The People Really Do Make the Place: Effects of Peers’ Personality on Individuals

Performance and Social Behavior

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A growing body of research increasingly supports the view that having a best friend at work is a key indicator of engagement and that employees often search for a sense of community in the workplace. Indeed, two recent meta-analyses that incorporated information from hundreds of studies showed that social relationships were strongly related to central organizational variables of interest such as absenteeism, turnover intentions, job satisfaction, organizational commitment (Humphrey, Nahrgand & Morgeson, 2007), effort reduction, and individual performance (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). While scholars are starting to recognize that work is intimately intertwined with social relationships, most research in this area is still conducted at the individual and not at the interpersonal level. For example, organizational research often treats personality as if it is a property of inanimate objects in that it only accounts for how “fixed properties” of single individuals influence behavior. This approach is similar to many dominant psychological theories that treat perception, including social perception, as emanating from objects (Fiske, 1992), but it does not account for how the relationships between the traits of actively interacting individuals affect behaviors.

Clearly, observations and measurements of the personality of single individuals cannot fully capture the dynamic nature of the personality effects of interacting individuals on behaviors. For example, if an individual is asked to rate the performance of a peer, this performance rating may be partially due to the peer, but it may also be due to the individual who is rating the peer, and due to the relationships between the rating individual and the peer. Thus, it is not likely that only the personality of the rated peer will affect these rating. Instead, the personality of the rating individual, and more importantly, the interactions between the personalities of the rating individual and the rated peer should affect this performance evaluation.
Yet, we could only find three studies (i.e., Glomb & Welsh, 2005; Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002; Strauss, Barrick, & Connerley, 2001) that investigated these rich and dynamic effects.

In this study, we specifically explore how the personality of focal individuals, their peers, and the interaction between the personality of the focal individuals and their peers interact to affect peers behaviors. In considering which traits are most theoretically important for social interactions, there is an extensive literature suggesting that two of the Big Five traits, extraversion and agreeableness, are particularly relevant to interpersonal processes and these traits comprise what is termed the Interpersonal Circumplex. Thus, we test the effects of the extraversion and agreeableness of peers, focal individuals, and their interactions on evaluative, cognitive, and behavioral variables in two field and one laboratory studies.

In the first study we investigate how individuals’ extraversion interacts with peers’ agreeableness and extraversion to influence the performance evaluation individuals give to their peers and their perceptions of the contribution of their peers to a group effort. In the second study we test some hypothesized mediating processes that may explain the effects found in Study 1. Specifically, we test whether the interaction between individuals personalities affect the attributions people make about their peers and their willingness to interact with their peers. In the third study we replicate the results of the first two studies in a lab setting that allow us to directly test whether the processes tested in Study 2 mediate the relationship found in Study 1. In this study we also investigate the effects of personality interactions on several other cognitions (i.e., accuracy of performance evaluations), emotions (i.e., hostility), and behaviors (i.e., pro-social behavior). We then discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these results.
References


