

Riester, Johanna; Keller, Johannes

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Considering the Dark Side of Work: Bullshit Job Perceptions, Deviant Work Behavior, and the Moderating Role of Work Ethic

Johanna Riester¹ · Johannes Keller¹

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Abstract

This contribution aims to expand the study of experiences at work by (a) analyzing a theoretical perspective concerning experiences at work which emphasizes both *positive* aspects as well as *negative* aspects, (b) exploring the relation of both negative (Bullshit job perceptions; BJP) and positive aspects (Meaningful Work perceptions; MWP) experienced at work to negative work-related behavior (Counterproductive Work Behavior [CWB] and Cyberloafing), (c) investigating the (moderating) role of work ethic, and (d) examining the robustness of these relations when considering additional contextual factors (organizational work values and tightness–looseness reflecting social norms). Three studies were conducted, including two samples of German employees ($N = 247$ and $N = 240$), and another one of employees in the USA ($N = 253$). Our findings reveal that negative experiences at work (BJP) are the main predictor of problematic workplace behavior (CWB and Cyberloafing). Furthermore, their relation was contingent on individuals' endorsement of work ethic. BJP and CWB (or Cyberloafing) were more closely associated for individuals strongly endorsing work ethic. In contrast, the relation of positive experiences (MWP) to problematic behavior at work was not significantly qualified by work ethic. The observed relations were robust when additional contextual factors were controlled for. The results emphasize the importance and complexity of work experiences including and differentiating positive and negative aspects. They also highlight the significance of work ethic and related beliefs of employees in shaping problematic behavior in work settings.

Keywords Bullshit job perceptions · Meaningful work · Deviant work behavior · Work ethic

Introduction

The experience of meaningfulness at work has been identified as a crucial variable in the work context (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). Within this context, David Graeber (2018) introduced the term “Bullshit Job” and defined it as follows:

A bullshit job is a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case (pp. 9–10).

The concept is treated as a subjective experience based on perceptions of work episodes or activities as pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious and herein referred to as Bullshit Job Perceptions (BJP). Graeber's (2018) concept has gained widespread attention, shedding light on the existence of senseless or harmful activities within the modern working world (e.g., Dean et al., 2022; Delucchi et al., 2021; Soffia et al., 2021). Rapid technological advancements and automation have led to significant transformations in existing jobs, introducing ambiguity and uncertainty, posing challenges for individuals and organizations in attaining meaningful work (Allan & Liu, 2020). Remarkably, prevailing research on the experienced meaningfulness at work predominantly focused on positive aspects, such as meaningful work perceptions (MWP) and their positive outcomes (e.g., commitment, which has been shown in other studies to prevent employees' engagement in CWB). That is, the direct connections of MWP and BJP to unethical work behavior have been largely overlooked so far (Allan et al., 2019; May et al., 2004; Steger et al., 2012). As we emphasize here, experiences at

✉ Johanna Riester
Johanna-I.riester@uni-ulm.de
Johannes Keller
Johannes.keller@uni-ulm.de

¹ Ulm University: Universität Ulm, Ulm, Baden Württemberg, Germany

work encompass both the presence and absence of positive and negative features, which are not necessarily opposites (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Accordingly, examining both facets (positive [MWP] and negative [BJP]) separately is essential to fully grasp the complexity of work experiences and their unique relationships with distinct outcome factors.

This paper aims to address this issue by exploring both positive (MWP) and negative (BJP) experiences at work, particularly focusing on the previously understudied facet of negative aspects experienced (which we refer to as BJP). By investigating a comprehensive framework that incorporates individual and contextual factors, we seek to unravel the relationship between positive and negative work experiences and their relation to unethical or deviant work behavior. We aim to demonstrate that negative experiences are more closely related to deviant behavior at work than positive experiences. Further, we will delve into the interconnectedness of work ethic, positive and negative work experiences, and deviant work behavior.

Work and Experiences of Positivity and Negativity

The fact that everyday life experiences often contain a mix of positively and negatively evaluated elements has been addressed in the evaluative space model of affect (ESMA; Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). It proposes that behavioral predispositions are influenced by the affect system, which integrates two components. One component links positive affect with appetitive motivation while negative affect is associated with aversive motivation (Larsen et al., 2001). Both systems can be coactivated and such a coactivation can also be subjectively experienced and reported, revealing the complexity of positivity and negativity (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Kahneman et al., 2004). In a similar vein, it is possible for a person to experience high levels of life satisfaction and stress or other negative emotions at the same time (Headey et al., 1993).

Considering the domain of work, reports on experiences at work typically show a mixture of positive and negative aspects (Anusic et al., 2017). Results of Beck et al. (2023) show that substantial portions of working individuals scored relatively high on both meaningful work perceptions (MWP) and BJP. These findings align with the basic notions of the ESMA and demonstrate the complexity of work experiences. Therefore, in line with Beck et al., (2023; see also Semmer et al., 2015), we argue that a proper operationalization of experiences at work requires the assessment of negative features (BJP) complementing the assessment of positive features (MWP).

Positive (MWP) and Negative (BJP) Experiences at Work

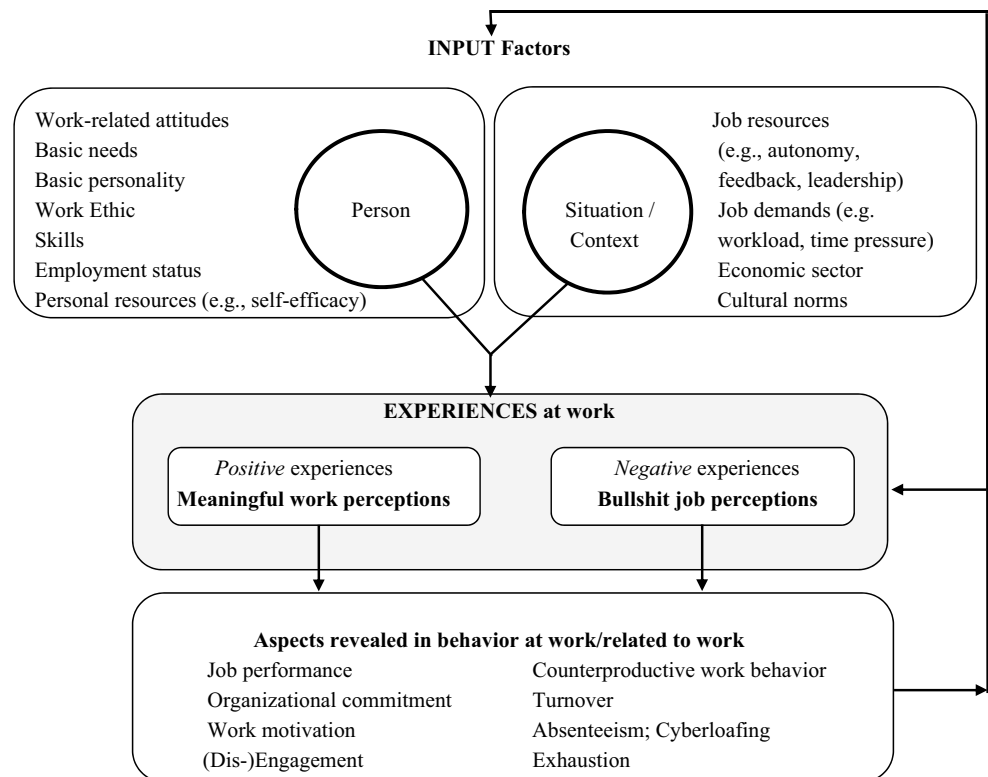
There are notable similarities between the concept of BJP and meaningful work, which prompts us to explore how BJP fit within the well-established framework of meaningful work. Meaningful work is a multifaceted construct (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). Recently, Lepisto and Pratt (2017) proposed a dual conceptualization of meaningful work that distinguishes between two features of meaningfulness: (a) aspects of purpose (justification vs. anomie) reflecting the perceived worthiness of one's work and (b) well-being aspects based on need satisfaction and self-fulfillment (realization vs. alienation). It points out the fact that meaningful work encompasses both the presence or absence of *positive* features but also the presence and absence of *negative* features (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017), which do not necessarily imply the opposite of each other (e.g., see also positive psychology literature, Gable & Haidt, 2005; and ESMA, Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Lepisto and Pratt's (2017) framework is valuable for providing insights into the complexity of positive and negative features at work, including classic concepts of anomie and alienation. We particularly value its emphasis on the negative dimension, which has often been overlooked in other research addressing work experiences and meaningfulness (Beck et al., 2023).

Thus, and in line with Beck et al. (2023), we propose a proper operationalization of both facets (positive [MWP] and negative [BJP] experiences at work) for a full comprehension of work experiences. Graeber's (2018) concept of "Bullshit Jobs" becomes relevant in recognizing the experience of negative features at work (pointless, unnecessary, and pernicious activities) and a lack of justification. Both facets exhibit unique relationships with input and output factors. Our proposed model builds upon and integrates established theories (e.g., job characteristics model, Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Job Demands-Resources Model, Demerouti et al., 2001). Figure 1 presents a rough illustration of the overarching theoretical framework that underlies our research.

Positive and Negative Work Experiences and Their Relation to Behavior at Work

Humans inherently seek meaning which makes the experience of meaningfulness one of the most important variables concerning job satisfaction (and satisfaction with life in general; Rosso et al., 2010). Given that work has become a key domain from which people derive purpose

Fig. 1 Rough illustration of the general theoretical framework underlying the present research



in life, researchers and practitioners dedicated significant attention to the concept of meaningful work due to its positive relation to various work-related attitudes and behavior, performance-related and individual outcomes, including job satisfaction, performance, organizational commitment, or life meaning (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019; Steger et al., 2012). Still, there has been a predominant focus on examining positive outcomes of meaningful work, leading to a research gap in understanding the relationship to deviant work behaviors (May et al., 2004; Steger et al., 2012). Concurrently, there is a growing recognition of the need to understand and address negative or unethical work-related behaviors like CWB or Cyberloafing, due to their detrimental consequences and substantial financial costs for organizations and their stakeholders (Carpenter et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2020). Therefore, it is critical to understand when and why employees engage in these unethical behaviors. Consequently, our primary focus is on investigating CWB and Cyberloafing as outcome variables of work experiences, to close the research gap and highlight the severe consequences arising from creating or experiencing BJP in the workplace.

Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

CWB is defined as any deliberate employee behavior that contravenes the legitimate interests of an organization and violates significant organizational norms (Gruys & Sackett, 2003). The

severity of CWB can vary, ranging from minor rule violations (e.g., coming late to work) to more serious acts of sabotage. In our study, the CWB scale employed primarily assesses sabotage, withdrawal, and abusive behavior targeting either the organization (CWB-O) or individuals within the organization (CWB-I; Spector, 2010). However, for our analyses, we utilized a single index representing CWB as a deviant form of behavior across levels (organizational vs. individual; Spector, 2010). To introduce another dimension of deviant work behavior, focusing on aspects of disengagement, and production deviance, Cyberloafing was included as a separate variable.

Cyberloafing

Cyberloafing is a type of deviant work behavior or production deviance that refers to the voluntary use of the internet for personal reasons during work hours (Lim, 2002). Examples of Cyberloafing activities are browsing social networking sites or sending and checking private e-mails. Given technological advances and the prevalence of remote work arrangements, Cyberloafing poses a significant problem for organizations (Lim, 2002; Mercado et al., 2017).

Do Positive Experiences Decrease, and Negative Experiences Increase Deviant Work Behavior?

Positive associations between meaningful work and beneficial work outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment,

or well-being are well-established in the literature (Allan et al., 2019; Bailey et al., 2019). Employees who experience rich job resources and opportunities for personal growth are likely to feel obliged to repay and stay in the organization (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Conversely, unfulfillment of meaningful work can lead to negative affect, disengagement, and various dysfunctional behaviors, resulting in negative outcomes such as withdrawal (Allan et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). Accordingly, one may suppose that positive experiences decrease, and negative experiences increase deviant work behavior. However, negative affect has been identified as a critical precursor of CWB. Specifically, anger or frustration, which can be aroused in response to irritating workplace conditions, have been linked to deviant work behavior (Spector, 1998). Spector et al. (2006) showed that various types of CWB originate in response to frustrating or stressful circumstances, leading to hostile motives and triggering revenge in form of deviant behavior at work. In line with that, Graeber's (2018) qualitative analyses revealed that individuals who reported bullshit tasks described their work as mentally draining and humiliating. Thus, in contrast to MWP, it is intuitive to assume that BJP do not contribute positively to employee well-being (Beck et al., 2023) or positive work attitudes and behaviors. Even more, negative experiences may exert more substantial effects than positive ones (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Accordingly, we propose that BJP represent stressful or frustrating experiences, arising when individuals perceive their jobs as pointless or harmful, serving as triggers for subsequent unethical behavior (Spector, 2011). BJP has the potential to be threatening to employees' professional identity, social esteem, or motivation and to provoke feelings of being treated unfairly and related anger or aggression (Semmer et al., 2015; Spector, 2011). Prior work has consistently demonstrated the negative relation of job stressors such as situational constraints, illegitimate tasks or psychological contract breach to employee's performance, work attitudes, and behaviors (Gilboa et al., 2008; Nixon et al., 2011; Semmer et al., 2015; Zhao et al., 2022). Also, prior work showed that harsh forms of CWB are not limited to individuals with a history of ill intentions or unethical behavior; even employees with no prior record of counterproductive actions might engage in harsh forms of CWB (Newman et al., 2020).

Thus, extending the results of prior studies, we argue that positive and negative experiences at work have distinct relations to work outcomes. By integrating both positive and negative work experiences, our objective is to demonstrate that the existence of negative experiences may be more closely related to deviant behavior at work than the mere absence of positive experiences. We assume that controlling for BJP the relation of MWP to CWB is only of limited relevance and that BJP emerges as a strong explanatory factor for deviant work behavior. This further underlines the

complexity of work experiences and the importance of differentiating positive and negative experiences in the work context.

Research question 1 (RQ1): *Is the lack of positive experiences or the existence of negative experiences more closely related to deviant behavior at work?*

While there is accumulating evidence on the social and psychological processes underlying the manifestation of CWB, less is known about the individual or contextual factors that may prevent or reinforce such unethical behaviors (Spector, 2011; Zhao et al., 2022). Our research framework (see Fig. 1) proposes personal characteristics, and Beck et al. (2023) found that the relation of BJP to SWB is dependent on attitudes towards work, specifically the endorsement of work ethic. This suggests that the relationship between work experiences and work behavior may be affected by specific individual-level (personal) boundary conditions (Spector, 2011). Specifically, we suggest that by considering the value that employees attribute to work we can gain a better understanding of deviant behavioral responses when confronted with negative work experiences.

Work Experiences and Attitudes Towards Work

Given that many employees report quite substantial levels of BJP, the question raises of why working individuals do not change their job when experiencing it to be bullshit (Beck et al., 2023). Graeber (2018) has termed this the "paradox of modern work" (p.241) where most individuals derive their self-worth from their work, despite disliking it (at least to some extent) at the same time. One potential answer to this question refers to the notion that specific personal characteristics determine the impact of negative work experiences on behavioral responses. And we consider attitudes towards work reflecting work ethic a meaningful starting point.

Work Ethic

Work ethic has historical origins in the work of Weber (1930), who introduced Protestant Work Ethic, a concept rooted in religious beliefs and related normative convictions. In the contemporary context, the religious aspect lost much of its relevance, and the concept is referred to as work ethic. It refers to the belief that hard work and effort are essential for achieving success and that individuals should always be working hard (Weber, 1930/2018). Simultaneously, enjoying leisure or wasting time are morally condemned (Furnham, 2021). Work ethic encompasses the idea that success is a result of hard work, while a lack of success is attributed to moral failure or a lack of self-discipline. Those who endorse work ethic emphasize individual responsibility and support harsh consequences for failure (Christopher & Schlenker,

2005; Katz & Hass, 1988). Additionally, work ethic contains the idea that hard work is seen as valuable and intrinsically rewarding, and accordingly work holds great significance in the life and self-identity of those endorsing the work ethic. Therefore, engaging in any kind of work should be preferred over doing nothing (Weber, 2018).

In summary, individuals strongly endorsing work ethic consider their work an integral part of their self-definition, valuing productivity, and high-quality outputs (Furnham, 2021). These ethical principles and expectations are incongruent with the phenomenon of “meaningless” or “bullshit” tasks at work. Furthermore, research showed that work ethic can be connected to indifference concerning conventional morality and antagonistic tendencies as revealed in positive correlations with Machiavellianism, (Miller & Konopaske, 2014; Mudrack & Mason, 1995), right-wing authoritarianism (Christopher et al., 2008), and negative correlations with honesty (Silvia et al., 2014). Thus, given their sensitivity towards expectancy violations (Christopher et al., 2003), individuals strongly endorsing the work ethic may respond more harshly and aggressively towards their organizations when faced with unmet expectations regarding work or with person-environment misfit (Christopher & Schlenker, 2005; Kristof, 1996) compared to individuals characterized by a weak work ethic. Given the established prominent role of negative affect (anger and frustration) concerning CWB, we expect that negative experiences (BJP) are more relevant concerning CWB than positive experiences (MWP) due their potential to trigger negative affect. And given the centrality of work in the self-concept of those strongly endorsing the work ethic, we suppose that the potential to react with deviant work behavior to such negative work experiences (BJP) is particularly strong among such individuals. Thus, although previous studies suggest positive associations of work ethic and favorable work outcomes (e.g., Meriac & Gorman, 2017), we expect that higher levels of work ethic amplify the relation of BJP to deviant work behavior (whereas we do not expect such a moderation effect in case of positive experiences, i.e., MWP). Our studies were designed to test these assumptions and to answer our respective second research question.

Research question 2 (RQ2): Are the relationships between (a) MWP and deviant work behavior and (b) BJP and deviant work behavior moderated by work ethic?

Contextual (Cultural and Organizational) Factors

In addition to personal characteristics, the broader context in which individuals operate (organizational and societal settings) can exert a significant influence on their behavior (see Fig. 1). These contextual factors encompass social and organizational norms and values, which serve as implicit or explicit guiding principles and constraints for behavior

(Gelfand et al., 2006; Schwartz, 1992). Researchers such as Lysova et al. (2019) emphasized the impact of cultural and organizational influences on individuals' perception and definitions of meaningful work as well as the extent to which specific jobs or organizations can promote meaningful work. Our study aims to explore and control for the impact of social norms and organizational values as contextual factors, primarily to examine the robustness of our findings concerning the relation of work ethic and work experiences to negative work-related behavior. To cover both cultural and organizational contextual components, we included organizational work values (experienced by the employee) as well as the degree of behavioral constraint or latitude (tightness-looseness; Gelfand et al., 2011) as relevant variables in our studies.

Study Overview

Study 1 was conducted using a sample of German employees ($N=247$) assessing the moderation of the relation between BJP and CWB by work ethic. As control contextual variables organizational work values were assessed. Study 2 was conducted using a sample in the US ($N=253$) accessing BJP, MWP, CWB, work ethic, and used tightness-looseness (personal, organizational, and cultural) as contextual control variables. In Study 3 ($N=240$), we replicated the second study with a German sample including an additional type of deviant work-related behavior (Cyberloafing).

Study (1–3) Method

All studies were conducted as online surveys and were part of a larger project containing several additional measures. Prerequisite for participation in all studies was that respondents declared their consent, that they were at least 18 years old and employed for at least 8 h a week for the past three months. Note that we utilized convenience samples via online surveys, which potentially increased the likelihood of low-quality responses and inattention. To mitigate these concerns, we implemented several strategies as suggested by Aguinis et al. (2021). First, we collected data from a larger number of participants to account for potential attrition and involvement of web robots and participant exclusion using inclusion criteria such as language skills, working hours, state residency, survey duration, or not working exclusively for MTurk (in Study 2). Second, attention-check items and answers to open-ended questions (e.g., “Please note what you had for dinner last night” to screen for web robot answers) were installed and examined. Failure to answer the attention-check items led directly to exclusion from the study. Also, we manually reviewed responses to open-ended questions to identify and exclude any potential robot-generated data. Consequently, a significant number of

participants (around 4% in Study 1, around 15% in Study 2 and around 1% in Study 3 of participants who successfully finished the study) were excluded following our review of open-ended questions. See more detailed information in the supplement on subject inclusion and exclusion criteria as well as all inventories (Table S1–S3), including how the sample sizes were determined and a priori power analysis.

Data were analyzed using SPSS (version 29). For the moderation analysis (work ethic \times BJP), we checked for collinearity in all three studies. Our analyses indicated that collinearity is not a problem (see Table S6, S10, S19 in the supplement; variance inflation factors < 2). For Study 2 and 3, we performed exploratory factor analyses for BJP and MWP items, which were relevant for our variable calculations (see Table S12 and S21 in supplement).

Study 1

Method

Procedure and Participants

Participants were recruited via personal contacts and social media platforms in June and July 2020. The study sample involved $N = 247$ working German participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.37$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.94$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 19\text{--}60$, 194 women, 51 men, 2 non-binary).

Measures

We asked participants to fill in inventories to measure BJP, MWP, work ethic, organizational work values, and CWB.

Bullshit Job Perceptions (BJP)

We used a three-item scale derived from Graeber's definition of bullshit jobs which respondents answered on a response scale ranging from 0 to 100. The items read, "How many of your daily work activities are completely (a) pointless, (b) unnecessary and (c) pernicious?" (Beck et al., 2023). Our studies focused on using a theory-driven assessment of negative experiences at work based on Graeber's (2018) conceptual framework. To estimate the prevalence of BJP in the work context, a 100-point scale was applied. We also opted for this frequency type of response format ranging from 0 to 100, because cognitive psychologists reliably documented that individuals are well capable to process information in frequency format whereas identical information presented in percentage or probability format was found to be much more difficult to process (cf. Gigerenzer & Hoffrage, 1995). The scale assesses the degree to which individuals perceive their work to be filled with unnecessary, pointless, and pernicious

activities. A value of 0 indicates zero episodes filled with bullshit out of 100 experienced work episodes, while 100 represents work completely filled with bullshit episodes. We computed a mean score across the three ratings representing the BJP-index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.63$).

Meaningful Work Perceptions (MWP)

MWP was measured using the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI; Steger et al., 2012) consisting of 10 items with response scale ranging from (1) *absolutely untrue* to (5) *absolutely true* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$). A sample item reads, "I view my work as contributing to my personal growth."

Work Ethic

To assess work ethic the scale by Katz and Hass (1988) was implemented. The scale comprises 11 items with an answering scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree* (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). A sample item reads "Most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements."

Organizational Work Values

To assess organizational values, 24 items of the Work Values Survey (WVS; Cable & Edwards, 2004) were used. The scale was subdivided into four types of work values (Ros et al., 1999), represented by the mean score of the corresponding six items, including intrinsic ($\alpha = 0.89$), extrinsic ($\alpha = 0.83$), prestige ($\alpha = 0.84$), and social organizational work values ($\alpha = 0.84$). Recipients were asked: "How important are these values to your organization." Response-options ranged from (1) *not important at all* to (5) *extremely important*.

Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

A measure of CWB consisting of 10 items (5 items targeting the organization and 5 targeting individuals) was used (Spector et al., 2010). Items were answered on a scale ranging from (1) *never* to (5) *many times* in response to the question of how often a certain behavior was shown at work in the last months (e.g., "Purposely wasted your employer's materials/supplies"). A total mean score was computed (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The results show that respondents perceived their job as substantially filled with bullshit tasks ($M = 21.62$; $SD = 16.51$). BJP and MWP were negatively associated ($r = -0.56$). BJP

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations (Study 1)

	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1)	BJP	21.62	16.51	-							
(2)	MWP	3.56	0.85	-0.56**	-						
(3)	Work ethic	3.10	0.67	0.18**	-0.05	-					
(5)	Intrinsic org. values	3.32	0.85	-0.30**	0.49**	0.10	-				
(6)	External org. values	3.60	0.80	-0.28**	0.26**	0.07	0.32**	-			
(7)	Social org. values	3.38	0.81	-0.32**	0.50**	0.04	0.56**	0.42**	-		
(8)	Prestige org. values	3.29	0.78	-0.16*	0.15*	0.18**	0.39**	0.52**	0.36**	-	
(9)	CWB	1.53	0.56	0.50**	-0.39**	0.26**	-0.28**	-0.36**	-0.36**	-0.20**	-

BJP bullshit job perception, MWP meaningful work perception, CWB counterproductive work behavior

N = 247

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2 Standardized Regression Coefficients of Hierarchical Regression with BJP and MWP as predictors of CWB (Study 1)

Dependent Variable	Steps	Predictors		$\text{corr} R^2$	ΔR^2
		BJP <i>B</i>	MWP <i>B</i>		
CWB	Step 1		-0.39**	0.15**	
	Step 2	0.41**	-0.16	0.26**	0.11*

BJP bullshit job perception, MWP meaningful work perception, CWB counterproductive work behavior

N = 247

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

was significantly positively correlated with work ethic ($r = 0.18$) and CWB ($r = 0.50$) (Table 1; see Table S4 in supplement for descriptive analysis of study sample and Table S5 for BJP item descriptives).

Hierarchical Regressions

To investigate RQ1 hierarchical regression analyses were computed. MWP was entered in the first step for the prediction of CWB. BJP was added in the second step (Table 2). The major finding was that BJP significantly predicted CWB and emerged as the main predictor of the hierarchical regression for CWB. Thus, BJP is more closely related to CWB than MWP (RQ1).

Moderation Analyses for BJP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Organizational Work Values)

In the first step, we regressed CWB on the control variables and added all four types of organizational work values and MWP (all mean-centered) to the regression ($R^2 = 0.24$; $F(5, 241) = 15.06$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors BJP and work ethic (mean-centered),

which significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.14$; $F(2, 239) = 26.513$, $p < 0.001$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for BJP x work ethic, which contributed significantly above and beyond the main effects ($\Delta R^2 = 0.02$; $F(1, 238) = 6.83$, $p < 0.05$). The interaction term was significant, indicating a moderating effect. See Table 3 for the results including all predictors ($F(8, 238) = 19.32$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.39$).

To decompose the interactions, a moderation analysis (only including BJP, work ethic and BJP x work ethic; see S7 in supplement) using the PROCESS macro (Model 1) by Hayes (2022) was applied. The analyses revealed a positive relationship between BJP and CWB. The positive effect was stronger for individuals high in work ethic (1 SD above the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = 8.72$, $p < 0.001$) than for individuals low in work ethic (1 SD below the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.01$, $SE = 0.003$, $t = 4.39$, $p < 0.001$) (see Fig. 2).

Moderation Analyses for MWP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Organizational Work Values)

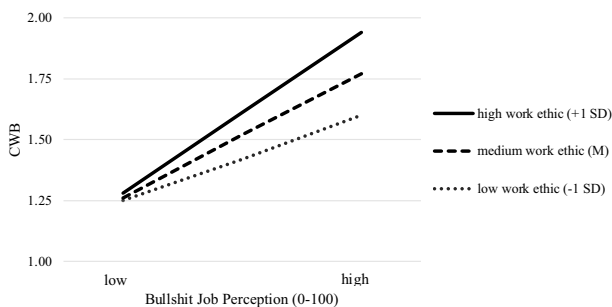
In the first step, we regressed CWB on the control variables and added all four types of organizational work values and BJP (all mean-centered) to the regression ($R^2 = 0.33$; $F(5, 241) = 23.28$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors MWP and work ethic (mean-centered), which significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$; $F(2, 239) = 9.72$, $p < 0.001$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for MWP x work ethic, which did not significantly contribute above and beyond the main effects ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$; $F(1, 238) = 3.22$, $p = 0.074$). Additionally, the interaction term was not significant. See Table 3 for the results including all predictors ($F(8, 238) = 18.60$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.39$).

Concerning our research question (RQ2), we summarize that the relationship between BJP and deviant work behavior (CWB) was moderated by work ethic. The interaction effect remained robust when controlling for organizational work

Table 3 Regressing scores of CWB onto BJP, MWP, work ethic (predictor variables were mean-centered), and their interaction terms including control variables (Study 1)

Parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
Constant	1.52	0.03		53.61	<0.001	[1.46, 1.58]
BJP	0.01	0.002	0.30	4.80	<0.001	[0.01, 0.014]
Work ethic	0.18	0.04	0.22	4.15	<0.001	[0.10, 0.27]
BJP x work ethic	0.006	0.002	0.13	2.61	<0.05	[0.001, 0.010]
MWP	-0.05	0.04	-0.08	-1.13	0.250	[-0.14, 0.04]
Intrinsic org. values	-0.02	0.04	-0.03	-0.39	0.697	[-0.10, 0.07]
Extrinsic org. values	-0.13	0.04	-0.18	-2.92	<0.01	[-0.21, -0.04]
Social org. values	-0.90	0.05	-0.13	-1.97	0.050	[-0.18, 0.00]
Prestige org. values	-0.01	0.05	-0.02	-0.26	0.794	[-0.10, 0.08]
Constant	1.52	0.03		54.12	<0.001	[1.47, 1.58]
MWP	-0.05	0.05	-0.08	-1.17	0.242	[-0.14, 0.04]
Work ethic	0.19	0.04	0.23	4.31	<0.001	[0.10, 0.28]
MWP x work ethic	-0.08	0.05	-0.09	-1.79	0.074	[-0.17, 0.01]
BJP	0.01	0.002	0.31	4.80	<0.001	[0.01, 0.02]
Intrinsic org. values	-0.02	0.04	-0.03	-0.42	0.675	[-0.10, 0.07]
Extrinsic org. values	-0.13	0.04	-0.19	-2.95	<0.01	[-0.22, -0.04]
Social org. values	-0.90	0.05	-0.13	-1.97	0.050	[-0.18, 0.00]
Prestige org. values	-0.01	0.05	-0.02	-0.26	0.792	[-0.10, 0.08]

BJP bullshit job perception, *MWP* meaningful work perceptions, *CWB* counterproductive work behavior
N = 247

**Fig. 2** Graphic representation of the moderating effect of work ethic concerning the relation between BJP and CWB (Study 1)

values and MWP. However, the relationship between MWP and deviant work behavior was not significantly moderated by work ethic when controlling for BJP.

Discussion

The findings of Study 1 provide support for a positive association between BJP and CWB, with BJP emerging as the primary predictor even when controlling for MWP (RQ1). Perceiving one's job as pointless, unnecessary, and/or pernicious appears to contribute to the engagement in CWB among employees more strongly than a lack of positive experiences (MWP). Furthermore, our results indicate that

the relation between BJP and CWB is moderated by work ethic. As proposed, a stronger positive association between BJP and CWB was observed among individuals scoring high on work ethic. Thus, work ethic may function as an enhancer for the co-occurrence of BJP and high levels of CWB. These findings remained robust after controlling for MWP and a relevant contextual factor, organizational work values. For MWP the interaction was not significant after controlling for BJP (RQ2). To validate these results, we conducted a second study with a comparable sample size in the USA. Further, we incorporated a different set of contextual control variables (tightness-looseness).

Study 2

Method

Procedure and Participants

Participants were recruited via the crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk with a compensation of US\$2.50 conducted in November 2022 and February 2023. The final sample involved *N* = 253 working US-American participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.73$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 22\text{--}66$, 117 women, 136 men).

Measures

We asked participants to fill in inventories to measure BJP, MWP, work ethic, tightness-looseness, and CWB. MWP¹ ($\alpha=0.91$), work ethic ($\alpha=0.91$) and CWB ($\alpha=0.86$) were assessed as described in Study 1.

Bullshit Job Perceptions (BJP)

We slightly reformulated the 3-item BJP scale used in Study 1 and added two additional items to create a BJP 5-item scale. To maintain comparability between the study results, we report all results using the original BJP 3-item scale in the main paper. However, we provide results using the adapted BJP 5-item scale in the supplemental material (Table S13-15 and S22-S24). Cronbach's alpha for the BJP 3-item scale was $\alpha=0.93$.

Tightness-Looseness

Cultural tightness-looseness was measured using the 6-item scale by Gelfand et al. (2011). As we were interested in tightness-looseness at federal state level, the items referred to "state" instead of "country". A sample item reads "There are many social norms that people are to abide in this state". Items were rated on a scale ranging from (1) *strongly disagree* to (6) *strongly agree*. To assess personal tightness-looseness, respondents were asked to indicate their opinion regarding social norms (e.g., "I think it is good, that people in this state almost always comply with social norms."). To measure organizational tightness-looseness, respondents indicated their opinion regarding the organization they worked for (e.g., "People in my organization almost always comply with social norms."). The data showed anomalies in the covariance structure and low Cronbach's alpha of all tightness-looseness scales. Therefore, reverse worded items were not included in the calculation of all three tightness-looseness variables. As discussed in the literature, reverse-coded items often offer no advantages regarding response

bias and may result in multi-factor loaded item structures (Zhang et al., 2016). Cronbach's alpha for the scales (without reverse-coded items) were Tightness_{cultural} ($\alpha=0.70$), Tightness_{personal} ($\alpha=0.75$), Tightness_{organizational} ($\alpha=0.71$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The results show again that respondents perceived their job as substantially filled with bullshit tasks ($M=41.65$; $SD=31.12$). Correlations and descriptive statistics are shown in Table 4 (see Table S7 in supplement for descriptive analysis, Table S8 for BJP item descriptives and S9 for example work episodes described by participants). BJP and MWP were not significantly correlated ($r=0.10$). BJP was significantly positively correlated with work ethic ($r=0.34$), CWB ($r=0.64$) and cultural tightness ($r=0.20$). Of note, MWP was robustly related to work ethic ($r=.58$) and moderately related to CWB ($r=0.28$) in this sample. As the regression analyses below reveal, the positive relation between MWP and CWB disappears when controlling for work ethic. The covariation of MWP and work ethic is a pattern that we observed in all of our studies conducted in the USA so far, whereas we typically do not observe such a covariation in data collected in the UK or Germany.

Hierarchical Regressions

To investigate RQ1, hierarchical regression analyses were computed, entering MWP as a predictor in a first step. In the second step BJP was added to the model. The major finding was that BJP significantly predicted CWB and emerged as the main predictor of the hierarchical regression for CWB (Table 5). Thus, BJP is more closely related to CWB than MWP (RQ1).

Table 4 Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations (Study 2)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) BJP	41.65	31.12	–						
(2) MWP	3.86	0.73	0.10	–					
(3) Cultural tightness	4.57	0.71	0.20**	0.67**	–				
(4) Personal tightness	4.60	0.75	0.18**	0.65**	0.77**	–			
(5) Organizational tightness	4.68	0.72	0.07	0.51**	0.65**	0.70**	–		
(6) Work ethic	4.38	0.88	0.34**	0.58**	0.59**	0.62**	0.39**	–	
(7) CWB	3.05	1.17	0.64**	0.28**	0.30**	0.28**	0.14*	0.53**	–

BJP bullshit job perception, MWP meaningful work perception, CWB counterproductive work behavior

N = 253

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 5 Standardized Regression Coefficients of Hierarchical Regressions with BJP and MWP as predictors of CWB (Study 2)

Dependent Variable	Steps	Predictors		corrR ²	ΔR^2
		BJP <i>B</i>	MWP <i>B</i>		
CWB	Step 1		0.28**	0.08**	
	Step 2	0.62**	0.22**	0.54**	0.38**

BJP bullshit job perception, *MWP* meaningful work perception, *CWB* counterproductive work behavior

N = 253

p* < .05;; *p* < .01

Moderation Analyses for BJP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Tightness-Looseness)

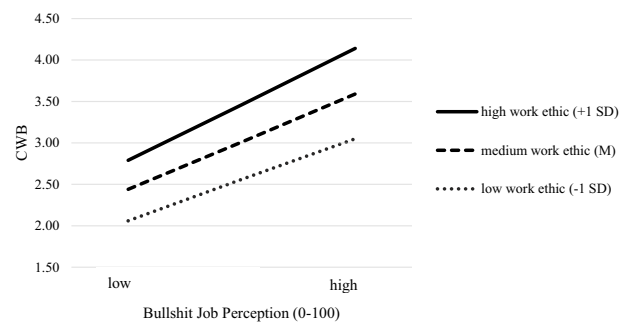
In the first step, we regressed CWB on the control variables and added tightness-looseness variables and MWP (all mean-centered) to the regression ($R^2 = 0.12$; $F(4, 248) = 8.24$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors BJP and work ethic (mean-centered), which significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.41$; $F(2, 246) = 106.59$, $p < 0.001$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for BJP x work ethic, which contributed significantly above and beyond the main effects but only at trend-level ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$; $F(1, 245) = 3.51$, $p = 0.062$). The interaction term of BJP x work ethic term was significant at trend-level (see Table 6).

Table 6 Regressing scores of CWB onto BJP, MWP, work ethic (predictor variables were mean-centered), and their interaction terms and control variables (Study 2)

Parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
CWB						
Constant	30.01	0.05		55.50	<0.001	[2.90, 3.12]
BJP	0.02	0.002	0.49	9.90	<0.001	[0.015, 0.022]
Work ethic	0.55	0.09	0.41	6.06	<0.001	[0.37, 0.73]
BJP x work ethic	0.004	0.002	0.09	1.87	0.062	[0.00, 0.01]
MWP	0.06	0.10	0.04	0.61	0.545	[-0.14, 0.27]
Cultural Tightness	0.03	0.13	0.02	0.27	0.787	[-0.21, 0.28]
Personal Tightness	-0.09	0.13	-0.06	-0.73	0.465	[-0.34, 0.16]
Organizational Tightness	-0.09	0.10	-0.05	-0.84	0.402	[-0.29, 0.12]
CWB						
Constant	3.05	0.06		56.61	<0.001	[2.95, 3.16]
MWP	0.09	0.12	0.06	0.74	0.459	[-0.15, -0.33]
Work ethic	0.48	0.08	0.36	5.74	<0.001	[0.31, 0.64]
MWP x work ethic	-0.02	0.05	-0.02	-0.28	0.777	[-0.12, 0.09]
BJP	0.02	0.002	0.52	11.00	<0.001	[-0.02, 0.02]
Cultural Tightness	0.01	0.13	0.01	0.11	0.911	[-0.24, 0.26]
Personal Tightness	-0.09	0.13	-0.06	-0.69	0.3493	[-0.34, 0.16]
Organizational Tightness	-0.05	0.11	-0.03	-0.45	0.656	[-0.27, 0.17]

BJP bullshit job perception, *MWP* meaningful work perceptions, *CWB* counterproductive work behavior
N = 253

To decompose the interaction, moderation analysis (Model 1) using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022) was applied. As in Study 1, the analyses revealed a positive relationship between BJP and CWB. The positive relation was stronger for individuals high in work ethic (1 SD above the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = 10.20$, $p < 0.001$) than for individuals low in work ethic (1 SD below the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.003$, $t = 5.57$, $p < 0.001$). The results are shown in Fig. 3.

**Fig. 3** Graphic representation of the moderating effect of work ethic concerning the relation between BJP and CWB (Study 2)

Moderation Analyses for MWP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Tightness-Looseness)

In the first step, we regressed CWB on the control variables and added all three types of tightness and BJP (all mean-centered) to the regression ($R^2 = 0.45$; $F(4, 248) = 50.47$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors MWP and work ethic (mean-centered), which significantly improved the model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.08$; $F(2, 246) = 20.39$, $p < 0.001$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for MWP x work ethic, which did not significantly contribute above and beyond the main effects ($\Delta R^2 = 0.00$; $F(1, 245) = 0.08$, $p = 0.777$). Additionally, the interaction term was not significant (see Table 6).

Concerning our research question (RQ2), we summarize that the relationship between BJP and deviant work behavior (CWB) was moderated by work ethic only at trend-level. The pattern of the results is in line with those of Study 1, but the interaction effect was rather small and reached only trend-level significance.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

In addition, we performed exploratory factor analysis, showing that BJP and MWP represented two distinct factors (see Table S12, supplement).

Discussion

Our findings were consistent with those in Study 1, documenting a robust positive association between BJP and CWB. Even when controlling for MWP, BJP remained the major predictor (RQ1). Furthermore, our results suggest a potential moderating role of work ethic in the relationship between BJP and CWB, although the interaction reached only trend-level significance, but remained robust even after accounting for MWP and contextual factors (tightness-looseness). Parallel interaction effects did not emerge for MWP (RQ2). Parallel to Beck et al. (2023), a factor analysis supports the idea that MWP and BJP capture different aspects of work experiences (see supplement, Table S12). To consolidate these results, a third study was conducted with a comparable sample size, introducing an additional behavioral outcome variable, cyberloafing.

Study 3

Method

Procedure and Participants

Participants were recruited via personal contacts and social media platforms in December 2022 until January 2023. The final sample involved $N = 240$ working German participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.65$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.82$, $\text{range}_{\text{age}} = 19\text{--}65$, 164 women, 74 men, 3 non-binary).

Measures

We asked participants to fill in inventories to measure BJP, MWP, work ethic, tightness-looseness, CWB, and Cyberloafing. BJP ($\alpha = 0.74$), MWP² ($\alpha = 0.90$), work ethic ($\alpha = 0.87$), Tightness_{cultural} ($\alpha = 0.78$), Tightness_{personal} ($\alpha = 0.88$), Tightness_{organizational} ($\alpha = 0.81$), and CWB ($\alpha = 0.87$) were assessed as described in Study 1 and 2.³

Cyberloafing

An 11-item scale created by Lim (2002) was used to assess cyberloafing. Participants were asked to indicate how often they engaged in specific activities at work such as “Send non-work-related e-mails”. Items were rated on a scale ranging from (1) *never* to (5) *constantly*. Cronbach’s alpha was 0.89.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The results show once more that respondents perceived their job as substantially filled with bullshit tasks. Even though the mean for BJP was clearly lower than in Study 2, we observed a quite similar level as in Study 1 ($M = 20.53$; $SD = 18.82$). Parallel to Study 1, BJP and MWP correlated negatively at a moderate level ($r = -0.46$; Table 7). BJP was significantly positively correlated with tightness ($r = 0.26$) and work ethic ($r = 0.21$). As predicted BJP was also positively associated with CWB ($r = 0.39$) and Cyberloafing ($r = 0.32$) (Table S14, see Table S16 in supplement for descriptive analysis of study sample, Table S17 for BJP item descriptives and S18 for example work episodes described by participants).

Table 7 Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations (Study 3)

	Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1)	BJP	20.53	18.82	–							
(2)	MWP	3.36	0.85	–0.46**	–						
(3)	Cultural tightness	4.39	0.68	0.26**	–0.13*	–					
(4)	Personal tightness	3.93	0.93	0.03	0.04	0.25**	–				
(5)	Organizational tightness	4.35	0.74	0.10	–0.03	0.39**	0.43**	–			
(6)	Work ethic	3.17	0.86	0.21**	0.06	0.22**	0.46**	0.26**	–		
(7)	CWB	1.64	0.59	0.39**	–0.20**	0.22**	0.21**	0.16*	0.46**	–	
(8)	Cyberloafing	2.21	0.74	0.32**	–0.15**	0.21**	0.20**	0.13*	0.30**	0.54**	–

N = 240

**p* < .05

***p* < .01

Table 8 Standardized Regression Coefficients of Hierarchical Regressions with MWP and BJP as predictors of CWB and Cyberloafing (Study 3)

Dependent Variable	Steps	Predictors		corrR ²	ΔR ²
		BJP <i>B</i>	MWP <i>B</i>		
CWB	Step 1		–0.19**	0.04**	
	Step 2	0.39**	–0.02	0.20**	0.17**
Cyberloafing	Step 1		–0.15*	0.02*	
	Step 2	0.32**	–0.01	0.15**	0.08**

BJP bullshit job perception, MWP Meaningful work perception, CWB counterproductive work behavior

N = 240

**p* < .05

***p* < .01

Hierarchical Regressions

To investigate RQ1, hierarchical regression analyses were computed. MWP was entered in the first step for the prediction of CWB and Cyberloafing. In the second step BJP was added (Table 8). The major finding was that BJP significantly predicted CWB and Cyberloafing and it emerged as the main predictor in the hierarchical regression. In line with Study 1 and 2, BJP is more closely related to CWB and Cyberloafing than MWP (RQ1).

Moderation Analyses for BJP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Tightness-Looseness)

In the first step, we regressed CWB and Cyberloafing on the control variables and all tightness-looseness variables and MWP (all mean-centered; CWB: $R^2 = 0.11$; $F(4, 235) = 7.00$, $p < 0.001$, Cyberloafing: $R^2 = 0.09$; $F(4, 235) = 5.53$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors BJP and work ethic (mean-centered), which significantly

improved the model (CWB: $\Delta R^2 = 0.21$; $F(2, 233) = 36.35$, $p < 0.001$, Cyberloafing: $\Delta R^2 = 0.09$; $F(2, 233) = 12.91$, $p < 0.001$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for BJP x work ethic, which contributed significantly above and beyond the main effects (CWB: $\Delta R^2 = 0.04$; $F(1, 232) = 14.69$, $p < 0.001$, Cyberloafing: $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$; $F(1, 232) = 10.03$, $p < 0.01$). The interaction terms were significant, indicating moderation effects (see Table 9).

To decompose the interactions, a moderation analysis (Model 1) using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2022) was applied. As in Studies 1 and 2, the analyses revealed a positive relationship between BJP and CWB. The positive relation was stronger for individuals high on work ethic (1 *SD* above the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.014$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = 6.72$, $p < 0.001$) than for individuals low on work ethic (1 *SD* below the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.004$, $SE = 0.002$, $t = 1.53$, $p = 0.127$) (see Fig. 4). The same pattern was found for Cyberloafing (see Fig. 5). The positive relation was stronger for individuals high on work ethic (1 *SD* above the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.02$, $SE = 0.003$, $t = 5.33$, $p < 0.001$) than for individuals low on work ethic (1 *SD* below the mean; $B_{\text{BJP}} = 0.003$, $SE = 0.003$, $t = 1.04$, $p = 0.302$) (see Fig. 5).

Moderation Analyses for MWP x Work Ethic (Controlling for Tightness-Looseness)

In the first step, we regressed CWB and Cyberloafing on the control variables and all tightness-looseness variables and BJP (all mean-centered; CWB: $R^2 = 0.20$; $F(4, 235) = 14.75$, $p < 0.001$, Cyberloafing: $R^2 = 0.15$; $F(4, 235) = 10.03$, $p < 0.001$). In the second step, we added the predictors MWP and work ethic (mean-centered), which significantly improved the model (CWB: $\Delta R^2 = 0.12$; $F(2, 233) = 20.23$, $p < 0.001$, Cyberloafing: $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$; $F(2, 233) = 4.45$, $p < 0.05$). In the third step, we added the interaction term for MWP x work ethic, which did contribute significantly above and beyond the main effects for CWB ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$; $F(1,$

Table 9 Regressing scores of dependent variables onto BJP, MWP, work ethic (predictor variables were mean-centered), and their interaction terms and control variables (Study 3)

Parameter	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>
CWB						
Constant	1.62	0.03		51.08	<0.001	[1.54, 1.68]
BJP	0.01	0.002	0.19	2.98	<0.01	[0.002, 0.011]
Work ethic	0.24	0.04	0.35	5.45	<0.001	[0.15, 0.32]
BJP x work ethic	0.01	0.002	0.22	3.83	<0.001	[0.003, 0.010]
MWP	-0.10	0.04	-0.14	-2.29	<0.05	[-0.18, -0.01]
Cultural tightness	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.76	.447	[-0.06, 0.14]
Personal tightness	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.48	.633	[-0.06, 0.10]
Organizational tightness	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	-0.19	.847	[-.11 .09]
Cyberloafing						
Constant	2.19	0.04		50.34	<.001	[2.10, 2.28]
BJP	0.01	0.003	0.17	2.43	<.05	[.001, .012]
Work ethic	0.13	0.06	0.16	2.21	<.05	[.001, .251]
BJP x work ethic	0.01	0.002	0.20	3.17	<0.01	[0.003, 0.012]
MWP	-0.08	0.06	-0.09	-1.31	0.192	[-0.19, 0.04]
Cultural tightness	0.09	0.07	.09	1.31	0.191	[-0.05, 0.23]
Personal tightness	0.08	0.06	.10	1.43	0.154	[-0.03, 0.19]
Organizational tightness	-0.03	0.07	-.03	-0.45	.651	[-0.16, 0.10]
CWB						
Constant	1.64	.03		51.56	<0.001	[1.58, 1.71]
MWP	-0.09	.04	-0.13	-2.01	<0.05	[-0.18, -0.002]
Work ethic	0.28	.04	0.41	6.46	<0.001	[0.20, 0.37]
MWP x work ethic	-0.10	.04	-0.13	-2.21	<0.05	[-.18, -0.01]
BJP	0.01	.002	0.24	3.81	<0.001	[0.004, 0.01]
Cultural tightness	0.07	.05	0.08	1.23	0.220	[-0.04, 0.17]
Personal tightness	0.002	.04	0.003	0.04	0.969	[-0.08, 0.08]
Organizational tightness	-0.003	.05	-0.004	-0.06	0.952	[-0.10, 0.10]
Cyberloafing						
Constant	2.22	.04		50.62	<0.001	[2.13, 2.30]
MWP	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	-0.88	0.382	[-0.17, 0.07]
Work ethic	0.18	0.06	0.21	2.99	<0.01	[0.06, 0.30]
MWP x work ethic	-0.04	0.06	-0.05	-0.73	0.465	[-0.16, 0.07]
BJP	0.01	0.003	0.23	3.19	<0.001	[0.003, 0.014]
Cultural tightness	0.11	0.07	0.10	1.44	0.153	[-0.04, 0.25]
Personal tightness	0.07	0.06	0.08	1.13	0.260	[-0.05, 0.18]
Organizational tightness	-0.02	0.07	-0.02	-0.32	0.746	[-0.16, 0.11]

BJP bullshit job perception, *MWP* Meaningful work perception, *CWB* counterproductive work behavior
N = 240

232) = 4.90, $p < 0.05$) but not for Cyberloafing ($\Delta R^2 = 0.002$; $F(1, 232) = 0.54$, $p = 0.465$) (Table 9). However, to further evaluate the results we additionally regressed CWB on all variables including both interaction terms (MWP x work ethic and BJP x work ethic). Again, BJP x work ethic significantly improved the model but diminished the effect of MWP x work ethic for CWB and Cyberloafing (see Table S20 in supplement).

Concerning our research question (RQ2), we conclude that the relationship between BJP and deviant work behavior (CWB) was moderated by work ethic. The interaction effect

remained robust when controlling for tightness-looseness and MWP. In contrast, the relationship between MWP and deviant work behavior was not significantly moderated by work ethic when controlling for BJP and the interaction term BJP x work ethic. The results confirm those obtained in Studies 1 and 2.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

In addition, we performed exploratory factor analysis, showing that BJP and MWP represent two distinct factors (see Table S21, supplement).

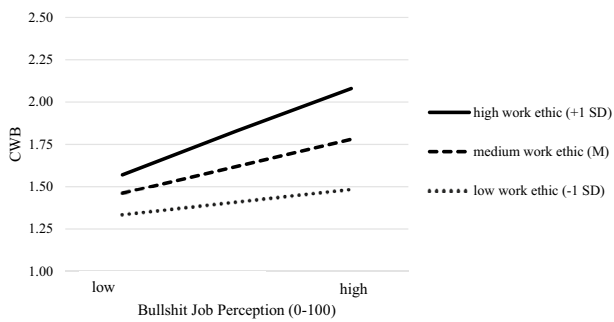


Fig. 4 Graphic representation of the moderating effect of work ethic concerning the relation between BJP and CWB (Study 3)

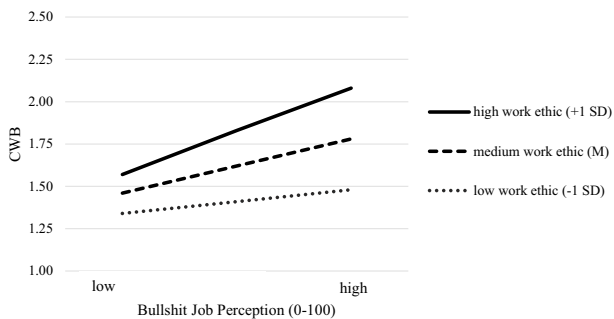


Fig. 5 Graphic representation of the moderating effect of work ethic concerning the relation between BJP and Cyberloafing (Study 3)

Discussion

Confirming the results of Study 1 and 2, these findings demonstrate the positive association of BJP and deviant work behavior and that BJP emerged as the primary predictor of CWB even when accounting for MWP. These results were further replicated with respect to Cyberloafing, representing an additional form of deviant work behavior (RQ1). Consistent with Study 1 and 2, we found that work ethic moderates the relation between BJP and CWB, which suggests that work ethic represents a crucial boundary condition regarding the degree to which BJP are related to employees' CWB. Similar patterns were observed for Cyberloafing as dependent variable, underscoring the role of work ethic as an enforcer of the negative relation of BJP to deviant work behavior (RQ2). All results were robust when contextual control variables were included. Again, a factor analysis supports the idea that MWP and BJP capture different aspects of work experiences (see supplement, Table S21).

General Discussion

In the present study, we pursued four key objectives. First, following Beck et al. (2023), we aimed to validate a conceptualization of subjective experiences at work that encompasses both positive and negative features. While in research on emotions positive and negative affect are conceptualized and assessed as separate components (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Kahneman et al., 2004) the complexity of positive and negative features in the conceptualization and measurement of work experiences has not been adequately implemented thus far. However, it is evident that many (if not most) jobs entail both negative experiences and positive experiences (Beck et al., 2023), such as tedious tasks at one day and meaningful work tasks the next. Considering this differentiation, Beck et al. (2023) proposed the assessment of negative features in addition to positive features to realize a proper operationalization of experiences at work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). The concept of bullshit jobs (Graeber, 2018) is particularly relevant in this context as it underscores the significance of negative experiences at work (pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious activities). Parallel to Beck et al. (2023), our findings confirm that experiences related to positive aspects at work (assessed with the WAMI) and BJP were only weakly (up to moderately) correlated and represented two separable factors in factor analyses. Moreover, the differential results of the moderation analyses involving work ethic show that distinct mechanisms are associated with MWP and BJP. These empirical results underscore the need to assess BJP (negative experiences) and MWP (positive experiences) separately to understand the complexity of different facets of work experiences.

The second aim of our contribution was to examine the relation between the experience of bullshit or meaningless work episodes and deviant work behavior. Our analyses revealed that BJP was significantly related to CWB and Cyberloafing. Moreover, even when including MWP in the regression models, BJP emerged as the main and primary predictor. The findings align with the notion proposed by Spector (2011) that exposure to frustrating or stressful circumstances can act as trigger for CWB. Previous research indicated that tasks threatening employees' professional identity or self-esteem contribute to deviant or aggressive behavior at work (Semmer et al., 2015). Consequently, experiencing BJP may lead to similar and potentially severe consequences as those resulting from job stressors (Fox et al., 2001; Gilboa et al., 2008). Importantly, although MWP exhibited a kind of preventative role concerning engagement in negative work behavior as previously suggested (Allan et al., 2019), our findings revealed that BJP remained the primary predictor, with MWP providing only a very limited increment in the prediction of CWB and Cyberloafing.

Following previous work, we acknowledge the fact that contextual factors and personality traits can play a crucial role concerning CWB. For example, factors such as trait anxiety, trait anger or irritability can intensify the negative effects of organizational constraints or personal conflict on CWB (Fida et al., 2014; Fox et al., 2001). Thus, most importantly, we identified a boundary factor for the relationship between BJP and deviant work behavior, leading us to our next objective. Our third aim was to unravel how work experiences relate to deviant work behavior as a function of work ethic. In all studies, we consistently found that BJP was positively related to CWB (and Cyberloafing; Study 3), especially and more strongly among individuals endorsing work ethic. For MPW, the interaction effects were not significant, when considering the interaction between BJP and work ethic (Study 3). This indicates that the moderating effect of work ethic was relevant only for BJP. Although previous studies showed positive associations of work ethic and favorable work outcomes (Meriac & Gorman, 2017; Miller et al., 2002), our results suggest that higher levels of work ethic amplify the relation of BJP to CWB and Cyberloafing. The pattern may be explained examining the underlying internal processes contributing to such deviant behavior. Consistent with Spector's (1998) assertion, frustrating or stressful events can evoke negative emotions, like anger and aggression, which in turn contribute to CWB. Moreover, as per Graeber's (2018) argument, individuals often derive their self-worth from work. At the same time, individuals who report experiencing bullshit job characteristics describe their work as mentally draining and humiliating (Graeber, 2018). Consequently, BJP may pose a threat to one's professional identity and self-esteem, signaling a lack of respect, and resulting in feelings of frustration and anger. Additionally, the fact that individuals strongly endorsing work ethic consider work as integral to their self-definition, core self-evaluations, and values (Miller et al., 2002) suggests that individuals strongly endorsing work ethic may experience particularly strong frustration and anger when assigned to purposeless and senseless tasks.

Additionally, individuals endorsing work ethic have specific expectations and beliefs about work. They highly value hard or even painful work as a pathway to success, prioritize productivity and efficiency, prefer challenging tasks, and emphasize high-quality outputs (Furnham, 2021). These values may not align with the experience of tasks as "bullshit." Given the connection of work ethic and indifference to conventional morality and antagonistic tendencies (e.g., Christopher et al., 2008; Miller & Konopaske, 2014), employees may attribute their dissatisfaction to their organizations, leading to aggressive behavior as a way to seek revenge against their organizations, addressing unmet expectations and alleviating their unpleasant state.

The fourth aim was to investigate the robustness of the examined relations when accounting for contextual factors such as organizational work values and social norms. The results demonstrate that the interaction effects involving BJP and work ethic on CWB and Cyberloafing remained robust after considering contextual factors.

Implications

Our findings have significant implications for the field of research on work experiences. First, it is crucial to recognize that experiences at work are multifaceted and require precise operationalization, including negative aspects complementing positive aspects (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). BJP is a valuable concept in this regard as it represents negative aspects of work experiences (Beck et al., 2023). Consistent with Walo (2023), our results underscore the widespread prevalence of BJP across different cultures and occupations. Our data indicate that a significant proportion of employees perceive a substantial portion of their work tasks as being filled with bullshit ($M_{bjp} = 28.12$; $SD = 25.12$; $N = 740$, across all three studies). The examples of bullshit work episodes provided by our study participants (Study 2 and 3) offer insights in their experiences of perceived meaninglessness or harmful tasks in their daily work (see Table S9 and S18, supplement). Especially in the FIRE sector (*Finance, Insurance, Real Estate*) and for manager positions, higher levels of BJP were observed, aligning with Graeber's (2018) and Walo's (2023) perspective (see Table S4, S7, and S16 in supplement). Job-bullshitization is not a minor issue and organizations should pay attention to it, especially considering its association with employees' behavior. This leads us to our next implication.

Our results shed light on the fact that negative experiences at work (represented by BJP) are related to problematic employee behavior, particularly the engagement in deviant and unethical behavior like CWB or Cyberloafing. Deviant work behavior has significant financial implications for organizations, highlighting the critical nature of this issue (Carpenter et al., 2021). It is imperative for organizations to recognize and address the role of negative work experiences to foster more productive and harmonious workplaces. Moreover, not only do BJP relate to the engagement in deviant behavior but it's especially the combination with specific attitudes towards work, specifically the endorsement of work ethic. This finding emphasizes the significance of considering both personal and situational factors (and their interplay) in understanding employees' experiences and behavior. Individuals who strongly value work and view it as integral to their identity (strong work ethic) may experience greater frustration and anger when confronted with purposeless and senseless tasks (BJP). Consequently, they may be more inclined to engage in deviant behavior

as means of seeking revenge and venting their anger. Even diligent workers, especially those who are willing to exert great effort and are potentially high performers (Furnham, 2021; Meriac, 2012) can be significantly affected by the experience of senselessness in their work and may respond negatively to it. Organizations should focus on reducing senseless or harmful work tasks but also on promoting positive work attitudes and organizational work values that align with employees' expectations and goals (Kristof, 1996). In addition, future research should delve deeper into the relation between BJP and employees' emotions, such as anger or frustration, resulting in CWB. As Spector (1998) noted, interpersonal processes and emotions play a crucial role in understanding negative employee behavior, along with their interaction with personal characteristics (Fida et al., 2014; Fox et al., 2001) like work ethic.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our studies utilized convenience samples, which limits the generalizability (to the population at large) of our findings, raising concerns about external validity and reliability of the relations in different contexts. However, we attempted to acquire individuals of various professions and backgrounds and replicated the results with three different samples. Future research should incorporate samples from broader backgrounds, including representative samples or employ specific sampling methods.

Additionally, in Study 2, we utilized MTurk Data, which often comes with its own set of challenges and validity threats. MTurk data can be susceptible to problems like inattention, self-misrepresentation, inadequate English language fluency, social desirability bias or vulnerability to web robots. To address these concerns, we implemented several approved strategies (Aguinis et al., 2021) detailed in the study method. However, possible limitations cannot be fully ruled out which also might have led to decreased reliabilities for scales including reverse-coded items.

Next, we acknowledge the concern of common method bias in our self-report studies. Combining subjective measures with other work-related measures may introduce social desirability or consistency effects, potentially inflating relationships or leading to an overestimation of correlations among key variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Particularly, social desirability can be problematic when assessing negative work behavior like CWB. To control for potential common method bias, we conducted Harman's Single Factor Test as a part of our preliminary analyses (see supplemental material; the unrotated factor solution revealed more than one factor with eigenvalues greater than one for each study and no single factor accounted for the majority of the variance). Additionally, as suggested by Podsakoff (2003), we applied strategies to reduce common method

bias by eliminating common scale properties of the predictor and criterion variables. Still, to proof the robustness of our results, future research should consider including separate sources when accessing forms of deviant work behavior or design a longitudinal study (Podsakoff, 2003). However, it should be noted that studies suggest that self-reports of CWB provide valid information and yield similar patterns of findings as reports provided by third parties (Berry et al., 2012).

At last, our paper initiates an empirical exploration of specific aspects within our overarching theoretical framework (Fig. 1), but it is only a first step. It lays the foundation for understanding the consequences of negative work experiences. We recognize empirical research supports a multidimensional structure of work ethic (Miller et al., 2002). The MWEP established by Miller et al. (2002) encompasses seven sub-dimensions of work ethic, revealing varied effects for each dimension including positive associations with favorable work outcomes (Meriac & Gorman, 2017). Our studies primarily focused on the dimensions representing hard work, work centrality, and anti-leisure (as reflected in the scale of Katz & Hass, 1988), anticipating their significance for expectations towards work productivity and resistance to the experience of bullshit tasks. However, we acknowledge the fact that the granularity of exploring more sub-dimensions especially content related to morality could reveal distinct effects. Since we did not examine individual dimensions of work ethic beliefs, our results could differ from other studies due to the scale chosen here. To explore this possibility and to gain a more in-depth examination of the interplay of negative work experiences and work ethic, further research should employ a more granular scale measuring work ethic (e.g., the MWEP; Miller et al., 2002). Additionally, future research should expand the scope to encompass various work-related behaviors, including positive outcomes (e.g., commitment).

Conclusion

Our research addresses the significance of two facets of work experiences acknowledging the complexity of experiences reflecting positivity and negativity. Extensive research suggests that negative experiences can have a more substantial impact compared to positive ones (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The urgency to assess and address BJP is emphasized by its robust association with workplace deviant behavior, particularly among highly motivated, hard-working individuals (reflected in strong work ethic). Future studies should provide further evidence in this direction to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of positive and negative experiences at work, their correlates, and consequences.

Notes

1. Following the results of the factor analysis (see Table S12, supplement), the reverse-coded item W3 (“My work really makes no difference to the world”) was not included in the MWP scale calculation.
2. Following the results of the factor analysis (Table S21, supplement), the reverse-coded item W3 (“My work really makes no difference to the world”) and item W6 (“I know my work makes a positive difference in the world”) were not included in the MWP scale calculation.
3. Note that (as in Study 2) all reverse-coded items were excluded in the scale calculation due to insufficient internal consistency.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval This is an observational study. The Institutional Review Board at Ulm University approved the studies.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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