

Conscientious, therefore engaged in work? Don't take it for granted: the moderating role of workplace mistreatment

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Abstract

Previous research on work engagement has mostly examined the relationship of personal resources and work characteristics with work engagement. In this study, the authors focus on the moderating role of one work characteristic, namely workplace mistreatment (i.e., abusive supervision and incivility), on the relationship between a personal resource (i.e., conscientiousness) and work engagement dimensions. Using a convenience sample of employees from various organizations, the authors found support for the hypotheses that abusive supervision and incivility moderated the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement. Specifically, the relationship between conscientiousness and two work engagement dimensions (dedication and absorption) is weaker for employees experiencing abusive supervision, whereas the relationship between conscientiousness and two work engagement dimensions (vigor and dedication) is weaker for employees experiencing incivility.

Keywords: work engagement, abusive supervision, incivility, moderation

Résumé

Des recherches antérieures au sujet de l'engagement en travail ont examiné la relation de ressources personnelles ou des caractéristiques du travail avec l'engagement en travail. Dans cette étude, les auteurs se concentrent sur le rôle de modérateur d'une caractéristique du travail, les mauvais traitements au lieu de travail (la direction abusive et l'incivilité) pour la relation entre une ressource personnelle (le caractère consciencieux) et les dimensions d'engagement en travail. En utilisant un échantillon de convenance d'employés de diverses organisations, les auteurs ont trouvé soutien pour les hypothèses que la direction abusive et l'incivilité modèrent la relation entre le caractère consciencieux et l'engagement. Plus précisément, les relations entre le caractère consciencieux et deux dimensions d'engagement en travail (le dévouement et l'absorption) ont été plus faible pour les employés qui connaissent direction abusive, alors que les relations entre le caractère consciencieux et deux dimensions d'engagement de travail (la vigueur et le dévouement) ont été plus faibles pour les employés qui connaissent l'incivilité.

Mots-clefs: engagement en travail, direction abusive, incivilité, modération

Rezumat

Cercetările anterioare asupra implicării în muncă (engl. work engagement) au analizat în principal relațiile acestea cu resurse personale și caracteristici ale mediului de lucru. În cadrul acestui studiu, autorii se concentrează pe analiza rolului de moderator al unei caracteristici din mediul de lucru: comportamente interpersonale inadecvate (comportamente abuzive ale supervisorului și comportamente lipsite de respect și considerație) pentru relația dintre o resursă personală (conștiințiozitatea) și dimensiunile implicării în muncă. Folosind un eșantion de conveniență format din angajați din mai multe organizații, autorii au verificat ipotezele conform cărora comportamentele abuzive ale supervisorului și comportamentele lipsite de respect și considerație au moderat relația dintre conștiințiozitate și implicarea în muncă. În mod specific, relația dintre conștiințiozitate

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și două dintre dimensiunile implicării în muncă (dedicarea și absorbirea) este mai slabă pentru angajații care sunt ținte ale comportamentului abuziv al supervisorului, în timp ce relația dintre conștiinciozitate și două dimensiuni ale implicării în muncă (energia și dedicarea) este mai slabă pentru angajații care sunt ținte ale comportamentelor lipsite de respect și considerație.

Cuvinte cheie: implicarea în muncă, comportamente abuzive ale supervisorilor, comportamente lipsite de respect și considerație.

Introduction

Work engagement is important for organizations since it predicts financial returns (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009), proactive behavior (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008; Sonnentag, 2003), service climate (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005), and in-role and discretionary work performance (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011). Conscientiousness, as a personal resource, was found to play an important role for work engagement (e.g., Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009). Having a strong sense of responsibility and being focused on their goals

(Costa & McCrae, 1992), conscientious employees are able and driven to channel their energy into work, therefore being more engaged. Recent studies started to test potential moderators (such as job demands/stressors) for the relationships between antecedents and work engagement (e.g., need for recovery and work engagement, Sonnentag, Mojza, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2012; job resources and work engagement, Hakkanen, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2005). Considerable attention was given to the role of demands which are related to the job itself (e.g., workload), with relatively little focus on interpersonal stressors in relation with work engagement (e.g., interpersonal conflicts at work, Sulea, Virga, Maricutoiu, Schaufeli, Zaborila Dumitru, & Sava, 2012). Considered an important interpersonal stressor (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langout, 2001), workplace mistreatment is an umbrella term that encompasses aversive interpersonal situations when individuals perceive they are not being fairly treated when performing their job (Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2009). In the present study we focus on two relevant forms of workplace mistreatment: *abusive supervision*, which has a range of negative effects for employees' well-being and performance (Tepper, 2000; Burton & Hoobler, 2006), and *incivility*, which is a type of mistreatment of low intensity, though a prevalent phenomenon in organizations (Cortina et al.,

2001). As stated earlier, there is a relevant connection between conscientiousness and work engagement, but it is not clear if this relationship preserves its strength when mistreatment is experienced at work. The aim of the present study is to analyze whether the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement is weakened by the experience of workplace mistreatment, abusive supervision and incivility, respectively. On one hand we seek to contribute to the work engagement literature by extending previous studies that have focused on job stressors as moderators for the relationship between antecedents and work engagement (e.g., Sonnentag et al., 2012). On the other hand we investigate how the experience of mistreatment affects engagement in ones work.

Conscientiousness and work engagement

Work engagement is defined as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). It is composed of three dimensions: *vigor*, which refers to the amount of energy invested in work, *dedication*, which refers to the enthusiasm and sense of being challenged by different tasks, and *absorption*, which refers to the total focus on work and difficulty in detaching from it (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Antecedents of work engagement include personal resources (e.g., conscientiousness, Kim et al., 2009), job resources (e.g., social support, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and also negative influences like job demands (e.g., interpersonal conflicts at work; Sulea et al., 2012). Within the Conservation of Resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989), resources are considered to play an important role in stress buffering, and fostering well-being (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Hobfoll, 1989). Halbesleben, Harvey, and Bolino (2009) argue that conscientiousness is a valuable personal resource because it has been linked to performance (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991), and also to extra-role performance, such

as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB; e.g., Organ and Ryan, 1995; Borman et al., 2001). *Conscientiousness*, as a personality feature, is characterized by responsibility, organization, dependability; persons that show a higher degree of conscientiousness have the capability of being persistent and of focusing on their goals (Costa & McCrae, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 2003). Previous studies have shown that conscientiousness is an important antecedent of work engagement (Inceoglu & Warr, 2012; Sulea et al., 2012). Kim and colleagues (2009) argue that conscientious employees are more likely to focus their energy into work because of a strong sense of responsibility, steadiness and organizational skills.

Workplace mistreatment as moderator for the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement

Workplace mistreatment is a broad term covering a wide range of negative physical and psychological interactions among people at the workplace. Some of the expressions of interpersonal mistreatment are listed by Tepper and Henle (2011, p.487). These are: "abusive supervision, bullying, incivility, interpersonal deviance, revenge, retaliation, social undermining, and victimization", referring not to physical, but to social or psychological aspects. The current paper focuses on two types of mistreatment: abusive supervision and incivility. *Abusive supervision* is defined as the subordinate's perception of the extent to which supervisors engage in a "sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision has a wide range of negative effects, such as employee turnover, lower job and life satisfaction, psychological distress, lower employee self-esteem, and, implicitly, a decrease in employee well-being and work performance (Tepper, 2000; Burton & Hoobler, 2006). Moreover, abusive supervision is considered one of the chronic stressors at work (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). *Incivility* is defined as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others." (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p.457). Incivility is one of the more insidious aspects of workplace mistreatment because the harmful intent is not clear to at least one of the parties involved. Its prevalence is rather high (e.g., two thirds of

American employees experience workplace incivility; Cortina et al., 2001) and it has undesirable consequences, such as employee turnover, while it also negatively affects employee's health and well-being, effort at work and performance (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004; Lim, Cortina & Magley, 2008; Porath & Pearson, 2010). Lazarus and Folkman (1984, as cited in Lim et al., 2008) describe the mechanisms through which stressors like incivility negatively affect health and well-being, on one hand arguing that hassles accumulating over time have an additive effect that can exhaust the individual and, on the other hand, that the individual evaluates a situation looking at its potential for harm, threat or challenge. Workplace mistreatment experiences, besides producing direct damage by itself, can also weaken the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement. Gilin Oore, Leblanc, Day, Leiter, Spence Laschinger, Price and Latimer (2010) argue for the moderating role of incivility from the perspective of COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001), considering that the presence of incivility negatively affects the support that colleagues give to one another, support that is relevant in obtaining resources. According to COR, the individual, when not confronted with stress and while striving for well-being, seeks to accumulate more resources. In the presence of stressors, the individual seeks to avoid losing resources. Within this reasoning, harmful, or potentially harmful interpersonal relationships at work can represent a threat to resources, such as social support at work, therefore significantly decreasing chances of experiencing well-being. Support from colleagues and support from supervisors were found to significantly relate to work engagement (e.g., Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008). Moreover, Gorgievski and Hobfoll (2008) argue that, for encouraging engagement, the prevention of resource loss is very important, and that resources, whether personal or interpersonal, can have either intrinsic or instrumental value. Being conscientious, having organizational skills and being dependable are characteristics that are valued by the person who has them, and also within the work environment. Resources like support from colleagues and supervisors contribute to the motivational process that leads to work engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Therefore, losing, or experiencing the threat of losing such resources due to mistreatment, could lower work engagement.

In sum, workplace mistreatment (i.e., harmful or potentially harmful interpersonal relations at work) can affect work engagement by diminishing or eliminating an important resource: social support from colleagues or supervisors and by acting as a powerful interpersonal demand and therefore negatively affecting engagement. Moreover, workplace mistreatment can affect the relation between personal resources (e.g., conscientiousness) and work engagement due to the fact that when social relations at work are impaired, so is the motivational process that leads to work engagement. Therefore we expect that:

Hypothesis 1a. *Abusive supervision and conscientiousness interact to influence work engagement in such a way that the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement dimensions (vigor, dedication and absorption) is weaker at higher levels of abusive supervision than at lower levels of abusive supervision.*

Hypothesis 1b. *Incivility and conscientiousness interact to influence work engagement so that the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement dimensions (vigor, dedication and absorption) is weaker at higher levels of incivility than at lower levels of incivility.*

Method

Sample

Three hundred participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire with measures of the variables in question. Two hundred twenty three employees (74% females) from various organizations (e.g., education, engineering) completed the survey, resulting in a 74.33 per cent response rate. The average age of participants is 37.24 (SD = 11.38) and the mean tenure in the organization was 11.53 years (SD = 10.56).

Measures

Work engagement was measured using the nine-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES 9; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), tapping three dimensions, namely *vigor* (three items; e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), *dedication* (three items; e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job") and *absorption* (three items; e.g., "I am immersed in my work"). Response alternatives

were given on a Likert scale (0 = "never" to 6 = "every day"). For our analyses, a global score was computed, with higher scores being indicative of a higher level of work engagement.

Conscientiousness was measured with a 3-item scale from Mowen's (2000) Personality Scale. Participants were asked to score on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"), to which extent a characteristic applies to them (e.g., organized).

Workplace incivility was measured using the twelve-item Workplace Incivility Scale (revised version; Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2011) measure of workplace incivility, (e.g., "In the past year, have you been in a situation where your peers or coworkers addressed you in unprofessional terms, either publicly or privately?"). Response alternatives were given on a Likert scale (0 = "never" to 4 = "many times").

Abusive supervision was measured by the employees' perception of their supervisors' interactions with them (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, 2000), using a 15-item scale representing the active dimension of perceived abusive supervision (e.g., "Puts me down in front of others"). Response alternatives were given on a 5-point frequency scale from (1) "I cannot remember him/her ever using this behavior with me" to (5) "He/she uses this behavior very often with me".

Analyses

Prior to conducting our analyses, we centered all predictors (i.e. abusive leadership, incivility and conscientiousness) and created interaction terms using the centered variables. We used moderated hierarchical regression to test each of the six hypothesized interactions between workplace mistreatment and conscientiousness. We entered the control variables in the first step of the regression. We entered the main effects – workplace mistreatment and conscientiousness – in the second step and the interaction term in the third step. Thus, with the variance that occurred because of the control variables and the main effects partialled out in the first two steps, the variance caused by the interaction term could be observed. We examined the incremental change in the squared multiple correlation from the second model to the third model in assessing the effect size and significance of the interaction. Because each of the hypotheses was directional, one-tailed tests of significance were used.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, correlations and reliability estimates for the variables of interest. Abusive supervision and incivility were significantly correlated with vigor, dedication and absorption, so that employees that experienced high mistreatment

scores were less likely to be engaged in work ($-.33 < r < -.14, p < .05$), while conscientiousness was significantly correlated with vigor, dedication and absorption, so that employees with high levels of conscientiousness were more likely to be engaged in work ($.23 < r < .26, p < .05$).

Table 1. A matrix of intercorrelations among core variables of interest in the study (N = 223 total; N = 204, listwise deletion)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender			-							
2. Age	37.24	11.38	.03	-						
3. Conscientiousness	16.96	2.77	.27	.10	(.83)					
4. Abusive supervision	17.31	4.17	-.25	-.12	-.17	(.86)				
5. Incivility	4.57	5.04	-.18	-.13	-.24	.57	(.87)			
6. Vigor	12.17	4.28	.14	.23	.25	-.24	-.32	(.78)		
7. Dedication	13.78	4.44	.18	.24	.26	-.20	-.32	.80	(.89)	
8. Absorption	14.15	3.78	.21	.28	.23	-.14	-.30	.67	.73	(.72)

Bold type correlations are significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed tests)

Table 2 presents the results of the moderated hierarchical regression analyses. In total, six separate regression analyses are shown. The first three regression analyses tested the interaction of abusive leadership with conscientiousness, having vigor, dedication and respectively absorption as dependent variables, while the last three analyses examined the interaction between incivility and conscientiousness, having the same dependent variables. In Model 1, the control variables were entered, and they accounted for significant variance in the deviance measure in all six regression analyses. In Model 2, the main effects of conscientiousness and the

mistreatment variables were entered, and they accounted for significant incremental variance beyond the control variables in all the regression equations. In Model 3, the interaction between conscientiousness and the mistreatment variables was entered, and it accounted for significant incremental variance beyond the control variables and main effects in all but two regression equations (abusive leadership as moderator with vigor as dependent variable, and incivility as moderator with absorption as dependent variable), partially supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

Table 2. Moderation effects of incivility and abusive leadership, on the relationship between conscientiousness and dimensions of work engagement (**Bold** type marks $p < .05$; one-tailed tests)

Predictors	Vigor			Dedication			Absorption		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β	B	β	β	β	β	β
Age	.223	.186	.193	.235	.204	.214	.279	.259	.268
Gender	.122	.028	.022	.170	.088	.079	.193	.138	.130
Conscientiousness = CONSC		.204	.214		.192	.208		.165	.180
Abusive supervision = ABLEAD		-.162	-.198		-.123	-.176		-.043	-.093
CONSC x ABLEAD			-.111			-.164			-.153
R^2	.066	.135	.146	.086	.139	.162	.118	.147	.167
F for change in R^2	7.222	7.967	2.532	9.555	6.089	5.592	13.616	3.324	4.942
Age	.220	.180	.184	.229	.190	.195	.281	.251	.251
Gender	.124	.041	.034	.174	.092	.082	.200	.137	.135
Conscientiousness = CONSC		.176	.208		.156	.198		.126	.133
Incivility = INCIV		-.225	-.247		-.244	-.272		-.176	-.181
CONSC x INCIV			-.129			-.169			-.028
R^2	.066	.157	.172	.086	.179	.204	.122	.174	.175
F for change in R^2	7.303	11.127	3.660	9.640	11.573	6.494	14.384	6.516	.168

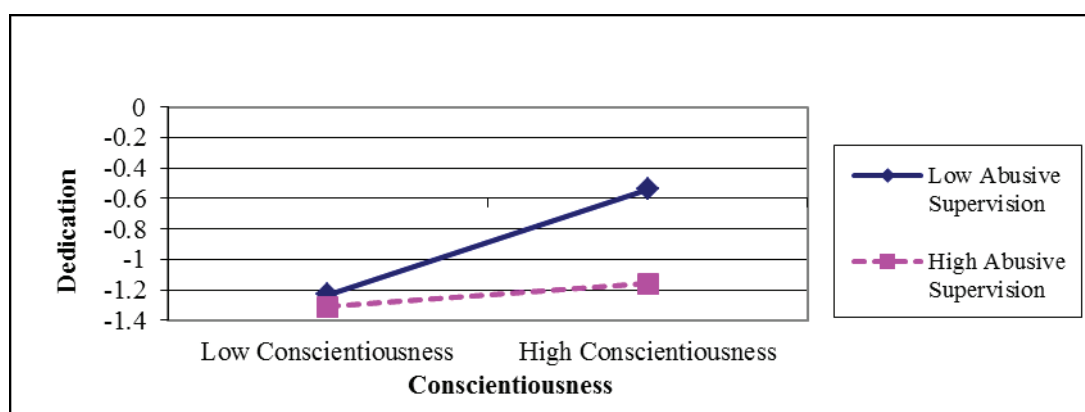


Figure 1. The moderating effect of Abusive Supervision on the relationship between Conscientiousness and Dedication

Graphs of the significant interactions are shown in Figures 1 – 4. Regression lines were plotted for high and low levels of the

independent and moderator variables (1 and -1 standard deviations from the mean).

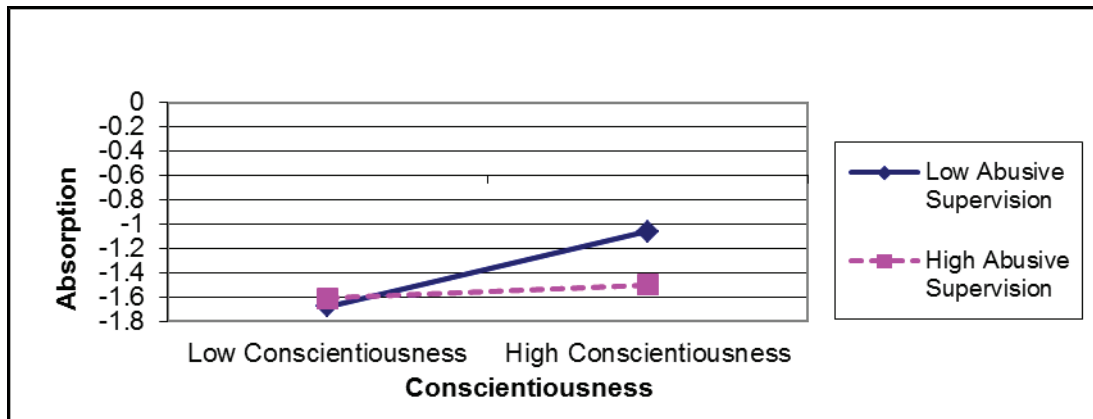


Figure 2. The moderating effect of Abusive Supervision on the relationship between Conscientiousness and Absorption

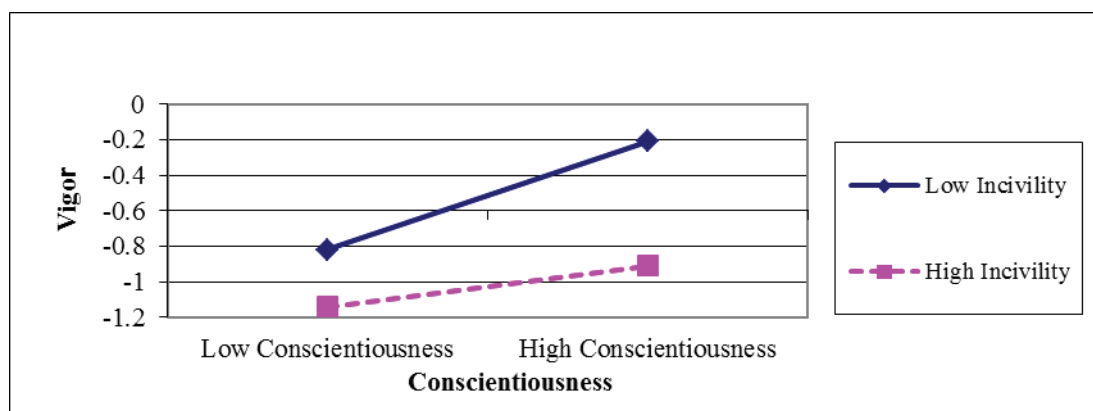


Figure 3. The moderating effect of Incivility on the relationship between Conscientiousness and Vigor

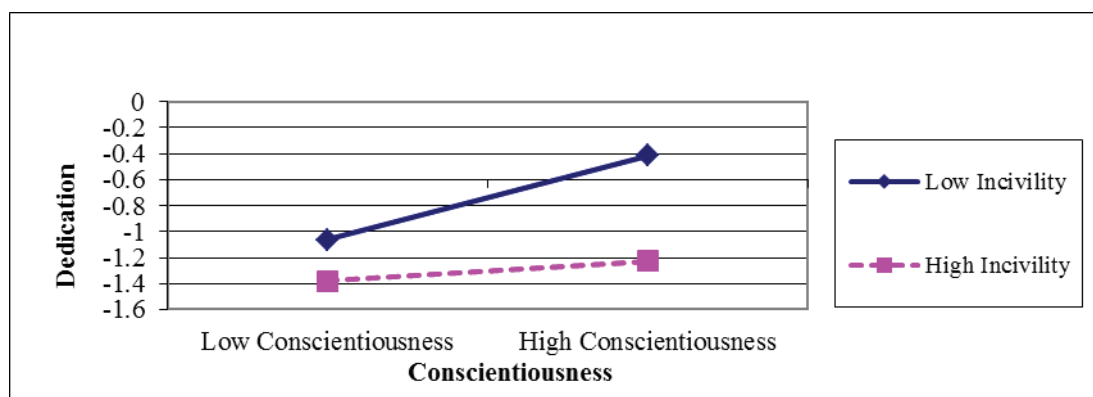


Figure 4. The moderating effect of Incivility on the relationship between Conscientiousness and Dedication

Four of the six hypothesized interactions were significant. The expected positive relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement dimensions was strongest when the levels of the mistreatment variables – either abusive supervision or incivility – were low.

High levels of the mistreatment variables constrained the relationships between conscientiousness and work engagement dimensions, bringing the relationship close to zero when the dependent variable was absorption and the moderator variable was abusive supervision (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Current research has emphasized the importance of fostering work engagement at the workplace. Most studies have focused on the relation of job resources (e.g., social support, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), and job demands (e.g., work overload, Rothmann & Joubert, 2007) with work engagement, even if the impact of demands on work engagement is lower than the one of resources (Halbesleben, 2010). Nevertheless, work engagement research also started to focus on the negative effect of interpersonal demands (e.g., interpersonal conflicts at work) on work engagement (Sulea et al., 2012). Although such avenues were created, we are not aware of any study examining the interaction of workplace mistreatment and conscientiousness on work engagement. We tested an interaction model of relevance factors for work engagement. This model proposes that conscientiousness leads to employees' work engagement and that this effect can be lessened by workplace mistreatment. In other words, employees who are conscientious are less likely to exhibit work engagement while being targets of mistreatment at work. Using a detailed view of work engagement, including its three dimensions, namely vigor, dedication and absorption, we found that conscientiousness is related to all the work engagement dimensions. These results are consistent with previous research (e.g., Kim et al. 2009). Moreover, when employees are targets of abusive supervision, the relationships between conscientiousness on one side, and dedication and absorption on the other side, are weakened. This effect was not statistically significant for the relationship between conscientiousness and vigor. When experiencing potentially harmful behaviors from supervisors, employees are less enthusiastic and less focused on their work, but they are still willing to invest effort in their work. One possible explanation is that when the individual invests a lot of energy in his work, he or she may be motivated to keep up that level and also to remain determined when confronted with difficulties. When looking at a milder form of mistreatment, incivility, we notice that it weakens the relationship between conscientiousness on one side, and vigor and dedication on the other side, but not the relationship between conscientiousness and absorption. When experiencing discourteous

behavior at work, employees tend to be less energetic and inspired by their work, but they still remain focused on their work. We argue that when the individual is immersed in his work, he or she might be less available and therefore less capable of perceiving and experiencing interpersonal relations at work. We notice that dedication to one's work is affected by both forms of mistreatment, the sense of significance and enthusiasm being vulnerable to them.

There are practical implications to understanding the factors that play a role in determining work engagement. Selecting employees with high levels of conscientiousness is likely to reflect a positive affective-motivational state at work, namely work engagement. However, when individuals experience mistreatment (i.e., abusive supervision and incivility) the relationship between conscientiousness and work engagement is weakened. Therefore, even when employees have personal resources (e.g., conscientiousness) that facilitate involvement and enjoyment of one's work, when they are targets of inadequate relations at work, their work engagement is decreased. These results emphasize the importance of thoroughly investigating the workplace interpersonal stressors that negatively affect the important relation between resources and well-being.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several strong points concerning its contribution to the research literature. We analyzed the moderating role of two types of mistreatment (abusive supervision and incivility) on the relationship between one personality trait (conscientiousness) and three dimensions of work engagement (vigor, dedication and absorption). Our results contribute to the literature on the role of personal resources and interpersonal demands on work engagement, emphasizing the harmful potential of such interpersonal demands for the employee's well-being, even in the presence of personal resources.

Despite these strengths, this study has limitations and indicates avenues for further research. First, we only included one type of personal resource (conscientiousness). Further research should include an array of personal and job resources and analyze their relation to work engagement, while taking workplace mistreatment into consideration. Another limit is

that our study is cross-sectional and also based on self-reports, therefore being prone to common method variance. Also, the participants were mostly female and mainly employed in the teaching field so we must be careful with regard to generalizing the results.

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