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An Integrative Approach to Understanding Counterproductive Work Behavior: The Roles of Stressors, Negative Emotions and Moral Disengagement

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RUNNING HEAD: UNDERSTANDING COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIORS

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An Integrative Approach to Understanding Counterproductive Work Behavior: The Roles of Stressors, Negative Emotions, and Moral Disengagement

Abstract

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of examining moral disengagement (MD) in understanding aggression and deviant conduct across different contexts. The present study investigates the role of MD as a specific social-cognitive construct that, in the organizational context, may intervene in the process leading from stressors to counterproductive work behavior (CWB). Assuming the theoretical framework of the stressor-emotion model of CWB, we hypothesized that MD mediates, at least partially, the relation between negative emotions in reaction to perceived stressors and CWB by promoting or justifying aggressive responses to frustrating situations or events. In a sample of 1,147 Italian workers, we tested a structural equations model. The results support our hypothesis: the more workers experienced negative emotions in response to stressors, the more they morally disengaged and, in turn, enacted CWB.

Keywords: moral disengagement, counterproductive work behavior, job stressor, negative emotions, aggression

Introduction

Deviant behavior at work represents one of the most relevant emerging criticalities in organizations worldwide (Chappel & Di Martino, 2006). In the literature, it has been labeled in different ways, e.g., organizational aggression, unethical behavior, delinquency, deviance, retaliation, revenge, violence, emotional abuse, mobbing/bullying, misconduct. However, despite the specificity of the different definitions provided, all operationalizations share a common emphasis on the actual or potential harmful and detrimental effects of such behaviors on both the organization and its members (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997; Spector & Fox, 2005). In this study, we focus our attention on counterproductive work behavior (CWB), namely, voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational and social norms (see Collins & Griffin, 1998; Robinson & Bennet, 1995; Spector & Fox, 2005) and in turn damages organizations and their shareholders and stakeholders (employers, supervisors, co-workers, and clients). CWB may include both overt acts, such as direct aggression and theft, and covert acts, such as purposefully failing to follow instructions or doing work incorrectly (Spector, Fox, Penney, Bruursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006).

Several researches have examined the different factors that could help to understand the process leading to CWB, considering both situational and personal dimensions (see Bowling & Eschleman, 2010; Spector & Fox, 2005). To this extent, the stressor-emotion model of CWB (Spector, 1998; Spector & Fox, 2005) represents a comprehensive model explaining why workers in stressful conditions may enact CWB at work. In particular, capitalizing on both the frustration-aggression theory developed by Dollard and his colleagues (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears 1939; also, see Berkowitz, 1989) and stress theories (Jex & Beehr, 1991; Lazarus, 1999), Spector and Fox hypothesized that CWB is one of the possible results of stress at work and constitutes a response to frustrating working conditions (e.g., Spector & Fox, 2005). Therefore, this behavior is considered as a response to perceived

organizational stressors, or more broadly, to any frustrating condition that substantially interferes with work goals, job activities, and/or job performance. Previous research has shown that whenever employees perceive a job stressor, they may experience negative feelings that, in turn, may lead them to enact CWB as a strategy to reduce the emotionally unpleasant condition derived from organizational frustrations (e.g., Penney & Spector, 2005; Spector, 1998). In sum, this is an emotion-centered model (Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox & Spector, 1999, Spector, 1975, 1997) that highlights the path from perceived stressors at work to deviant conduct through “hot” affective processes.

However, CWB does not occur automatically and in a vacuum; rather, it is enacted within a complex social context pervaded by shared values, norms, and models of behaviors acquired during socialization (Schein, 1999). Thus, in order to understand the process leading to CWB, it is important to also consider the role of socio-cognitive “cold” processes. As underlined in the organizational literature, as a consequence of negative emotional reaction to frustrating working conditions, workers may also enact such forms of unethical and deviant behaviors through cognitive processes that allow them to temporarily bypass the acquired collective norms, values, and models (Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Moore, 2008; White, Bandura, & Bero, 2009). Base on this fact, we aim to extend the stressor-emotion model of CWB by integrating moral disengagement (MD), a social cognitive process that may facilitate the translation of negative feelings derived from perceived stressors into CWB (Fig. 1). Specifically, we believe that negative feelings can activate MD as a secondary cognitive process through which individual moral standards are momentarily obscured, giving access to CWB as a plausible behavioral strategy to cope with negative emotions derived from negatively perceived situations. Thus, MD may intervene in the stressor-emotion process mediating the transition from negative emotional reaction to CWB by legitimizing this kind of

response without concurrently requiring abandoning personal and shared norms, values, and models.

Figure 1

CWB and Stressor-Emotion Model

CWB represents a behavioral response to strain aimed at managing a stressful situation and reducing the consequent unpleasant negative emotions even though, in so doing, it threatens organizational and members' well-being and reduces their effectiveness (Fox & Spector, 1999; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Krischer, Penney, & Hunter, 2010; Rodell & Judge, 2009; Spector, 1975, 1997). Furthermore, in accordance with Robinson and Bennett (1995), CWB can be distinguished on the basis of the target: against the individuals in the organization (CWB-I) or against the organization as a whole (CWB-O). The former, CWB-I, is interpersonally oriented and may include acts of aggression toward fellow co-workers, such as verbal insults; spreading false rumors about or making fun of others; playing mean pranks; making racial slurs; and withholding crucial information from others. The latter, CWB-O, is oriented toward the organization and may manifest as taking excessive breaks, working on a personal matter instead of working for the employer, withholding effort, violating organizational policies, or intentionally working slowly (Bennet & Robinson, 2000; Dalal, 2005; Mount, Ilies, & Johnson, 2006).

CWB is an increasingly pervasive and costly phenomenon (Coffin, 2003; Greenberg, 1990; Mount et al., 2006; Murphy, 1993; Vardi & Weitz, 2004) and has an impact on organizations in terms of loss of productivity, damage of property, increased turnover and absenteeism, and threatening the organization and its members' well-being (Bensimon, 1994;

Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Penney & Spector, 2005). More generally, although behaviors violating organizational and social norms in the short time may meet some organizational goals (for instance, bribery, deception, cheating or stealing for the benefit of one's own unit) and be justified on this premise, long term, these behaviors are costly and even threaten organizations' survival (Moore, 2008).

Previous studies on CWB focused on different situations or conditions that are, at least potentially, mighty stressors such as organizational constraints, unmanaged conflicts, work overload, and lack of autonomy and support (Chen & Spector, 1992; Fox & Spector, 1999; Fox et al., 2001; Miles, Borman, Spector, & Fox, 2002; Peters & O'Connor, 1980; Spector, Dwyer, & Jex, 1988). While the first three are tangible stressors, autonomy and support are situational resources; however, when they go missing, workers may perceive them as stressors. Moreover, research has shown that organizational stressors (such as organizational constraints) are more closely associated with CWB-O than CWB-I, whereas interpersonal conflict is more closely associated with CWB-I than CWB-O.

In line with the stress model (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkmann, 1984), the existence of one or more of these conditions is not *per se* sufficient to lead to CWB: a fundamental element is workers' appraisal of such conditions as stressful. Indeed, when a situation is perceived as stressful, this elicits negative feelings and workers may act aggressively as a consequence. In this sense, Spector's model highlighted the role of negative emotion and affect regulation on aggressive behavior according to the traditional hypothesis that frustrations and instigations may lead to harmful behaviors (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard et al., 1939). Thus, emotions play a pivotal role in the process of work stress, since they represent the immediate reactions to perceived stressful situations (Lazarus, 1999; Payne & Cooper, 2001) and facilitate behavioral responses. For these reasons, negative emotions

mediate the relation between stressors and CWB (Fida, Paciello, Tramontano, Barbaranelli, & Fontaine, 2012; Fox et al., 2001; Rodell & Judge, 2009).

Moral Disengagement and Deviant Conduct

MD refers to social cognitive processes by which a wrongful, deviant, and antisocial behavior is psychologically altered such that it is dissociated from these negative qualities that would serve to deter the actor from performing it. In particular, through MD, the moral content and ties usually associated with the deviant act are detached (or disengaged) from it, and consequently, carrying out that behavior in pursuit of one's own desire or goal is considered neither internally aversive nor obstructive by the actor. In a sense, it is a process by which the individual may rationalize, by either excuse or justification, the harm and wrong that the behavior necessarily serves so that the deterrent mechanisms (e.g., guilt) regarding the behavior are neutralized.

MD was originally introduced by Bandura (1990, 1991) to clarify how people, despite being morally committed to ethical principles, under specific situations may perform behaviors that violate shared norms even while continuing to profess the same principles and avoiding any feelings of conflict, guilt, shame, or remorse. MD affects the operation of moral standards in the regulation of conduct by deactivating internal control and therefore self-sanction, allowing people to avoid the emotional reactions related to specific moral content. Self-sanctions of deviant conduct may be deactivated by eight MD social-cognitive mechanisms (see Bandura, 1991) that, for instance, facilitate the cognitive restructuring of such acts to appear less harmful or unethical, e.g., being morally justified, labelled with euphemisms, or advantageously compared with other worse actions. Other mechanisms are aimed at minimizing the role of the actor, displacing or diffusing the responsibility of his/her actions among others (e.g., colleagues, supervisor). Finally, still other mechanisms suggest a

reframe of the effects of one's action, for instance, distorting or minimizing its consequences, belittling or dehumanizing the victims of its action, or attributing blame. Overall, MD may be considered a cognitive distortion (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995) through which individuals may view their own aggressive behavior and its negative consequences in a socially and morally favourable (or at least acceptable) way. This transformation of social understanding enhances the probability that the individual will act aggressively (Crane-Ross, Tisak, & Tisak, 1998; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997) without requiring the abandonment of shared personal and social norms.

A large body of research has demonstrated the disinhibitory power of MD and its strong associations with several manifestations of aggressive behavior as well as other forms of deviant conduct across different contexts (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Caprara, & Zsolnai, 2000; Detert, Trevino, & Sweitzer, 2008; Fida et al., 2012; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Specifically, in explaining deviant conduct in organizations, several studies have attested to the role of MD in the performance of various behaviors that violate social and organizational norms, for example, corporate transgression and organizational corruption (Bandura et al., 2000; Barsky, 2011; Barsky, Islam, Zyphur, & Johnson, 2006; Moore, 2008), violations of legal and moral rules in producing harmful practices and products (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001), violation of safety rules (Barbaranelli & Perna, 2004), and "crimes of obedience"¹ (Beu & Buckley, 2004; Hinrichs, 2007). Moreover, researchers have focused on the role of MD in ethical decision-making in organizational contexts (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Pauli & Arthur, 2006; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006).

Furthermore, some contributions underlined that specific conditions may facilitate the activation of these mechanisms. For example, higher levels of MD have been associated with the experience of negative emotions such as anxiety or irritability (Caprara et al., 2012) and

the perception of organizational climate as less favorable, leading to lower levels of job satisfaction (Claybourn, 2011). Therefore, when people are negatively activated, MD can lead them to perceive the adoption of unethical behavior as an appropriate strategy to cope with stressful situations (Paciello, Fida, Cerniglia, Tramontano, & Cole, 2012). In this sense, MD may be an effective protection strategy that is useful in stressful job situations to cope with negative reactions and avoid moral responsibility toward others (including social organizations), providing the cognitive framework in which CWB appears appropriate.

Aims and Hypotheses

The general aim of the present study was to present the work MD scale and integrate this dimension in the stressor-emotion model of CWB to examine, in a large sample of employees, its role in translating negative emotional responses to stressors into deviant behaviors. Specifically, we posited that negative emotions elicited by the perception of job stressors on one hand facilitate the recourse to CWB and on the other hand activate mechanisms of MD that may free the way to CWB by transforming it into an acceptable behavior. More specifically, we expected that MD partially mediated the relation between negative emotions and CWB. Thus, we hypothesized that the more individuals react to job stressors with negative emotions, the more prominent MD will be in countenancing aggressive, wrongful behaviors, in turn leading to greater CWB. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies examining the role of MD in the stressor-emotion model of CWB.

As depicted in Figure 1, we had the following hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1: Job stressors are positively related to negative emotions. In particular, organizational constraints, quantitative workload, interpersonal conflict, and lack of decision latitude and social support are related to negative

emotions so that the higher the perceived stressors, the higher the negative emotional response.

2. Hypothesis 2: Negative emotions are positively related to both CWB-I and CWB-O. In particular, employees are more likely to engage in both CWB-I and CWB-O in response to the experience of negative emotions associated with their jobs.
3. Hypothesis 3: MD is positively related to both CWB-I and CWB-O. In particular, the more employees disengage their moral control, the more they engage in both CWB-I and CWB-O.
4. Hypothesis 4: Negative emotions are positively related to MD. The more employees are negatively emotionally activated, the more they resort to MD in order to perform CWB, perceiving deviant conduct as an appropriate strategy to cope with stressors.
5. Hypothesis 5: Negative emotions mediate the relation between job stressors and both CWB-I and CWB-O.
6. Hypothesis 6: MD partially mediates the relation between negative emotions and both CWB-I and CWB-O.

In testing our hypotheses, we considered gender as a covariate for all variables, as previous studies have shown that females are more vulnerable to negative (Newmann, 1986; Smith & Reise, 1998), whereas males are generally more prone to deviant behavior and MD (Archer, 2004; Bettencourt & Miller, 1996).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 1,147 (53.5% women) Italian working adults with a mean age of 40 years ($SD = 11$). They were employed in a broad range of industries, from healthcare to sales

and retail to manufacturing, mainly in the private sector (62.6%). The majority (62.3%) had a high school education, 30% had a bachelor's degree or higher, and the remaining participants had lower educational qualifications (7.2%). As pertaining to employment contract type, 68.7% were permanent employees, 12.2% were temporary employees, 15.7% had other types of contracts, and 3.4% of respondents did not indicate the typology of their contract. The mean organizational tenure was 16 years ($SD = 11$), and on average, participants had held their positions (at the time of the study) for 10 years ($SD = 10$). We accessed a convenience sample of employees recruited by a group of 15 bachelor's-trained psychology students as part of their bachelor's thesis. Each employee filled in the questionnaire individually and returned it the same day they received it. Before starting, we explained to them that their responses would be absolutely confidential and that the research was not commissioned by the organization for which they worked. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the university to which the first author is affiliated. Participants were not paid for their participation in this study.

Measures

The anonymous self-report survey included measures of job stressors, negative emotions in response to work, CWB, and MD.

Interpersonal conflict. This was measured by the Italian version of the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS) (Barbaranelli, Fida e Gualandri, 2013; Fida et al., 2012; Spector & Jex, 1998). This scale is a four-point continuous scale measuring the amount of conflict or discord experienced by an individual at work. Respondents were asked how often they get into arguments at work and how often other people at work are rude to, yell at, and/or do nasty things to them (item example: "How often do other people yell at you at work?").

Response options were presented on a five-point continuous scale ranging from *less than once*

per month or never to several times per day, wherein higher scores indicate more conflict.

The internal consistency for the ICAWS in the current sample was .71.

Organizational constraints. These were measured with the Italian version of the Organizational Constraints Scale (OCS) (Barbaranelli et al., 2013; Fida et al., 2012; Spector & Jex, 1998). This scale is an eleven-item continuous scale measuring events or situations at work that interfere with task performance. Respondents were presented with a list of situational constraints based on constraint areas identified by Peters and O'Connor (1980) and were asked to indicate how often they found it difficult or impossible to do their job because of each constraint (constraint example: "Lack of equipment or supplies"). Response options were presented in a five-point format ranging from *less than once per month or never* to *several times per day*. The alpha reliability coefficient for the OCS in the current sample was .89.

Workload was measured by the Italian version of the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI; Fida et al., 2012; Spector & Jex, 1998). This scale is a five-item continuous scale measuring the quantity and speed of work carried out by the respondents. Participants rated their responses on a five-point rating scale ranging from *less than once per month or never* to *several times per day* to items such as "How often does your job require you to work very fast?" or "How often does your job require you to work very hard?". Higher scores represent elevated workloads. The alpha reliability coefficient was .86.

Lack of job decision latitude. This was measured by three items from the Italian version of the Job Content Questionnaire (Baldasseroni, Camerino, Cenni, Cesana, Fattorini, et al., 2001; Karasek, Brisson, Kawakami, Houtman, Bongers, et al., 1998). Participants responded on a five-point scale ranging from *never or almost never* to *very often or always* (e.g., "The job allows opportunity for me to develop my own special abilities"). The alpha reliability

coefficient was .65. Items were reversed so that the higher the score, the higher the lack of decision latitude.

Lack of social support. This was measured by three items from the Italian version of the Job Content Questionnaire (Baldasseroni et al., 2001; Karasek et al., 1998). Participants responded on a five-point scale ranging from *never or almost never* to *very often or always* to items referring to both co-workers' and supervisors' support, such as "People I work with are competent in doing their jobs." The alpha reliability coefficient was .75. Items were reversed so that the higher the score, the higher the lack of social support.

Negative emotions. These were measured by the Italian translation of the 17 items included in the Job-Related Affective Well-Being Scale (JAWS) (Fida et al., 2012; Van Katwyk, Fox, Spector, & Kelloway, 2000). Each item is an emotion, and respondents were asked how often they experienced each at work over the prior 30 days. Examples of items are "angry," "furious," "depressed," "frustrated, and "anxious." Response options were presented in a five-point format ranging from *almost never* to *extremely often or always*. The negative emotions score was obtained by summing scores on the items. The alpha reliability coefficient was .90.

Counterproductive workplace behavior. This was measured by an abridged version of the Italian version of the Counterproductive Work Behavior Checklist (CWB-C) (Barbaranelli et al., 2013; Spector et al., 2006). This scale is a 30-item continuous scale measuring a wide range of CWB. Participants were asked to indicate how often they enacted each of the listed behaviors in their present job. Response options were presented in a five-point format ranging from *never* to *every day*. Higher scores indicate higher levels of CWB. The CWB provided two scores for behaviors that targeted individuals (CWB-I) (e. g., stole something from a person at work, did something to make a person at work look bad, insulted someone about his or her job performance) and behaviors that targeted the organization (CWB-O) (e.g., put in to be paid more hours than worked, purposely did work incorrectly, stole something belonging

to an employer). The CWB-C demonstrated good internal consistency for both the CWB-I and CWB-O dimensions, with alpha reliability coefficients of .89 and .79, respectively.

Work moral disengagement. This was assessed by a new scale designed for the scope of this research. The starting points for the construction of this scale were as follows: 1) the scale developed by Bandura and colleagues (1996) within the domain of antisocial behavior, 2) the 10-item scale developed by Barsky and colleagues (2006), 3) the scale developed by Barbaranelli and Perna (2004), and 4) two focus groups with different employees (30 students that work at least 20 hours per week). We came up with a scale including 24 items. Participants responded on a five-point scale (from *agree not at all* to *completely agree*).

Data Analysis and Results

Preliminary Analysis on Work MD Scale

We initially examined the dimensionality of the MD scale by means of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Consistent with previous studies (see Bandura et al., 1996; Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009; Fida et al., 2012; Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004), we hypothesized a one-factor solution. Because several items presented a deviation from the normal distribution, a CFA was performed using robust maximum likelihood parameter estimates, with standard errors and the chi-square test statistic corrected using the Satorra-Bentler approach. This model fits the data ($\chi^2 = 242.10$, $df = 82$, $p < .001$, CFI = .90; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .041, SRMR = .038, WRMR = .672), reproducing with a good approximation the covariances among the items of the scale (Table 1). The Cronbach's reliability coefficient was .89.

Table 1

Descriptive Analysis of the Study Variables

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for all studied variables are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Analyses showed that all of the stressors correlated with each other with the following exceptions: 1) lack of decision latitude, which correlated only with workload and the lack of social support; and 2) lack of social support, which did not correlate with workload. Furthermore, while all stressors correlated with negative emotions only organizational constraints and the lack of social support correlated with MD. Negative emotions were significantly associated with MD. Overall, both CWB-I and CWB-O significantly correlated with all stressors; the only exception was that CWB-O did not correlate with interpersonal conflict. Finally, both negative emotions and MD correlated with both CWB-I and CWB-O.

Structural equation model

To test our hypothesis about the process from job stressors to CWB through negative emotions and MD, we implemented our theoretical model (see Figure 1) within the structural equations modeling framework and used gender as a covariate. This powerful statistical model allows us to investigate the mediating role of negative emotions and MD, which simultaneously acts as a dependent variable with respect to stressors and as an independent variable with respect to both CWB-I and CWB-O. In particular, we used the indirect effect test with the bootstrap procedure (MacKinnon, 2008) to compute the confidence interval of each effect. The analyses were performed using Mplus 6.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998- 2010).

We used the maximum likelihood estimation of parameters for handling missing data (Schafer & Graham, 2002) under the assumption that the data are missing at random (Arbuckle, 1996). Before proceeding with the analysis, we ascertained the normality of the variables. Due to the non-normality of some measures (CWB-I and CWB-O), we computed the inverse of CWB-I and the logarithm of CWB-O to normalize these variables, as suggested by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). The skewness and kurtosis of the computed outcomes varied from .69 for CWB-O to 2.45 for CWB-I. Following Bollen (1989), all of the included dimensions were posited as a “single-indicator” latent variable. To take into account measurement error, and for the purpose of obtaining more precise estimates of structural parameters, error variance for each single indicator was fixed at one minus the sample reliability estimate of the variable multiplied by its sample variance. Since there was non-normality of CWB variables even after their transformation in inverse and logarithm, we used the *Mplus* MLMV method for parameters estimation, to correct standard errors and the chi-square test statistic for nonnormality.

The model specified in Figure 1 showed a good fit: $\chi^2(19) = 61.64, p < .01$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .044 (CI = .032 - .057), $p = .76$; SRMR = .029. Nevertheless, an inspection of the modification indices revealed four significant direct effects from stressors on two dimensions of CWB (i.e., interpersonal conflict and lack of support on CWB-I; organizational constraints and lack of decision latitude on CWB-O) and a direct effect of the lack of social support on MD. The four direct effects on CWB were in conceptual accord with the literature on the influence of stressors on CWB (Spector & Fox, 2005). Moreover, the effect of the lack of social support on MD is in line with what Detert and colleagues (2008) suggested on the antecedents of MD related to social context in organization. Therefore, we decided to revise the model (Fig. 2) to include these five new parameters and to test a more parsimonious model fixing non-significant parameters to zero. This model provided an excellent fit to the

data, as revealed by multiple fit indices: $\chi^2(17) = 21.40$, $p = .21$; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .015 (CI = .000 - .032), $p = 1.00$; SRMR = .017. An alternative model testing the process by inverting the process from negative emotions to MD did not fit the data: $\chi^2(18) = 222.35$, $p < .01$; CFI = .84; RMSEA = .100 (CI = .088 - .111), $p < .001$; SRMR = .058.

Figure 2

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, interpersonal conflict, organizational constraints, workload, and lack of social support significantly and positively affected negative emotions. Furthermore, as hypothesized, none of the stressors significantly affected MD, with the exception of the lack of social support, despite a low beta coefficient.

The results of our model partially supported Hypotheses 2 and 3. In particular, negative emotions significantly influenced only CWB-O with a low beta coefficient, whereas MD significantly influenced both CWB-O and CWB-I. As expected (Hypothesis 4), negative emotions significantly and positively affected MD.

Finally, with regard to Hypotheses 5 and 6, the posited model assumed that stressors would have indirectly affected both CWB-O and CWB-I by influencing negative emotions and MD. As shown in Figure 2, only a partial mediation was confirmed. Table 2 presents the estimates of indirect effects and their bootstrap confidence intervals. In particular, some stressors influenced both CWB-I and CWB-O both directly and indirectly. Interpersonal conflict influenced CWB-I both directly ($\beta = .16$) and indirectly through negative emotions and MD ($\beta = .03$). Similarly, the lack of social support influenced CWB-I both directly ($\beta = .07$) and indirectly through MD and through both negative emotions and MD ($\beta = .04$, $\beta = .03$).

respectively). Organizational constraints influenced CWB-O both directly ($\beta = .12$) and indirectly through negative emotions ($\beta = -.02$) and both negative emotions and MD ($\beta = -.024$). Finally, lack of decision latitude directly influenced CWB-O ($\beta = .07$).

Table 3

Finally, with regard to the effect of gender as a covariate, the results attested to some gender differences. In particular, males scored higher in MD ($\beta = -.11$), whereas females scored higher on negative emotions ($\beta = .15$) and on quantitative workload ($\beta = .08$). Considering that gender was scored zero for males and one for females, a negative beta indicates higher scores for males and a positive beta indicates higher scores for females. Overall, the model explained 29% of the variance in CWB-I and 20% of the variance in CWB-O. Stressors explained 31% of the variance in negative emotions.

Discussion

The results of the current study suggest that MD plays a critical role in mediating the relation between negative emotions in reaction to job stressors and both CWB-I and CWB-O. Specifically, the more workers react with negative emotions to work situations that interfere with their work goals and/or job performance, the more they activate cognitive maneuvers that rationalize unethical, wrongful, and deviant behaviors and in turn legitimize enacting CWB. Indeed, although CWB violates significant social and organizational norms, it can be restructured by MD and become an acceptable behavioral response to strain (Robinson & Bennet, 1995; Spector & Fox, 2005). This allows employees to reduce the emotionally

unpleasant condition generated by work stressors or perceived wrongs without abandoning personal and shared norms, values, and models.

The concurrent examination of the roles of both emotional reactions and social-cognitive mechanisms associated with job stressors allowed us to better clarify the relation between emotion and action. Indeed, the inclusion of MD within the stressor-emotion model substantially reduces the association of negative emotions with CWB-O, and moreover the direct effect of negative emotions on CWB-I becomes non-significant. The weaker influence of emotional reaction on CWB suggests that in the work context, where norms and models are acquired and shared, social cognitive processes are necessary mediators for converting negative emotions into aggressive and deviant behavior. In the organizational social scenario, workers that are usually ethically committed need to rationalize and justify sanctionable and undesirable behaviors through social cognitive processes triggered by emotional reactions related to stressors. MD captures this “cold” cognitive process that may give access to a broader repertoire of misconducts, including behaviors that are potentially more harmful, less predictable, and more dangerous to the organization. This process may be particularly valid when the misconduct is potentially dangerous and harmful for other people (CWB-I) rather than being for a more abstract and impersonal entity such as the “organization as a whole” (CWB-O).

In line with Spector and Fox’s hypothesis, our results support the posited role played by stressors in eliciting negative emotions, with the only exception being the lack of decision latitude. Here, we want to focus our discussion in particular on the two specific stressors we examined: lack of support and lack of decision latitude. As stated initially, these are generally considered as resources rather than as stressors *per se*. However, in our study, we examined the plausible negative impact that their absence may cause. Our results suggested that the lack of social support was associated with both negative emotions and with MD (although

modestly). This finding was not so surprising, since it is plausible that the perception of organizational context as unsupportive may reduce empathy and therefore facilitate the activation of cognitive processes aimed at reducing guilt or shame that would deter resorting to harmful actions toward the organization and its stakeholders. These results are also in line with the findings from studies by Detert and colleagues (2008) and by Paciello and colleagues (2012) that highlight the role of the quality of social ties in influencing individual choices to perform harmful behaviors. Specifically, they found that empathy—an individual affective competence to understand and to be concerned with others' feelings—was negatively related to MD, which in turn influenced unethical decision-making. The results related to decision latitude were not in line with our expectations. This dimension refers to work autonomy and job control and, as suggested by Spector and colleagues (Fox & Spector, 2006; Spector & Fox, 2005), may be a moderator of the relation between stressors and negative emotion and between negative emotion and CWB rather than an independent variable. Moreover, the lack of decision latitude may play a different role in relation to specific characteristics of role and organizational position occupied by workers. Along the same lines, social support could actually represent a moderator of the stressor-strain relation. Indeed, as theorized by Karasek and in line with the job demand-resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), social resources can mitigate the negative effect of stressors. Future studies should specifically investigate and examine more in depth the role of these dimensions in the process leading to CWB in order to identify possible organizational resources that can contrast and prevent recourse to unethical and deviant behaviors at work.

In terms of the posited model, in line with previous findings, some stressors directly influenced CWB above and beyond their indirect effect through negative emotions and MD. Moreover, stressors tended to be mainly associated with a specific CWB. In particular, interpersonal conflict and lack of support were principally related to CWB-I, whereas

organizational constraints and lack of decision latitude were principally related to CWB-O. Hence, on the one hand, stressors referring to the quality of interpersonal relationships with colleagues and supervisors tended to foster misconducts oriented toward damaging organizational stakeholders. On the other hand, stressors referring to work management and planning tended to foster misconducts oriented toward damaging the organization as a whole.

Overall, this study extends the findings that emerged in the literature, which frequently underline the relevance of MD in the unethical decision-making process (Barsky, 2011; Detert et al., 2008; Moore, 2008, 2012). The inclusion of MD in the stressor-emotion model represents an attempt to integrate two important traditions of research on aggressive behavior: the frustration-aggression hypothesis, focusing on the effects that negative emotions and affect regulation exert on aggression; and social cognitive theory, addressing processes that promote or justify aggression. This integrated approach may be highly productive and promising for defining organizational strategies aimed at discouraging and contrasting CWB. Indeed, unlike emotions, MD mechanisms are susceptible to the reciprocal influences of individuals and context and can be learned. This means that these cognitive maneuvers may likely become crystallized over time (Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, & Caprara, 2008) in a context where workers repeatedly have to deal with job stressors, legitimizing recourse to aggressive and transgressive behaviors. Furthermore, it is plausible that a context in which misconduct is frequently enacted through moral-cognitive distortions without being sanctioned may in turn promote a “morally disengaged culture” in which these mechanisms can be socialized, learned, and activated, facilitating recourse to CWB (Farnese, Tramontano, Fida, & Paciello, 2011; Gino & Galinsky, 2012). Therefore, within a socio-cognitive perspective, it is plausible that organizations in which an increasing number of employees tend to adopt MD over time will assimilate a cultural model coherent with the adoption of unethical behaviors. For instance, if the cognitive justification of wrongful acts is the easiest

and least costly answer to job stressors, it may produce a “routinization” of misconducts both in individuals, in workgroups, and finally within the organization as a whole (see Moore, 2008). This could be even more likely if leaders or direct supervisors exert a modeling function in this direction. Complementarily, organizational cultures may enhance the use of MD processes, for instance, disregarding adverse consequences by not sanctioning, or even worse, promoting them as long as they are coherent with implicit values of the organization (e.g., when diffusing responsibility is in line with an unethical corporate goal, or when moral justifications help the company to pursue competitive corruption strategies). Some authors highlight that the way performance objectives are set defines different contexts that are more or less favorable to deceptive or harmful behaviors, according to the degree to which they are “reframed” as serving worthy purposes, making them personally and socially acceptable (Barsky, 2008; Barky et al., 2006). Further, the management may produce organizational practices or may promote the creation of shared beliefs about the weak morality within the work context, facilitating widespread recourse to MD (see White et al., 2009).

It is plausible that CWB could be the result of an unethical decision-making process derived from a distorted interpretation and application of shared norms. In this vein, organizational culture may play a role in influencing and reinforcing cognitive mechanisms such as MD through which individuals attribute meaning to their work experience and relations. For instance, organizational culture may promote a system of beliefs about human relations that legitimizes dehumanization practices. Similarly, a gap between explicit and implicit norms may explain the adoption of moral justification mechanisms that allow people to consider personally and socially acceptable a detrimental or immoral style of conduct. However, cultural dimensions (e. g., collectivism; cf. Jackson, Colquitt, Wesson, & Zapata-Phelan, 2006) may on the contrary facilitate the internalization and adoption of social norms, restricting the use of MD mechanisms. In this sense, organizational culture, by conveying and

reinforcing coherent managerial practices (reward systems, leaders' behaviors, etc.), guides the sense-making processes that orient and legitimize ethical decision-making in work contexts. At the same time, individuals who misbehave without being sanctioned or even gaining opportunistic advantages from their conduct may become a model for teammates. From a longstanding theoretical perspective, these negative models may make easier and more obvious the adoption of MD, contributing, in turn, to the creation of a "morally disengaged culture." Future research should focus on the link between collective and individual processes for interpreting interiorized norms that lead to the adoption of both prosocial and antisocial behaviors in the work context to deeply investigate their possible reciprocal influences.

Undoubtedly, the cross-sectional nature of our data makes it more difficult for us to infer causal relations among variables considered, although the posited model is strongly grounded in theory and prior research. Nevertheless, future longitudinal and experimental research should be implemented to confirm and strengthen the model herein examined. Another limitation of this research is the utilization of self-report instruments. However, it should be noted that Fox, Spector, Goh, and Bruursema (2007) demonstrated the convergence between self- and peer-reports of the majority of stressor-emotion model measures. Finally, the stressors and the negative emotions included in the model only explain a reduced percentage of variance of MD. Future studies should include further determinants of MD more related to social and cultural aspects to enable a better understanding of the process.

Conclusion

The results of our study highlight the role of MD in better understanding the processes involved in the emergence and maintenance of CWB, which is an increasingly pervasive and costly phenomenon (Coffin, 2003; Greenberg, 1990; Mount et al., 2006; Murphy, 1993; Vardi

& Weitz, 2004) impacting organizations in terms of loss of productivity, damage of property, increased turnover, and absenteeism (Bensimon, 1994; Einarsen et al., 2003; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Penney & Spector, 2005). Specifically, this study extends previous research on the stressor emotion model of CWB that has mainly investigated the role of emotions within the relation between work environment and CWB. In particular, this study suggests that CWB may have both “hot” emotional and “cold” social cognitive triggers it. Moreover, this study suggests the importance of integrating different theoretical approaches to better understand individual behaviors in social context. MD has received widespread attention in the study of deviant behavior, and this study has promising potential within the organizational literature for explaining the process leading to CWB.

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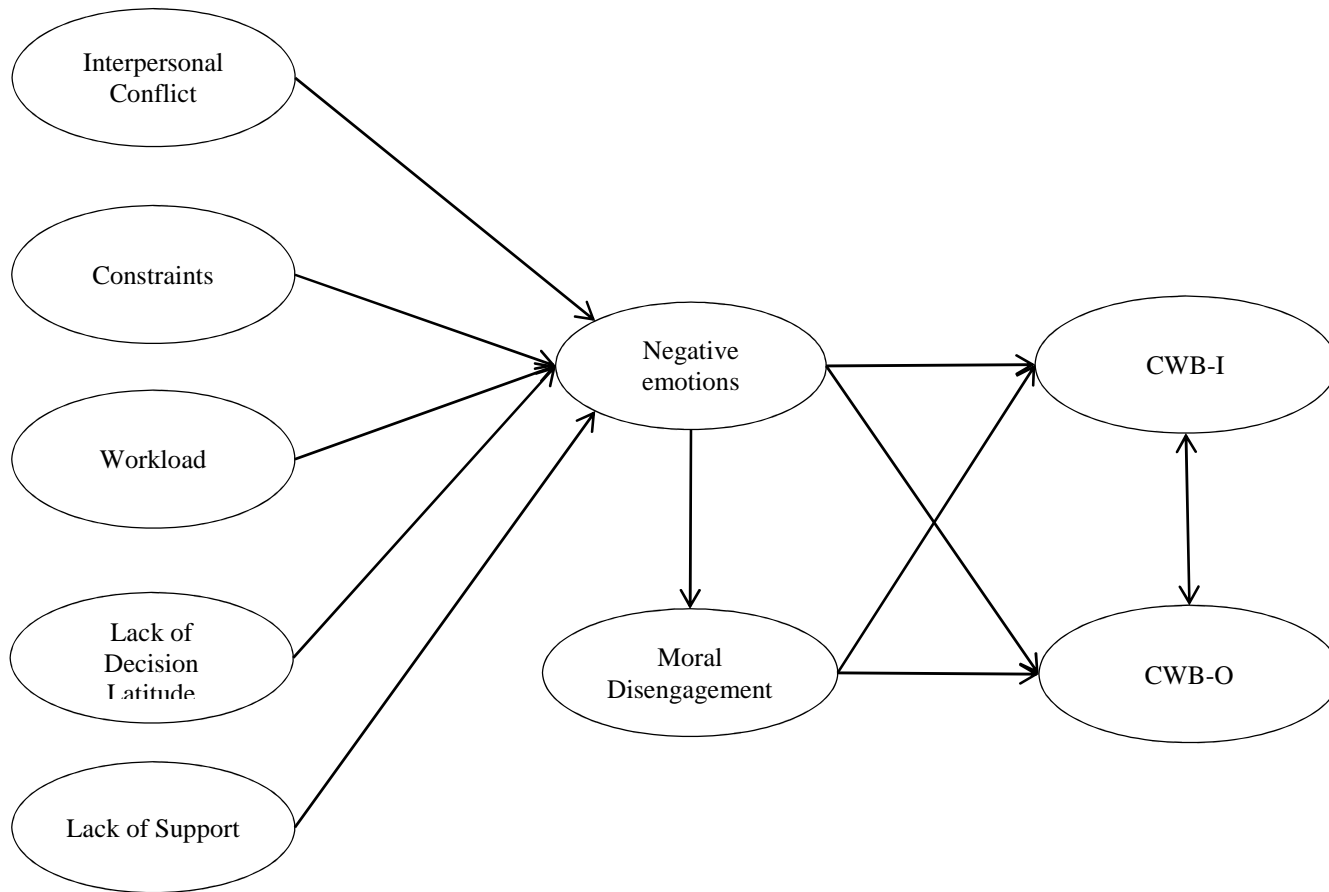
Footnote.

1. Type of unethical behavior where followers are influenced by a leader to engage in behavior they would otherwise consider unethical (Hinrichs, 2007).

Figure capture

Figure 1. Theoretical model of relations among stressors, negative emotions, MD and CWB

Figure 2. Results of the posited model: The meditational role of MD in the stressor-emotion model



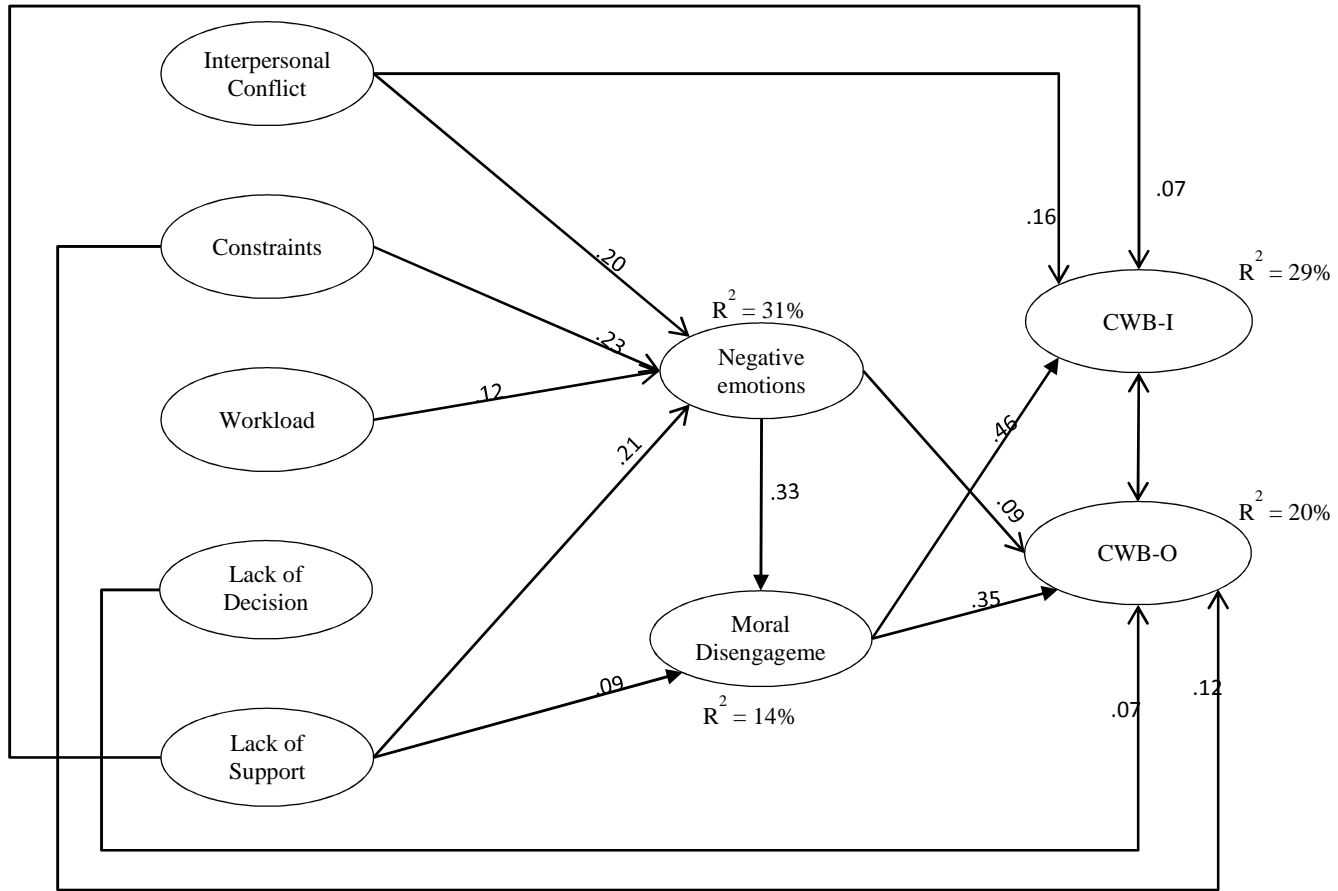


Table 1. Work MD scale: items and results of CFA

Work MD scale		
Italian version	English version	Loadings
1. Non c'è niente di male ad appropriarsi del lavoro di un collega se lui è poco attento e non se ne accorge	There's nothing wrong with appropriating the work of a colleague if he/she is careless and does not notice it.	.544
2. Se dall'azienda sparisce ogni giorno molto materiale non è colpa di chi lo sottrae ma dell'azienda che non adotta nessuna misura preventiva	If things disappear every day from the company it is not the fault of the people who take them but of the company itself who do nothing to prevent it.	.541
3. Un dipendente che suggerisce solamente di infrangere le regole non dovrebbe essere biasimato se altri dipendenti seguono la sua indicazione e lo fanno*	An employee who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if other employees go ahead and do it.*	.488
4. Un dipendente che si fa timbrare il cartellino da un collega per uscire a sbrigare necessità personali non è da biasimare, se anche tutti i suoi colleghi lo fanno	It is acceptable for an employee to leave work without permission for personal interests if other employees do the same.	.567
5. Un dipendente non può essere incolpato se spreca materiale di proprietà della sua azienda, se l'azienda non fa nulla per controllare	An employee cannot be blamed for wasting organizational supplies if the organization does nothing to control.	.645
6. E' giusto "gonfiare" la verità per tirar fuori dai guai la propria azienda*	It is alright to exaggerate the truth to keep your company out of trouble.*	.524
7. Assentarsi spesso dal posto di lavoro non è poi così grave, dal momento che molta gente viene al lavoro e poi non combina nulla	Being absent from work frequently is acceptable since many people at work are not productive anyway.	.657
8. Non vi è motivo che i colleghi si offendano se vengono presi in giro al lavoro, perché anche questo è un modo di interessarsi a loro	There is no reason that colleagues should be offended if they are teased at work because this is simply an expression of others showing interest in them.	.632
9. E' giusto che un lavoratore si assenti per malattia, se questo è il modo per allontanarsi da un ambiente di lavoro ostile	It's all right to be absent from work due to illness, when the employee uses this as a way to cope with his/her hostile work environment.	.535
10. Impegnarsi meno degli altri sul lavoro non è poi così grave, se si pensa a tutti i dipendenti che non si impegnano affatto	Doing less work when you are at your job is not that bad considering the fact that many employees do not work at all.	.738
11. Se un lavoratore danneggia l'azienda non adempiendo ai propri compiti contrattuali, la colpa è dell'azienda stessa che non è stata in grado di selezionarlo e di formarlo adeguatamente	When an employee damages the company by not doing the job it is the fault of the company itself for not doing a good job at selecting and training employees.	.547
12. Un dipendente non deve essere biasimato se fa qualcosa di sbagliato per conto della sua azienda*	An employee should not be blamed for the wrongdoing done on behalf of the organization.*	.558
13. Quei colleghi che vengono derisi al lavoro di solito se lo meritano	Colleagues who are mocked at work usually deserve it.	.575
14. Non bisogna farsi troppi problemi ad assentarsi dal lavoro quando se ne ha bisogno, perché tanto lo fanno tutti	It is not a big deal to be absent from work since everyone does it.	.612

15. Se la maggioranza dei colleghi si impegna poco non c'è motivo perché un dipendente si comporti diversamente	If the majority of colleagues do not work hard enough, there is no reason why an employee should act differently.	.636
16. E' giusto forzare la verità per proteggere la propria azienda*	It is alright to stretch the truth to protect your company.*	.506
17. Usufruire impropriamente delle risorse messe a disposizione dall'azienda non è poi così grave, visto che ci sono dirigenti che si appropriano indebitamente dei capitali degli azionisti	Using organizational resources for inappropriate purposes is not shameful since managers embezzle stakeholders' money.	.671
18. Danneggiare le cose dell'azienda non è molto grave se si pensa a quante cose illegali commettono i dirigenti	Damaging an organization's property is acceptable when you consider how many illegal actions are committed by managers.	.732
19. Non è grave restare indietro con il proprio lavoro dal momento che lo fanno tutti	It's not a big deal if you get behind in your work since everyone does it.	.646
20. E' normale che un dipendente usufruisca impropriamente delle risorse che l'azienda gli mette a disposizione se nessuno impedisce che ciò avvenga	It's ok that an employee improperly benefits from work resources if no one prevents it happening.	.690
21. Se al lavoro i dipendenti battono la fiacca e producono poco è colpa dei loro superiori o dell'azienda	If the employee is lazy and does little work, only the bosses and company are to blame.	.490
22. Insultare o trattare male dei colleghi spesso è soltanto un modo per dare loro una lezione	Insulting or treating colleagues badly is just teaching them a lesson.	.618
23. Non c'è nulla di male nel tenere disordinata o sporca la propria postazione di lavoro quando lo fanno tanti colleghi	There is nothing wrong if an employee's work area is sloppy or dirty if his/her colleagues have theirs the same way.	.740
24. Se i dipendenti pensano di non andare incontro a sanzioni non dovrebbero essere biasimati se fanno azioni sbagliate	Employees cannot be blamed for wrongdoing if they know they will not be punished.	.613

Note. * items in bold are from Barsky 2006

Table 2. Descriptive statistics among all study variables for the total sample

	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Constraints	1139	2.32	.78	-							
2.Conflict	1140	2.10	.72	.42**	-						
3.Workload	1140	3.40	.83	.38**	.31**	-					
4.Lack of decision latitude	1145	3.38	.59	.10	.04	.13*	-				
5.Lack of Social Support	1145	3.65	.70	.29**	.21**	.02	.27**	-			
6.Negative Emotions	1145	2.09	.66	.39**	.29**	.18**	.30**	.29**	-		
7.Moral Disengagement	1143	1.59	.48	.26**	.09	-.03	.14	.12*	.15**	-	
8.CWB-O	1145	1.40	.41	.21**	.07	.12*	.16**	.20**	.32**	.37**	-
9.CWB-I	1145	1.20	.33	.19**	.14*	.11*	.14**	.22**	.26**	.38**	.60**

Note. ** significant at the $p < .001$; * significant at the $p < .05$

Correlations for males are reported below the diagonal while correlation for females are reported above the diagonal.

Table 3. Indirect estimates and bootstrap confidence interval of indirect effects from stressors to both CWB-I and CWB-O

Indirect Effect	Estimate	CI
Interp.conflict →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-I	.03	.014 ~ .046
Workload →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-I	.02	.007 ~ .030
Constraint →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-I	.04	.017 ~ .032
Lack of Support→Neg.Em →MD →CWB-I	.03	.015 ~ .047
Lack of Support→MD →CWB-I	.04	.004 ~ .086
Interp.conflict →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-O	.02	.009 ~ .036
Interp.conflict →Neg.Em→CWB-O	.02	.002 ~ .033
Workload →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-O	.01	.005 ~ .023
Workload →Neg.Em →CWB-O	.01	.001 ~ .020
Constraint →Neg.Em →MD →CWB-O	.03	.012 ~ .041
Constraint →Neg.Em →CWB-O	.02	.002 ~ .038
Lack of Support→Neg.Em →MD →CWB-O	.02	.011 ~ .036
Lack of Support→ Neg.Em →CWB-O	.02	.002 ~ .034
Lack of Support → MD → CWB-O	.03	-.005 ~ .067

Note. Significant estimates are highlighted in bold. CI = 95% bootstrap confidence interval