.04
$F_{\Delta R^2} (df1, df2)$	7.03 (2, 158)**	.22 (2, 156)	8.64 (1, 155)**	8.67 (1, 149)**

Note. $N = 161$ target-other-rater triads, Gender (0 = female; 1 = male), control variables, moderators and predictors were centered; *PPI-R* = Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised; *PSI* = Political Skill Inventory;

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3*

Hierarchical Moderated Regressions on Adaptive Performance

Variables	DV = Adaptive Performance			
	Model 2a	Model 2b	Model 2c	Model 2d
Predictors (β)				
Gender				-.01
Age				.05
Educational level				.10
Working hours per week				-.09
Job tenure (years)				-.14
Hierarchical position				.13
<i>PPI-R</i>	.07	.08	.08	.09
<i>PSI</i>	-.04	-.02	.01	-.04
<i>PPI-R</i> ²		-.04	-.06	-.05
<i>PSI</i> ²		.08	.03	.04
<i>PPI-R</i> x <i>PSI</i>			.20*	.20*
ΔR^2	.01	.01	.04	.03
$F_{\Delta R^2} (df1, df2)$.44 (2, 158)	.59 (2, 156)	5.99 (1, 155)*	5.48 (1, 149)*

Note. $N = 161$ target-other-rater triads, control variables, moderators and predictors were

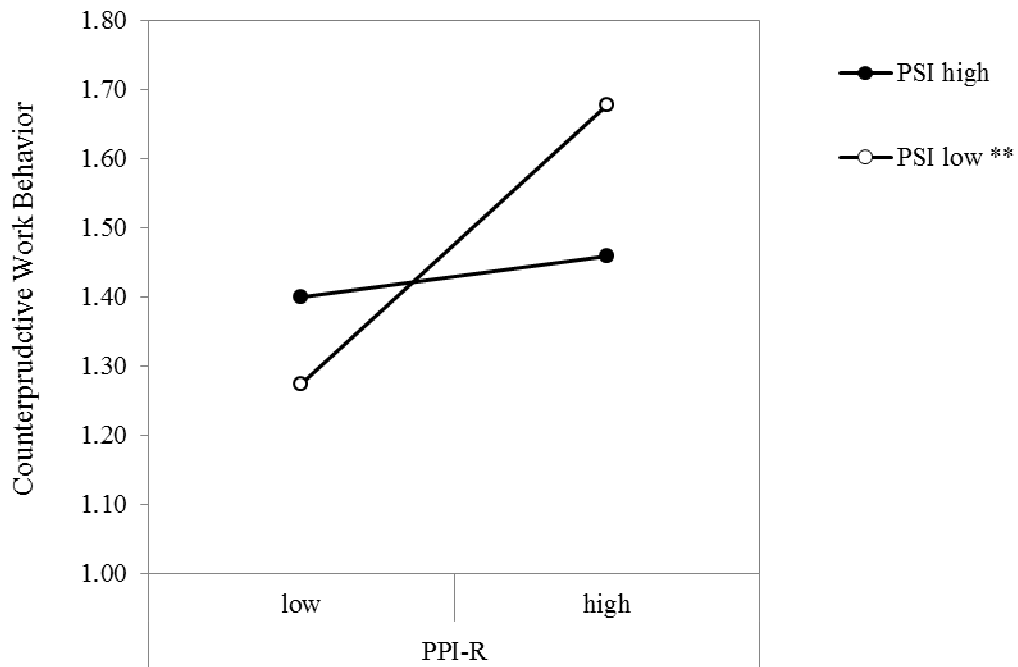
centered; *PPI-R* = Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised; *PSI* = Political Skill

Inventory;

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

FIGURE 1*

**Interaction Plots of Regressions on Counterproductive Work Behavior
(With Control Variables)**



Note. $N = 161$ target-other-rater triads; *PPI-R* = Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised;

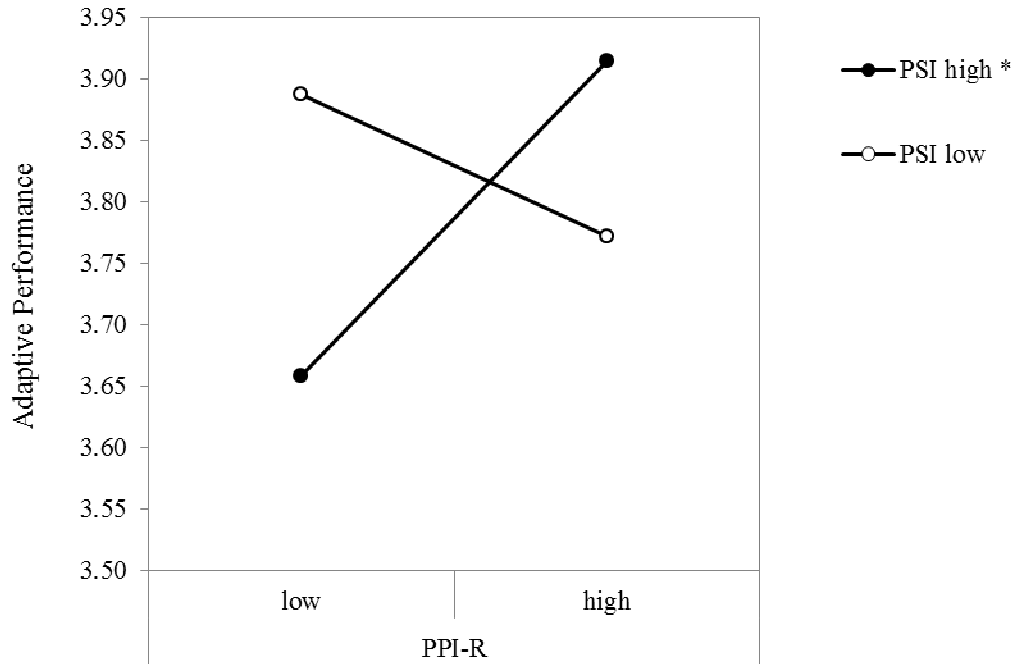
PSI = Political Skill Inventory;

** $p < .01$ (slope).

FIGURE 2*

Interaction Plots of Regressions on Adaptive Performance

(With Control Variables)



Note. $N = 161$ target-other-rater triads; *PPI-R* = Psychopathy Personality Inventory - Revised;

PSI = Political Skill Inventory;

* $p < .05$ (slope).