You’re offended, I’m offended! An empirical study of the proclivity to be offended and what it says about employees’ attitudes and behaviors

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Abstract

For all the news stories devoted to individuals taking offense to various issues, little is known about these individuals or their work-related habits. To address this important gap in organizational and societal knowledge, the reported research draws on cognitive interference theory to define and measure the proclivity to be offended (PTBO). This measure was hypothesized to serve as an off-task stimuli, and results of a time-separated multi-source study found PTBO negatively relates to employees’ task performance and citizenship behavior, and positively relates to counterproductive behavior, as rated by one’s supervisor. PTBO also had implications for employees’ self-reported job satisfaction and workplace engagement. Building on the idea that PTBO may also influence the way employees view their organization’s actions, overall organizational justice was hypothesized and found to mediate the relationship between PTBO and both employees’ behavior and attitudes. Implications for managers and organizations concerned with modern societal movements are discussed.

1. Introduction

Managers are increasingly working in politically-charged contexts. Polls show citizens of many countries are more polarized today than ever before (e.g., Hook, 2017) and that these political divisions increasingly arise in and affect the workplace (McCarthy, 2017). As political divisions grow, so too do reports of people taking offense to politically or socially sensitive events and issues (see Campbell & Manning, 2015; Hess, 2016). Whereas acquiescing to these sensitivities is lauded by some as “a force for promoting positive social outcomes,” others call into question the altruistic portrayal of outrage over perceived social injustices (Rothschild & Keefer, 2017, p. 209). This divergence of views translates into two contrasting perspectives regarding the implications for employees and organizations: one perspective holds that proactively limiting perceived injustices and offenses may benefit both employees and organizations as it helps employees to adaptively respond to the environment and thus advance their careers, while organizations likewise benefit as they send a message to the public that they are concerned with redressing historical injustices and thus attract better applicants and a larger proportion of the market (Marques, 2009). The other perspective suggests individuals and organizations are overly sensitive, and that “politically correct” stances and behaviors stifle communication and distract the individual and organization from developing competencies (Diplock, 2005; Hofstede, 2006; Schwartz, 2010).

Despite rapidly growing media attention to these issues, systematic empirical research exploring the work-related implications of political and social issues, including the increasingly common tendency to be offended by a vast array of events and traditions, is mostly nonexistent. What little research that does exist is largely anecdotal in nature and/or relies on retrospective mono-sourced judgements (Lilienfeld, 2017). Related to this dearth of empirical research is the absence of theoretical explanations for why such issues may relate to important workplace outcomes. Arguments to date instead rely mainly on unsubstantiated emotionally-driven claims that do little to explain why these actions and tendencies might relate to such outcomes. This is particularly problematic for organizational scholars and practitioners as millions of dollars are currently spent on addressing these issues (Fisher, 2015; Gates, 2014) without evidence suggesting such capital expenditures are necessary or beneficial.

Given the importance of these issues, the reported research examines the proclivity to be offended (PTBO) by social events and traditions and how this tendency relates to important organizational considerations. This study specifically develops a new measure labeled the proclivity to be offended and explores behavioral and attitudinal outcomes of this new measure drawing upon cognitive interference theory (Sarason, 1984) as an overarching theoretical framework to explain the relationship between the new measure and workplace phenomena vis-à-vis a key mediating mechanism, namely, perceptions of organizational justice. In doing so, this study makes a number of
important contributions to organization scholarship and practice. First, this study systematically explores an issue at the forefront of political and societal debate which is virtually ignored in the organization and business literatures. This study also offers a theoretical explanation for why this tendency likely relates to work-related phenomena, and follows up this notion with an empirical test of critical relationships with time-separated multi-source data. This research consequently answers calls from practitioners, academic scholars, and the general public (Ely, Meyerson, & Davidson, 2006; Friedersdorf, 2016; Lilienfeld, 2017; Marques, 2009; Rothschild & Keefe, 2017) who express concern over the current state of political correctness and behavior displayed by a large percentage of the population.

2. Defining a new construct and its nomological network

Prior to exploring the nomological network of PTBO, it makes sense to clearly operationalize the construct that is the focus of the present research and distinguish it from analogous terms. PTBO, in the present context, represents a state-like tendency to be sensitive to customarily innocuous societal events and traditions. An example of the type of event viewed offensively under this state is the playing of the United States’ National Anthem. Once a source of universal pride for Americans, the national anthem has recently come to symbolize oppression in the eyes of certain individuals (Clague, 2016; Payne, 2016). While this is one example, it is important to note that PTBO as a state-like tendency does not involve merely being offended by a single event or tradition; rather, PTBO is the tendency to view an array of events and/or traditions as offensive—thus distinguishing this term from related topics such as moral outrage. Psychologists define moral outrage as feelings of anger aimed at third-party transgressors of morality and justice standards (Bies, 1987; Rothschild & Keefe, 2017). Whereas individuals high in PTBO are likely to feel that the social events or traditions to which they take offense also violate moral or equitable standards, PTBO addresses a general state-like tendency to be offended by such events whereas moral outrage represents an emotional expression with regards to a specific person’s actions.

PTBO is also distinct from two other popular terms used in lexicon of social discussion, namely political correctness and microaggressions. Some might argue PTBO includes aspects of political correctness, which represents the avoidance of language that may exclude, marginalize, or offend members of protected classes, yet PTBO refers not to the act of avoidance but rather a tendency to take offense to events and/or traditions. Likewise, PTBO is distinct from the phenomenon of microaggressions, “subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities,” women, and other marginalized groups that implicitly commuicate hostility (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 139; see also Sue et al., 2007). PTBO does not necessarily include feelings of hostility nor does the reaction need to be elicited by actions directed toward specific minority groups; rather, it is a cognitive framework set in one’s existing psyche to be offended by an array of events or traditions.

2.1. PTBO and work-related behavior and attitudes

Having defined and distinguished PTBO from related concepts, it is important to turn to the relationship between this phenomenon and important work-related behavior and attitudes. This study focuses explicitly on six outcomes variables: task performance, citizenship behavior aimed at individuals within an organization (OCBI), maintaining a positive attitude (also known as sportsmanship), counterproductive work behaviors (CW Bs), employee job satisfaction, and employee engagement. Task performance represents those actions directly involved in the achievement of core job tasks whereas citizenship behavior represents more informal, spontaneous behaviors that support the organization indirectly by creating an environment conducive to success (Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010; Williams & Anderson, 1991). OCBI, in particular, represents extra-role and discretionary behaviors that benefit the individuals within an organization (Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006). Sportsmanship also represents discretionary behavior, but unlike OCBI, sportsmanship is aimed at the organization and includes maintaining a positive attitude even in the face of unforeseen failures or difficulties (Organ et al., 2006; Organ, 1988). In contrast to those behaviors that directly and indirectly contribute to an organization’s success, CW Bs represent acts intended to harm an organization’s production process (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Stewart, Bing, Davison, Wochr, & McIntyre, 2009). The final two outcomes, job satisfaction and employee engagement, represent critically important workplace attitudes that are essential for organizational success (Kataria, Garg, & Rastogi, 2012; Koy, 2001; Ostroff, 1992). Specifically, job satisfaction represents a positive emotional state resulting from the assessment of one’s job (Locke, 1976), and engagement represents an individual’s physical investment into their work role (Rich et al., 2010). These four behaviors and two attitudes are the primary criteria because polemic discussions about emerging phenomena like PTBO explicitly suggest they relate to critical aspects of workplace productivity such as these (e.g., Gates, 2014; Lilienfeld, 2017). Cognitive interference theory, as explained below, also provides an explanation for why these relationships likely exist. Thus, there are both practical and theoretical reasons for focusing on these outcome variables.

For readers unfamiliar with cognitive interference theory (Sarason, 1984), an overview of existing theoretical and empirical findings can help set the stage for the relationships proposed in this study. The basic idea of cognitive interference theory is that off-task thoughts interfere with concentration and performance by drawing limited processing and sense-making resources away from task-relevant stimuli to task-irrelevant stimuli (Pierce et al., 1998; Sarason, 1984; Sarason, Sarason, Keefe, Hayes, & Shearin, 1986; Vasey & Daleiden, 1996; Yee & Vaughan, 1996). Attention is by its very nature a discriminatory process in which myriad environmental cues are ignored in favor of others (Smith, 1996). As there are limitations in a person’s ability to process internal and external stimuli, any processing devoted to task-irrelevant cues leaves less capacity available to support the execution of task-related activities (MacLeod, 1996; Sarason, 1984). A broad range of conditions contribute to cognitive interference, but existing research is clear that stress/worry-related thoughts provide the most powerful source of interference (Klinger, 1996; MacLeod, 1996; Vasey & Daleiden, 1996). This is significant for understanding PTBO’s potential role in the workplace as being offended is both a stressor and a task-irrelevant stimulus. Also significant to understanding the potential role of PTBO in the workplace is existing research that indicates stress interferes with our reasoning abilities and memory retrieval processes (Mueller, 1992; Zeidner, 1998)—two factors clearly important for performance. Additional research indicates worrisome thoughts have a peremptory power, taking precedence over other areas and priming one to focus on aspects of the stimuli not perceived or felt by others (Carver, 1996; Klinger, 1996; Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1996; Yee & Vaughan, 1996). Research in various domains conclude cognitive interference is thereby associated with performance deficits (Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Coy, O’Brien, Tabaczynski, Northern, & Carels, 2011; McCarthy, Harbluk, & Jelley, 2009; Mikulincer, 1989; Rafaeli et al., 2012). Turning to one of the primary criterion organizations care about, task performance, there appears to be good reason to propose a connection with PTBO. Task performance reflects those activities related to the execution or maintenance of the organization’s core mission. Performing task-oriented activities at optimal levels typically relies on smooth cognitive functioning across areas of processing and recall (Rafaeli et al., 2012). This includes an ability to put aside worries and preoccupations in addition to an ability to be attentive to what is taking place around us (Sarason et al., 1986; Sarason, 1984). The proclivity to see offense in ordinarily innocuous events, as a result, likely gets in the way of effective task performance as being offended diverts attentional resources away from task-relevant cues and requirements towards the
processing of peripheral or secondary cues. The offensive event competes with and impairs task-relevant thoughts and actions by reducing the amount of accessible cognitive resources. Rather than focusing on task requirements, those high in PTBO are distracted by perceived offenses that seem unjust; moreover, existing research indicates being distracted by worrisome thoughts creates a feeling of helplessness as divided attention prohibits resolving actions (cf. Mikulincer, 1989). Imagine the scenario where an organization is days away from the end of the quarter; sales numbers are generally good but several sales people have yet to reach pre-determined quarterly goals. As meeting sales goals is a substantial part of one’s year-end bonus, those who need to finalize ongoing conversations with clients need to focus all their attention on preparing one final pitch that answers all questions and removes any remaining doubts. The person offended by everyday occurrences diverts important and limited cognitive resources away from the client (and potential sale) towards a task-irrelevant stimuli (cf. Sarason, 1984; Sarason et al., 1986). In this way, PTBO likely harms task-performance by lessening and interfering with task-related attention.

Hypothesis 1. The proclivity to be offended negatively relates to task performance.

Task performance is clearly important for organizational success, yet research indicates discretionary behaviors also play a key role in the functioning of organizations. Citizenship behaviors represent a family of behaviors that are both voluntary and helpful (Organ et al., 2006). As many citizenship behaviors involve the helping of one’s coworkers (Lee & Allen, 2002; Williams & Anderson, 1991), the work and cognitive dynamics found in those with a PTBO suggest possible implications for OCBs. When one is offended by something, natural processes cause that individual to divert cognitive resources to the eliciting stimuli; this imposes additional processing demands on an employee while simultaneously reducing the number of available resources that could be allocated to helping a coworker. In fact, existing research indicates cognitive interference reduces one’s sensitivity to peripheral cues (Mueller, 1992; Smith, 1996). As individually-aimed citizenship behavior requires an awareness of the needs of others, it seems those with a proclivity to be offended may not pick up cues suggesting help is needed and/or not have the available resources needed to help. Citizenship behaviors may also (and frequently are) aimed at the broader organization. Sportmanship, for instance, represents an employee’s tolerance or willingness to overlook problematic work characteristics and maintain a focus on resolving task demands (Joireman, Daniels, George-Falvy, & Kamdar, 2006; Organ et al., 2006; Stoverink, Chiaburu, Li, & Zheng, 2015). Other key sporting behaviors include avoiding complaints about trivial matters and “making mountains out of molehills” (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Recent media reports (e.g., Bodley, 2017; Holley, 2017; Weinstein, 2017) suggest those who take offense to social issues and events are increasingly vocal—a pattern likely repeated within organizations.

Hypothesis 2. The proclivity to be offended negatively relates to OCBs in the form of (a) OCBIs and (b) sportmanship.

Not all discretionary behaviors help an organization or its members. CWBs, as referenced above, refer to a family of volitional acts that harm the organization’s functioning. Given what cognitive interference research tells us about the processing of negative thoughts or events (Sarason et al., 1986; Vasey & Daleiden, 1996; Yee & Vaughan, 1996), it appears there is good reason to expect a relationship between PTBO and CWBs. For example, perceived threats impair brain functioning and slow down cognitive processing (Goleman, 2004). Being offended is analogous to a threat of sorts, which means one can expect those high in PTBO to take more time processing and making sense of stimuli overlooked or disregarded by many. Germane to this investigation is established research indicating working at a slow pace is a form of CWB (Stewart et al., 2009). Yet, the interference that comes into play when processing offensive events is not the only reason to expect a relationship between the two. Organizational justice research suggests individuals are “hard-wired” to respond to instances of incivility (i.e., “incivility is an example of unfair treatment” Griffin, 2010, pp. 312–313) with attempts at retribution (Folger, Cropanzano, & Goldman, 2005). As being offended shares overlapping properties, a connection between PTBO and CWBs seems likely as those offended may seek out negative reciprocity in an effort to rebalance a perceived inequitable situation.

Hypothesis 3. The proclivity to be offended positively relates to CWBs.

Cognitive interference theory suggests that a focus on the offensive nature of social issues and events distracts employees from performing at an optimal level, but it also stands to reason that PTBO correlates with individuals’ attitudes. This is because people who experience cognitive interference report dissatisfaction at an inability to become absorbed in key life events (Sarason et al., 1996), Miller (1996) similarly notes those with a tendency to monitor and scan the environment for threatening information (arguably those high in PTBO) do not live a “happy-go-lucky” life style” (p. 184). By definition, cognitive interference also represents mental disengagement as those distracted by task-irrelevant cues are unable to concentrate and absorb themselves into the focal task (Carver, 1996; Sarason et al., 1996). Concentration, focus, and absorption are all keys to workplace engagement (Rich et al., 2010), meaning those distracted by offensive events are unlikely to devote their full attention to the job. The justice literature parallels these arguments, finding individuals disassociate (i.e., disengage) themselves from those that treat others poorly (Blader & Tyler, 2005; Haynie, Flynn, & Bauer, 2019). To the extent that PTBO leads individuals to focus on the inequitable characteristics of the workplace (cf. Schwartz, 2002, 2010), it likely prevents such individuals from fully engaging in their work and also likely elicits feelings of dissatisfaction.

Hypothesis 4. The proclivity to be offended negatively relates to job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 5. The proclivity to be offended negatively relates to employee engagement.

2.2. Underlying mechanism connecting PTBO and work-related behavior and attitudes

Closer examination of cognitive interference theory and the explanation put forth above suggesting a connection between PTBO and important workplace criteria provides insight into a potential underlying mechanism responsible for these relationships. That is, it was suggested that PTBO serves as a cognitive distraction that re-routes limited resources from task-relevant cues to task-irrelevant cues as employees attempt to make sense of offensive events. Yet, it is important to remember the root of being offended by a wide array of events and traditions lies, in part, in the belief that such events and traditions represent an unfair treatment of specific groups of people. This proclivity also represents, in part, a belief that such inequity is ingrained into the fabric of organizations, and, consequently individual obligations to such institutions are lessened. Relevant to this notion is existing research that suggests social justice (which includes sensitivity to offensive events) goes hand in hand with organizational justice (e.g., Cartabuke et al., 2019; Stone-Romero & Stone, 2005). Also relevant is research indicating the more threatening or offensive events a person detects, the lower the threshold for activation becomes (Carver, 1996; Vasey & Daleiden, 1996). Individuals who persistently monitor the environment for offensive events prime themselves to view ambiguous organizational actions and decisions as being offensive/unfair (see Segal, 1996). Such cognitions are typically studied in the organizational sciences under the umbrella of organizational justice theory, and whereas different forms of justice exist, overall perceptions of justice
are more stable and account for more variance in key workplace outcomes than narrow facets (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2013). Organizational justice, in this study, is therefore defined as the overall perception of fairness displayed by an organization (Ambrose & Schminke, 2009; Crippanzano & Ambrose, 2001).

The theory and results described in the preceding paragraph along with traditional news reporting (e.g., Bodley, 2017; Holley, 2017; Weinstein, 2017) and limited academic research (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017; Rothschild & Keefe, 2017; Schwartz, 2002) suggest a link between PTBO and organizational justice, yet existing research also suggests a link between justice and those criteria previously described. Meta-analytic results illustrate this, documenting a strong relationship between perceptions of organizational (in)justice and an array of behaviors and attitudes including the criteria explored in this study, as employees who believe their organization has treated them unfairly feel little reason to reciprocate with strong behavior or with a sense of gratefulness for the imbalanced exchange (Colquitt et al., 2013; Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). These dynamics combine to suggest organizational justice mediates the relationships between PTBO and behavioral and attitudinal outcomes.

Hypothesis 6. The proclivity to be offended is negatively related to organizational justice.

Hypothesis 7. The relationships between the proclivity to be offended and (a) task performance, (b) OCBs, (c) CWBs, (d) satisfaction, and (e) engagement are mediated by organizational justice.

3. Study 1: Measuring PTBO

Although theory suggests individuals offended by various social issues and events differ from those not easily offended in behavior and attitudes, this is a new line of inquiry. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a measure that assesses this construct. Three sequential studies were used to develop such a measure and to assess whether or not it relates to work-related attitudes and behaviors.

3.1. Item development and initial assessment

Using a hybrid deductive-inductive methodology, 17 items representing offensive events were developed. These events (i.e., items) came directly through news stories receiving substantial media attention. The content validity of the newly developed items was assessed by conducting a survey of 18 social scientists who study work-related phenomena. Each expert had a doctoral degree in a related field. Each subject matter expert was given a set of 45 survey items; this included the 17 items developed to assess the proclivity to be offended, eight moral outrage items by Pagano and Huo (2007), 11 microaggression items by Torres-Harding, Siers, and Olson (2012), and nine political correctness items by Strauts and Blanton (2015). Survey instructions asked participants to identify each item as one of four constructs (listed at the beginning of the survey were definitions of PTBO, moral outrage, microaggressions, and political correctness) or indicate the item was unidentifiable. Analysis began by first calculating the percentage of experts who classified each newly developed PTBO item correctly as PTBO. No explicit cut-off exists for correct identification, but generally agreed upon best practice recommendations suggest a minimum correct classification of 75% or better (Hinkin, 1998). Examination of the items intended to assess PTBO revealed 5 items (Two men holding hands as they walk down the street; The term “Black lives matter,” Refusing to bake a cake for a gay wedding (for religious reasons); Believing minors brought to the US illegally should be granted citizenship; Believing black Americans should be paid reparations for prior ancestral slavery) fell below the 75% mark. The item “Refusing to bake a cake for a gay wedding (for religious reasons)” was identified as PTBO by nine experts, unidentifiable by two, and as a microaggression by the remaining eight experts. The other four items were identified as PTBO by fewer than half of all respondents; each of these items were most frequently categorized as “unidentifiable.” With 12 of 17 items classified as PTBO by more than 75% of experts, analysis continued by calculating Fleiss’ Kappa to assess the overall consistency among experts that these 12 items represent the PTBO. Kappa for this 12 item measure was 0.85 (p < .05), thus indicating there was agreement among social scientists that these 12 items represent the construct of PTBO (i.e., these 12 items are content valid).

4. Study 2: Quantitative assessment of PTBO

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participation was solicited from employees with the help of upper-level business students at seven geographically-dispersed universities across the United States. As part of the recruitment process, students were offered extra-credit in exchange for submitting the name and email address of an employee working a minimum of 20 hours per week or for distributing and collecting a paper survey to an employee working a minimum of 20 hours per week. 395 individuals completed the survey and correctly answered two data-quality check questions (i.e., answer strongly agree to this question). Participants’ reported average age was 25.9 years (SD = 9.1), average number of hours worked per week was 30.3 (SD = 12.9), and average job tenure was 3.6 years (SD = 5.4). 54.6% indicated they were male; 70.0% indicated they were White, 10.9% were Black, 9.0% were Hispanic, 6.5% were Asian, and 3.6% selected Other.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Social desirability

Because the goal of this study was to explore a new construct, it was essential to evaluate any potential response bias in the newly developed items. As such, participants completed a five-item social desirability measure by Hayes, Hayashi, and Stewart (1989). Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.65.

4.2.2. Job satisfaction

Three items by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979) assessed participants’ job satisfaction. Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.94.

4.2.3. Employee engagement

Six engagement items by Rich et al. (2010) assessed participants’ work engagement. An example item includes “I exert my full effort on my job.” Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.93.

4.2.4. PTBO

Study 2 began by assessing the relationship between the 12 PTBO items developed in Study 1 and social desirability. Importantly, not a single item correlated with the measure of social desirability, indicating the appropriateness of continuing assessment of internal statistical properties. Following Hinkin (1998), the relationship between items was assessed by studying the corrected item total correlation (i.e., the correlation between each individual item and the measure absent that item). The rationale for beginning this process with corrected item total correlations is that any item with a low correlation is indicative of an outside domain. This analysis revealed three items (“Using the pronoun ‘he’ or ‘she’ when referencing biologically male or female persons,” “Caucasian individuals wearing dreadlocks as a hair style,” “Using the term ‘black’ when referring to a person with African or Caribbean heritage”) did not reach generally accepted correlational standards (r = 0.40). These items were discarded at this point. An exploratory
factor analysis using principle axis factoring with Varimax rotation and an unspecified number of factors then assessed the factor structure of the remaining 9 items. This analysis revealed a one-factor solution that subsequently composed the final nine-item PTBO measure (α = 0.83). See the Appendix for a list of the final nine-item measure.

5. Results and discussion

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for Study 2 variables; correlations reported in this table reveal a relationship between the new measure and both job satisfaction (r = −0.22, p < .05) and workplace engagement (r = −0.19, p < .05). In addition, in two simple regression analyses, PTBO negatively related with job satisfaction (R² = 0.05, p < .05) and engagement (R² = 0.04, p < .05). These results support the contention that PTBO can be measured and that it correlates with work-related attitudes. With these findings in mind, formal hypothesis testing continued in Study 3.

6. Study 3: Assessing the outcomes of PTBO

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participation was solicited with the help of upper-level business students at two universities in the United States (one located in the West and the other in the South). Students received extra-credit for submitting the name and email address of a subordinate (working a minimum of 20 hours per week) and their immediate supervisor. As part of the study, the subordinate was asked to complete two surveys (separated by one month) while the direct supervisor was asked to complete a single survey assessing subordinate’s workplace behaviors. Of the roughly 350 employees who were sent an invitation to participate in the first survey, a total of 123 sets of Time 1 employee surveys, Time 2 employee surveys, and Time 2 supervisor surveys matched, for a rough participation rate of around 35%.

The reported demographic statistics for the final set of subordinates indicated an average age of 35.1 years (SD = 12.3), average job tenure of 6.8 years (SD = 8.1), and average number of work hours of 35.4 (SD = 12.3). The reported race of subordinates included 79.3% White, 5.8% Black, 6.6% Hispanic, 5.8% Asian, 0.8% Native American, and 1.7% Other. Reported statistics for participating supervisors indicated an average age of 44.9 years (SD = 12.0), average organizational tenure of 13.9 years (SD = 11.2), and average managerial span of control of 19.0 employees (SD = 30.6). The reported race of supervisors included 88.6% White, 4.4% Black, 2.6% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, and 0.9% Other.

6.2. Time 1 measure

6.2.1. PTBO

In addition to demographic questions, subordinates completed the nine-item measure developed and refined in Studies 1 and 2. Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.81.

6.3. Time 2 measures

6.3.1. Job satisfaction

A single-item overall job satisfaction measure was used to assess employees’ overall job satisfaction (All in all, I am satisfied with my job). A single-item job satisfaction was used in this study to lessen the burden on subordinates and to help entice participation in the study (i.e., as part of the recruitment message, participants were told surveys were short and should take no more than 10–15 min to complete; thus, the survey looked to minimize the number of questions required to participate). Meta-analytic research on job satisfaction indicates single item measures are appropriate in certain contexts and may obtain equally valid ratings as multiple-item measures (Dolbier, Webster, McCalister, Mallon, & Steinhardt, 2005; Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997).

6.3.2. Engagement

Rich et al.’s (2010) six item engagement scale was again used to assess employees’ work engagement. Coefficient alpha for this study was 0.92.

6.3.3. Organizational justice

Ambrose and Schminke’s (2009) three-item measure assessed subordinates’ overall justice perceptions. An example item includes “Overall, I am treated fairly by my organization.” Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.93.

6.3.4. Task performance

Supervisors assessed subordinates’ task performance with seven items by Williams and Anderson (1991). An example item includes [This employee] “Adequately completes assigned duties.” Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.89.

6.3.5. OCBI

Supervisors assessed their subordinates’ citizenship behaviors aimed at individuals within the organization with a seven-item measure by Williams and Anderson (1991). An example item includes [This employee] “Helps others who have been absent.” Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.83.

6.3.6. Sportsmanship

Supervisors assessed subordinates’ sportsmanship with a five-item measure by Podsakoff et al. (1990). An example item includes [This employee] “Consumes a lot of time complaining about trivial matters” (reverse scored). Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.92.

6.3.7. Counterproductive work behaviors

Supervisors assessed subordinates’ counterproductive work behaviors with a seven-item measure by Stewart et al. (2009). An example item includes [This employee] “Intentionally worked slower than they could have worked.” Coefficient alpha for the present study was 0.82.

6.4. Confirmatory factor analyses

Prior to testing study hypotheses, two confirmatory factor analyses (CFA; one on the data provided by employees and the other on the data provided by supervisors) were run to ensure the appropriate structure of measured constructs. The first CFA, run on data provided by employees, indicated the hypothesized four-factor model, including a single item measure of job satisfaction with reliability set to one minus 0.70 (i.e., a conservative estimate found in established research, see Dolbier et al., 2005; Wanous et al., 1997), fit the data well: χ² (147) = 251.14, p < .01; CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.07. Because the overall sample size was small in comparison to the number of indicators (which could inflate goodness-of-fit statistics) for the data provided by supervisors, items were parcelled together so that each
latent factor was explained by three indicators (see Hall, Snell, & Foust, 1999; Kishton & Widaman, 1994; Landis, Beal, & Tesluk, 2000; Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). This model indicated the data provided by supervisors also fit the hypothesized four-factor model adequately; \( \chi^2 (48) = 91.94, p < .01; \) CFI = 0.96, SRMR = 0.05, RMSEA = 0.09.

7. Results

Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all study variables.

7.1. Hypotheses testing

The hypothesized direct and indirect (i.e., mediated) relationships were tested using standard regression techniques in combination with a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure with 5000 replications (see Preacher & Hayes, 2004; Hayes, 2013). Using the bootstrapping procedure allows one to draw a large number of random samples from original data to develop a sampling distribution of indirect effects, and subsequently calculate and examine confidence intervals to ensure they do not contain zero (i.e., check for mediation). All mediation analyses used PROCESS version 2.16.3 for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). The first set of hypotheses, Hypotheses 1 and 2, predicted negative relationships between PTBO and task performance, OCBI, and sportsmanship, and Hypothesis 3 predicted a positive relationship between PTBO and CWB.

Results reported in Table 3, which indicate PTBO negatively relates to task performance \((b = -0.38, p < .05)\), OCBI \((b = -0.34, p < .05)\), and positively relates to CWB \((b = 0.20, p < 0.05)\), fully support Hypotheses 1–3. Hypothesis 4 and 5 predicted negative relationships between PTBO and job satisfaction and employee engagement. The negative relationship \((b = -0.67, p < .05)\) found in Table 3 between PTBO and job satisfaction indicates full support for Hypothesis 4, yet results were not as clear with employee engagement. Although a negative relationship was found between PTBO and employee engagement in Study 2, results reported in Table 3 indicate PTBO was unrelated to employee engagement \((b = -0.19, p = ns)\) in Study 3. Mediation results described next help shed light on this finding, yet the pattern of results across both studies indicates only limited support for Hypothesis 5.

Hypothesis 6 proposed a relationship between PTBO and organizational justice while Hypotheses 7a–7e built on this proposed relationship and suggested justice serves as an intervening mechanism between PTBO and the work-related behavior and attitudes proposed in Hypotheses 1–5. Results in Table 3 indicate that PTBO is in fact negatively related to perceptions of organizational justice \((b = -0.38, p < .05, \) adjusted \( R^2 = 0.04 \)), supporting Hypothesis 6. To assess Hypothesis 7, which included six embedded hypothesized indirect effects, the bootstrapped indirect effects and confidence intervals associated with each proposed relationship was assessed. Examination of Table 4 indicates organizational justice served as an intervening mechanism for five of the six outcome variables. Specific results indicate organizational justice mediated the relationship between PTBO and task performance \((H7a; ab = -0.05, CI_{95} = -0.145, -0.001)\), OCBI \((H7b; ab = -0.05, CI_{95} = -0.135, -0.003)\), sportsmanship \((H7b; ab = -0.10, CI_{95} = -0.236, -0.011)\), job satisfaction \((H7d; ab = -0.29, CI_{95} = -0.571, -0.019)\), and employee engagement \((H7e; ab = -0.06, CI_{95} = -0.187, -0.005)\). The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of justice on the relationship between PTBO and CWBs included zero, indicating Hypothesis 7c was not supported. The overall pattern of results, however, provides general support for Hypothesis 7 and more context for the insignificant direct relationship found between PTBO and employee engagement as it appears PTBO’s influence on engagement is partially a result of the influence on unfair organizational perceptions formed by those high in PTBO.

8. Discussion

The popular press is replete with news stories about individuals upset by various political and social issues, events and traditions (e.g., Bodley, 2017; Clague, 2016; Holley, 2017; Payne, 2016; Weinstein, 2017), yet there is no systematic research exploring what these reactions might tell us about applicants and/or employees and how they, the organization, should view and react to such happenings. To address
this issue, this study conceptualized these reactions as a proclivity to react in a specific way. The relationship between this proclivity and important work-related behavior and attitudes was then empirically explored, finding this proclivity is negatively related to task performance, citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, and employee engagement, and positively related to counterproductive work behaviors. This study also explored a potential explanatory mechanism underlying these relationships, finding that those prone to be offended also view their organizations as less fair. Perceptions of fairness subsequently correlated with five key outcome variables, suggesting one reason that PTBO correlates with important work-related outcomes is a distraction or a focus on the perceived injustice of organizational actions.

The most fundamental implication of this research is the finding that the current trend of taking offense to an array of events and traditions represents an underlying phenomenon and not isolated reactions. Moreover, this state correlates with some of the most important work-related outcomes (see Kataria et al., 2012; Kois, 2001; Ostroff, 1992), and in ways one might not expect or predict. For example, one might assume those who display PTBO are the most helpful in the organization as their prescriptive morality dictates helping and providing for others (cf. Arnot, 2009; Janoff-Bulman & Carnes, 2014; Schwartz, 2002, 2010; Thomas & McGarty, 2009), but study results indicate a negative relationship between PTBO and two different forms of citizenship behavior. Moreover, PTBO negatively correlated with task performance and positively correlated with counterproductive work behaviors, suggesting not only that these individuals engage in fewer citizenship behaviors but also engage in behaviors managers and organizations want their employees to avoid. As this is the first systematic exploration of PTBO and work-related outcomes, this study offers empirical evidence that managers and organizations can utilize to help navigate increasingly politically-charged contexts as they decide how to respond to increases in the PTBO.

Despite numerous and sensationalized headlines in the popular press, very few stories offer an explanation for why or how modern political and social activity relates to behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in the workplace. This study put forth a unique application of cognitive interference theory (Sarason, 1984), and in doing so hypothesized a key mediating mechanism that serves as an explanation for why PTBO correlates with important workplace outcomes. PTBO not only correlated with each of these factors, but mediation effects also indicated perceptions of organizational (in)justice mediate the relationship between PTBO and five of six outcomes. Using cognitive interference theory in conjunction with organizational justice theory represents a novel and notable contribution as scholars have previously suggested injustice may serve as an important distraction, but this research focused exclusively on customer mistreatment (Rafaeli et al., 2012) and concerns over employment testing (McCarthy et al., 2009). This study instead focused on the distraction caused by a state-like tendency, finding the proclivity to be offended to customarily innocuous societal events and traditions spills over to employees’ perceptions of how the organization treats them. These results have clear theoretical implications for future research as cognitive interference theory needs to expand the definition of what constitutes an interfering event while justice scholars could better integrate ideas of social justice into models of organizational justice.

### 8.1. Implications for practice

Building on the points raised above, it is also important to note the practical implications of this research. For one, managers and organizations are largely unguided by empirical research and thus left to question how they should treat applicants and/or employees who might respond to increases in the PTBO.
take offense to an array of events and traditions. While only an initial exploration, this research suggests those easily offended may focus closely on the fairness of the organization’s actions and decisions. This subsequently harms their attitudes and performance. Existing research suggests managers trained in principles of fairness positively impact their employees’ perceptions (Starlckl & Latham, 1997) and may, therefore, be able to lessen the deleterious effects of PTBO on employee effectiveness. Paying close attention to personal interactions and the manner in which organizational policies and decisions are enacted provides a good starting point, but both anecdotal and objective data suggests giving in to those individuals expressing the most outrage is not an advisable strategy (see Hartocollis, 2017). This suggests organizations, managers, and organizational scholars alike take strides to more systematically explore current societal topics like PTBO.

8.2. Limitations and future research

This study is the first to explore the relationship between PTBO and work-related behavior and attitudes, yet readers should be mindful of certain limitations of the reported research. For example, the items (i.e., events) that compose the PTBO measure developed and used in this research are not exhaustive and may be fluid in nature. What respondents feel is offensive today (in the current political climate) may change over time, meaning the items contained in the reported measure will likely need to be updated periodically. One possible topic to include in additional items or updates is work-related offensive events. This study used cognitive interference and organizational justice theory to connect PTBO with significant work-related outcomes. As justice theory suggests specific actions help promote fairness perceptions, it would be interesting to see if a lack of such actions or if engagement in other work-related behaviors generate similar reactions to those found in this study and/or statistically map with non-work related offensive events. Relatedly, the initial pool of items developed for this study purposefully included events on all sides of the political aisle, but as these items were subjected to various validity checks, some of the desired balance was lost. As such, future updates could consider the possibility of a higher order construct or separate constructs that tap into distinctive conservative/progressive offensive events, which would allow for potentially important comparisons.

Another consideration is the definition of PTBO as a state-like tendency that has emerged in recent years. This use of the term “state-like” is intended to be less fluctuating than the transient or momentary feelings studied by emotions scholars but considerably less enduring than the stable individual differences explored by personality scholars. To this point, cognitive interference research finds some individuals are predisposed towards the experience of intrusive thoughts while others are victims of situational characteristics (i.e., there is both trait and state interference; Mikulincer, 1989; Pierce et al., 1998; Sarason et al., 1986). On the disposition side, enduring characteristics like anxiety, personal adjustment (or lack thereof), and negative affect show the strongest link with reoccurring cognitive interference (Dombeck, Siegle, & Ingram, 1996; Pierce et al., 1998; Yee & Vaughan, 1996). As Big Five personality scholars typically study these traits as part of neuroticism, this opens up one avenue of future research in that it is possibly that certain traits act as either an antecedent to (or moderator of) the PTBO (and subsequent outcomes). Neuroticism seems particularly likely based on scholarly research whereas narcissism seems equally possible based on traditional news reporting (Behary, Young, & Siegel, 2013; Stines, 2017; Vogel, 2006).

Given PTBO has a moral component to it, moral objectivism/relativism also seems like a potential antecedent and/or moderator, and this is especially true as one major theoretical lens used to study justice is the moral virtue perspective (Folger et al., 2005), which suggests justice signals a respect for morality. A related opportunity for future research is the study of both offensive and innocuous events and traditions over the course of a more distal period of time. This study took items from traditional news reporting, but many of the items included in the final measure would not have been included had the study begun five years ago when many of these events/traditions were still viewed as harmless to the vast majority of individuals. Having employees rate the same events and traditions over the course of several years could help determine the degree to which PTBO is truly stable or malleable.

9. Conclusion

The reported investigation provides an initial attempt to fill a void in social science knowledge by developing a measure that asks how individuals view current events and subsequently assessing the relationship between this measure, a key workplace distraction (i.e., organizational (in)justice), and important work-related behavior and attitudes. Results linking the proclivity to be offended with perceived (in)justice, poor task performance, citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, job dissatisfaction, and employee engagement are particularly important to organizations that do not have a good understanding of how they should view applicants and employees who express indignation at an array of events and traditions. Ultimately, individuals, organizations, and society need to better understand what is driving current trends like PTBO, and as such, it is hoped that this study provides a foundation for debate and future explorations.

Appendix A

9-item proclivity to be offended measure (PTBO)

Instructions given to participants: The statements in this section describe a number of current events/topics in the news. We would like to get your opinion on the extent to which these events/topics are offensive to YOU personally (i.e., not how offensive other people think they are). It is important that you give your honest opinion of these events/topics. Remember, your responses are completely anonymous.

With this in mind, please circle your answer using the following rating scale:

1 = Not at all offensive
2 = Indifferent or neutral
3 = Somewhat offensive
4 = Offensive
5 = Extremely offensive

The term Washington “Redskins”
Wearing a shirt that has an American flag on Cinco de Mayo
Telling someone to “man up”
Dressing up as an American Indian for Halloween
Saying “God bless you” after someone sneezes
The term “Blue lives matter”
The playing of the USA National Anthem
Believing that individuals who do not have legal status to be in a country should be deported
Using the term Islamic terrorist

References
