
Personality Derailers: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Guenole (2014) sheds additional light on the importance of derailing personality constructs in work settings. A growing body of research examining relationships between such constructs and a variety of work-related outcomes demonstrates the relevance of this topic for Industrial–Organizational (I–O) psychology. Since McCall and Lombardo’s (1983) and Bentz’s (1985) initial investigations into the personalities of failed leaders, others (e.g., Benson & Campbell, 2007; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Hogan, Raskin, & Fazzini, 1990; Moscoso & Salgado, 2004) have provided empirical evidence that derailers predict a variety of work outcomes.

In addition, Harms, Spain, and Hannah (2011a) found that derailers negatively predicted trajectories of leader development among military cadets, and confirmed the

incremental validity of derailers in predicting performance ratings beyond Five-Factor Model (FFM) measures (Harms, Spain, & Hannah, 2011b). Similarly, Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser (2011) demonstrated that managerial failure often results from an inability to get along with coworkers, which can be predicted by derailing personality characteristics. And finally, in a meta-analysis using a dozen samples, Gaddis and Foster (2013) noted several significant relationships between derailing personality characteristics and critical work behaviors for leaders across the globe. In short, an enhanced understanding of how these constructs impact work-related outcomes can contribute substantially to the field of I–O psychology.

Within a general context of agreement, our commentary is intended to suggest how to move research on derailing characteristics forward in a more consolidated direction. These suggestions include using a unifying theory and nomenclature and potential directions for future research.

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Theory and Nomenclature

Although Guenole argues for the development of assessments based on personality disorders outlined in the DSM, we do not believe the DSM is the only source of constructs to operationalize dark side personality characteristics. The fact that the definitions and measurement approach of DSM personality disorders show little temporal stability across different editions suggests the need to explore different taxonomies and go beyond the DSM. Furthermore, DSM models of personality disorders tend to be descriptive rather than causal and explain neither how derailing personality characteristics emerge nor how individuals with such characteristics successfully emerge (and often effectively function) as leaders.

In fact, research shows that measures of derailing characteristics based on personality disorders have positive relationships with some job performance measures (Furnham, Trickey, & Hyde, 2012) and curvilinear relationships with overall job performance (Benson & Campbell, 2007), two findings that are incompatible with DSM-based personality disorders. Most of the scales proposed by Guenole align with existing scales; consequently, adopting the term "maladaptive" for these constructs is misleading because it implies a consistent negative relationship with outcomes rather than the more complex relationship suggested by previous research. For this reason, we prefer to use the term "derailer," referring to "poor self-control and relationship problems" (Hogan et al., 2011) resulting from using "interpersonal strategies that are no longer functional" (Hogan, 2007). Such a definition provides better alignment with research and shows that derailing characteristics often reflect strengths that become weaknesses when over-used (McCall & Lombardo, 1983).

Nevertheless, the theories on which we base measures are more important than arguments over what to call such measures. Earlier versions of the DSM provided useful descriptions of constructs that can

be personality derailers. However, rather than using descriptive sources to guide research, we prefer to explore theories that describe the development and impact of such characteristics.

For example, Horney (1950) provided a theory of "neurotic needs" that categorized 10 behavioral tendencies into three themes: moving toward people, or managing one's insecurities by building alliances with others to minimize the perceived threat of criticism; moving away from people, or managing one's feelings of inadequacy by avoiding true connections with others; and moving against people, or managing one's self-doubts by dominating and intimidating others. This theory helps explain why, despite the often negative consequences of personality derailers, individuals still behave in ways associated with derailers in everyday work settings. Horney (1950) describes strategies we develop early in life for overcoming obstacles that may prevent us from reaching our full potential. Later in life, over-relying on these defense mechanisms may result in behaviors that degrade job performance and/or derail careers over time (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). The empirical evidence supporting the theory is as important as the insight provided by Horney's (1950) model. Numerous studies have found that derailer assessments based on DSM personality disorders, as Guenole advocates, fit the 3-factor model outlined by Horney (Jones, 1988).

As this research demonstrates, we can obtain a better understanding of personality derailers through the empirical examination of sound theories that inform the topic. Measurement models based on pilot DSM categories are insufficient. In fact, such models provide no insight into why personality derailers exist. Based on this reasoning, we suggest a number of directions for future research in the area.

Future Directions

We agree with Guenole that personality derailers should be measured using continuous scales. Current research provides no

evidence of specific scores or ranges on existing derailment assessments that would facilitate categorical description. Also, we agree that the exploration of forced-choice and other response formats, as well as alternative assessment methods, could prove beneficial. Although the use of purely ipsative scales may ignore important variance associated with overall base rates in individual results, methods for extracting normative scores from forced-choice responses, as outlined by Guenole, may help overcome this limitation. Therefore, we encourage future research to examine a variety of response and scoring methods such as ipsative and quasi-ipsative scales along with previously established norm-based measures.

We also encourage efforts to better examine the construct validity of derailing personality measures. Research shows that some derailing characteristics are more strongly aligned with FFM measures than others (Douglas, Bore, & Munro, 2012). Thus, some derailment measures may reflect extreme scores on FFM scales (Watson, Clark, & Chmielewski, 2008) while others, as Guenole outlines, may reflect combinations of facets from FFM scales. The key to evaluating both types of scales is first to establish a common definition of derailing personality characteristics. We believe the previously outlined definition, which focuses on interpersonal strategies that surpass their own functionality, provides this framework.

Along these lines, researchers should also examine more complex relationships between personality derailers and FFM scales when predicting important work-related outcomes. Research demonstrates that composite personality scales can provide incremental validity over FFM scales (e.g., Marcus, Ashton, & Lee, 2013) and that FFM scales may interact in predicting job performance (Witt, 2002; Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002). Similarly, future efforts should examine the incremental validity of derailers over FFM scales and potential interactions across all types of personality scales.

Summary

In our view, the impact of derailing characteristics on work outcomes is an important topic that deserves greater attention in our field. We commend Guenole for continuing to bring attention to this topic. That said, we think it premature to focus only on the DSM or any other single measurement model. To further our understanding of how such characteristics impact organizations, we should start with sound theoretical models that guide our empirical efforts.

As cited by Guenole, established lines of research, such as those examining dark side personality (Judge & LePine, 2007; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009) and the Dark Triad (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Wu & Le Bretton, 2011), already contribute to our knowledge of derailing personality characteristics. Nonetheless, we should encourage future developments through the use of sound empirical data, ideally collected from individuals in applied settings across a variety of industries, organizations, and jobs.

As a community, we are often concerned that research in our field follows too far behind business practices (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). However, research on derailing personality characteristics and their impact on leadership behaviors and other work-related outcomes seems to have grown alongside, rather than in response to, increasing public interest. As a result, there is a growing body of empirical research, often from real-world business samples, on which we can draw as we explore this topic. As a whole, evidence demonstrates that research on derailing personality characteristics can contribute to our understanding of leadership and organizational performance.

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