In the organizational setting, counterproductive work behaviour is defined as unproductive activities that are damaging to organizational goals. Examples of counterproductive behaviours include theft, destruction of property, misuse of company time or resources, unsafe behaviour, absenteeism, poor quality work, and alcohol or drug abuse. Evaluating counterproductive behaviour is difficult for researchers and organizations, because self-reports may be inflated out of a desire to appear productive, while supervisors may not be aware of the full extent of counterproductive behaviour. Little is known about how well ratings from different sources (self, supervisor, subordinate, peer) agree with one another. Some preliminary research has suggested that the personality trait known as conscientiousness (efficiency, organization, caution) and attitudes towards integrity may impact ratings of counterproductive behaviour. Additionally, the extent to which an individual engages in counterproductive work behaviours may impact his/her ratings of these behaviours in others.

What is this research about?

What did the researchers do?

108 Canadian undergraduate business students were randomly assigned to groups of five to six members, in which they completed weekly in-class assignments over a twelve-week period. During the last week of class, each student rated themselves and the other group members on four different counterproductive work behaviours, using a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (always). A total counterproductive behaviour score was then calculated, and ratings by group members were averaged to get a single peer-rating. Surveys were also given to each student to determine how high they rated on the conscientiousness trait and their attitudes towards integrity and honesty.

What you need to know:

There was low agreement between self- and peer-ratings of counterproductive work behaviour, with self-ratings reporting much lower levels of counterproductive behaviour. The rater’s own level of counterproductive performance impacted their ratings of others on this measure, suggesting that some peer ratings are less accurate than others.
What did the researchers find?
Self- and peer-ratings of counterproductive work behaviour were significantly different, with an average self-rating of 1.40, compared to an average peer-rating of 2.10. The researchers also found that the rater’s own level of counterproductive behaviour influenced their rating of others on this measure. More specifically, self- and peer-ratings of counterproductive behaviour were more likely to agree if both the rater and the person being rated exhibited similar levels of counterproductive behaviour. Therefore, the largest mismatches occurred when one scored high and the other scored low on counterproductive behaviour. Similarity in either conscientiousness or attitudes towards integrity did not lead to similarity in self- and peer-ratings.

How can you use this research?
Business and government organizations can use this research to better understand how peer- and self-ratings of counterproductive work behaviour differ, and how the rater’s own level of counterproductive behaviour can impact their ratings of others.

Management and organizational researchers can further this research by replicating this experiment in an organizational setting, comparing inter-rater agreement between other sources (for example, self-subordinate, self-supervisor, peer-supervisor), and considering a broader range of counterproductive behaviours.

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