Moral Character in the Workplace
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Moral character can be conceptualized as an individual’s disposition to think, feel, and behave in an ethical versus unethical manner, or as the subset of individual differences relevant to morality. Using data from two three-month diary studies and a large cross-sectional survey, we developed a tripartite framework for understanding character and its relationship to harmful and helpful work behaviors. According to the model, character contains motivational, ability, and identity elements. The motivational element is consideration of others—referring to a disposition toward considering the needs and interests of others, and how one’s own actions affect other people. The ability element is self-regulation—referring to a disposition toward regulating one’s behavior effectively, specifically with reference to behaviors that have positive short-term consequences but negative long-term consequences for oneself or others. The identity element is moral identity—referring to a disposition toward valuing morality and wanting to view oneself as a moral person. Consistent with our model, cognitive moral development and emotionality were found to be relatively undiagnostic of moral character as compared to individual differences associated with consideration of others (e.g., honesty-humility, empathic concern, guilt proneness), self-regulation (e.g., conscientiousness, self-control, consideration of future consequences), and moral identity (e.g., moral identity-internalization). Low-moral-character employees committed harmful work behaviors (i.e., counterproductive acts) more frequently and helpful work behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship acts) less frequently than high-moral-character employees, according to their own admissions and coworkers’ observations. Low-moral-character adults also committed more delinquent behavior and had more lenient attitudes toward unethical negotiation tactics as compared to high-moral-character adults. By showing that individual differences have consistent, meaningful effects on employees’ behaviors, after controlling for demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, income) and basic attributes of the work setting (e.g., enforcement of an ethics code), our results contest situationist perspectives that de-emphasize the importance of personality. Moral people can be identified by self-reports in surveys, and these self-reports predict consequential behaviors months after the initial assessment.