INDIVIDUAL KNOWLEDGE SABOTAGE ANTECEDENTS: A MULTILEVEL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing (KSH) has been highlighted as the principal knowledge management (KM) process, since it allows organizations to leverage knowledge-based resources in order to obtain a competitive advantage (Wang and Noe, 2010). However, this key process suffers from several counterproductive workplace behavior (CWB) that often remain uncharted pitfalls (Spector et al., 2006). Among them, knowledge sabotage (KSA) has been identified as one of the darker side of KSH which, to date, remains mostly unexplored (Serenko, 2019; Ferraris and Perotti, 2020). In fact, no studies have ever been proposed regarding the antecedents of this phenomenon. The purpose of this research is therefore to identify the role of certain personality traits (i.e., Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness) with respect to KSA occurrences at individual level, and introduce team cohesiveness as an empowering and corrective group level factor. Overall, we are willing to contribute to KSA theoretical development by providing a multilevel empirical analysis and offer useful insights to managers who want to prevent this harmful counterproductive behavior, as well.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS

Knowledge sabotage

KSA is a phenomenon lately observed in Serenko's research and identified as a CWB capable of affecting KSH in organizations (Serenko, 2019; Serenko and Choo, 2020). It has been identified as a dangerous behavior capable of negatively impact on intraorganizational sharing of knowledge (Ferraris and Perotti, 2020; Serenko, 2019). KSH is a KM key process which allows organizations to exploit and capitalize on knowledge-based resources, although some behaviors may hinder or limit its effectiveness (Spector et al., 2006; Wang and Noe, 2010). Thus, it is of interest to empirically investigate individual and team-level antecedents of KSA (i.e. personality traits and group cohesiveness) through a multilevel analysis, in order to figure out their role in preventing this extreme CWB related to KSH processes.

Individual antecedents - Personality traits

Literature shows how personality traits define people decisions and actions, so it also includes the way someone act in organization and share knowledge with colleagues (Matzler et al., 2008). In particular, high levels of Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness to Experience have been associated to interpersonal exchanges and people willingness to share knowledge with organizational team's members (Cabrera et al., 2006; Matzler et al., 2008). From the perspective offered by the five basic dimensions of personality (Costa and McCrae, 1992), we believe certain characteristics of people can be concretely related to this kind of CWB, due to their pointed out relation to information exchange process. This means high levels of Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness are possibly associated with people unwilling to commit KSA. Conversely, we expect lower levels of these attributes to be associated with people willing to commit KSA. This leads us to the development of the following hypothesis.

H1. The higher the level of individual personality traits (Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness), the lower is individual knowledge sabotage within the company.

The moderating role of group cohesiveness

In terms of interpersonal and relational characteristics of people who collaborate in team, it has been stated how strong relationships are able to establish a sense of trust in people which result in an effective information flow (Levin and Cross, 2004). In particular, in a cohesive group where people identify each other with recurrent values and follow common goals, sharing of knowledge is a common attitude raised by folk (Woerkom and Sanders, 2010). Since team characteristics and interpersonal relationships affect the way people operate and pool resources (Wang and Noe, 2010), we argue that team cohesion is a factor capable of improving individual characteristics in the direction of a common sense that prevents sabotage occurrences. In conclusion, we expect group cohesiveness may intensify the role of people's personality traits (i.e., Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness) in avoiding individual KSA attitudes. Moreover, it should be able to alleviate the opposite effect as well, where people with low reported levels of Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Openness have a greater inclination to commit sabotage related to knowledge. Therefore, we hypothesize what follows.

H2. Team member cohesiveness positively moderates the relationships between personality traits and individual knowledge sabotage, such that higher levels of Group Cohesiveness strengthen the negative association between Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Openness and Individual KSA.

Figure 1 graphically represents the relationships among the variables identified in hypotheses.
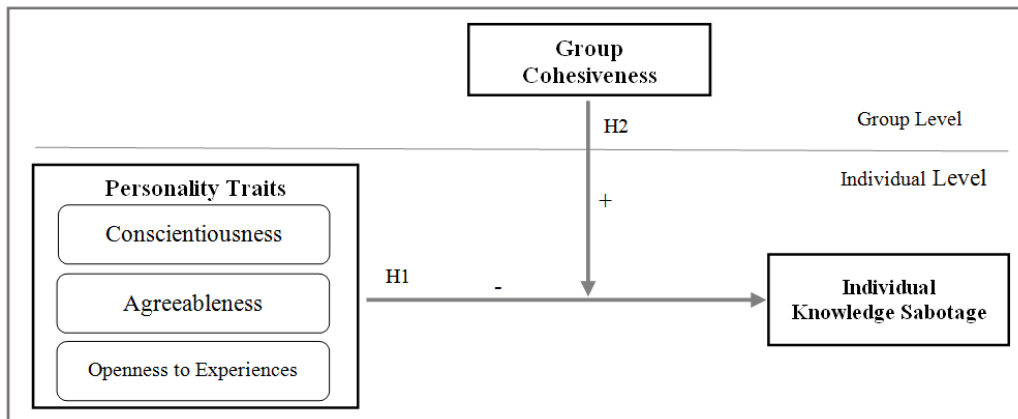
Figure 1 – The multilevel relationship model
Source: Authors' elaboration

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Authors conduct a multilevel analysis with the aim of exploring the relationships between individual and group level variables and knowledge sabotage. Preliminary data for this empirical study are taken from a survey submitted to 200 people. Our target includes managers and employees from Italian companies, different in terms of economic activity and size (minimum number of employees are 50). Then, due to the multilevel nature of the research, a hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) will be carried out in order to test the hypotheses put forward. All items were adapted basing on previous studies (Costa and McCrae, 1992; Serenko and Choo, 2020; Woerkom and Sanders, 2010).

EXPECTED FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In our research we expect to demonstrate the negative association between certain personality traits and KSA occurrences with the moderating role of group cohesiveness. This study aims to enrich the knowledge management literature and shed lights on its antecedents as counterproductive workplace behavior. Moreover, it is our intention to deliver important insights to managers interested in preventing this kind of sabotage in their organization, by suggesting some features to look for in people and how the establishment of cohesion in working groups can actively improve individual conditions.

Keywords: knowledge sabotage, knowledge sharing, personality traits, Big Five, group cohesiveness, knowledge management

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