Moral Character in the Workplace

Taya R. Cohen[1], Abigail T. Panter[2], Nazlı Turan[1],
Lily Morse[1], & Yeonjeong Kim[1]

[1]Carnegie Mellon University

[2]University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

June 2013

Moral Character

o What aspects of a person are indicative of moral character?

- o *Personality:* "an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns." (Funder & Fast, 2010, p. 669)

- o *Moral Character:* the characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior underlying moral/ethical and immoral/unethical behavior.

What Traits are Character Traits?

o Despite decades of research, dating back to Freud (1923) and Gordon Allport (1937), little consensus has emerged as to what traits are most important for predicting moral and immoral behavior.

o Why?

   o Lack of integration.

      o Most studies focus on one particular trait, or broad dimensions (the Big Five) rather than investigate many narrow and broad traits simultaneously.

o *If an HR manager (or other practitioner) asked you, what traits are the most important to measure for predicting unethical behavior, what would you say?*

Reasoning vs. Emotions

o Another reason for the lack of integration is because the field of moral psychology has not focused much on moral character traits and unethical behavior.

  o Instead, the emphasis has been on disentangling the roles of cognitions vs. emotions in influencing moral judgments.

o This debate is about what predicts *judgments* in difficult moral dilemmas not what predicts moral/immoral *behaviors* in people's everyday lives.

  o (e.g., Narvaez v. Haidt, 2010, *Perspectives in Psychological Science*)

The Current Research

o We examine 22 different individual differences to answer the question of what is moral character.

  o Multiple measures to describe the attributes of both high and low moral character adults.

  o Multiple reporters to understand how character is manifested in work behaviors.

  o Longitudinal assessments to determine whether these relationships hold over time.

o Tested whether moral character plays an important role in decreasing unethical work behaviors and increasing ethical work behaviors beyond demographic variables and attributes of the work setting.

Preview of the Findings

o Our results challenge the idea that individual differences in moral reasoning or emotionality are critical determinants of character.

   o Instead they suggest that *consideration of others, self-control and concern for the future, and desire for a moral identity* are of greater consequence.

o By showing that individual differences in moral character have consistent, meaningful effects on employees' work behaviors, our findings contest situationist perspectives that de-emphasize the importance of personality in predicting behavior (cf. Doris, 2002; Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Work Experiences and Character Traits Project

o Two three-month weekly online diary studies of employed U.S. adults (www.WECTProject.org)

o Goal was to investigate how character, personality, emotions, and treatment by managers and coworkers affect the frequency with which workers engage in unethical and ethical behavior.

   o ***Counterproductive work behaviors (CWB)***

      o Acts that harm organizations or people within them

   o ***Organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB)***

      o Acts that help organizations or people within them

CWB & OCB Pilot Study (*N*=443)

All CWB acts were rated *immoral* by working adults.

All OCB acts were rated *moral* by working adults.

Examples:

o Put in to be paid for more hours than you worked

o Insulted or made fun of someone at work

o Took supplies or tools home without permission

o Came to work late without permission

o Blamed someone at work for error you made

Examples:

o Volunteered for extra work assignments.

o Went out of the way to give co-worker encouragement or express appreciation.

o Decorated, straightened up, or otherwise beautified common work space.

o Helped co-worker learn new skills or shared job knowledge.

WECT Project Design

14 surveys over the course of 3 months + a coworker survey

- o **Initial survey** (approx. 60 to 75 minutes)
  - o Assessed personality/character, moral reasoning, demographics, job descriptions

- o **12 weekly surveys** (approx. 20 to 30 minutes each)
  - o Assessed work behaviors, work experiences, and emotions

- o **Final survey** (approx. 45 to 60 minutes)
  - o Similar to initial survey (except moral reasoning not included)

- o **Coworker survey** (approx. 45 to 60 min)
  - o Assessed coworkers' judgments of participants' personality and work behaviors (*observer-reports*); also assessed coworkers' personality/character and work behaviors (*self-reports*)

Participants

- Diverse group of American adults living in all 50 states, and District of Columbia.
  - 18 to 71 years old (M = 39.32, SD = 11.37)
  - 50.0% Women
  - White (75.2%), Black (9.2%), Hispanic (5.5%), Asian (3.6%), and other / multi-racial (6.3%) participants
- *Employment:*
  - 66.6% private for-profit companies; 14.7% local, state, or federal government; 10.6% private non-profit orgs., and 8% self-employed
  - *Tenure* ranged from less than one month to more than 48 years (M = 6.77 years, SD = 6.97)
  - *Median Income*= $44,000; M = $52,962, SD = $43,547; *Range* = $0 to $750,000
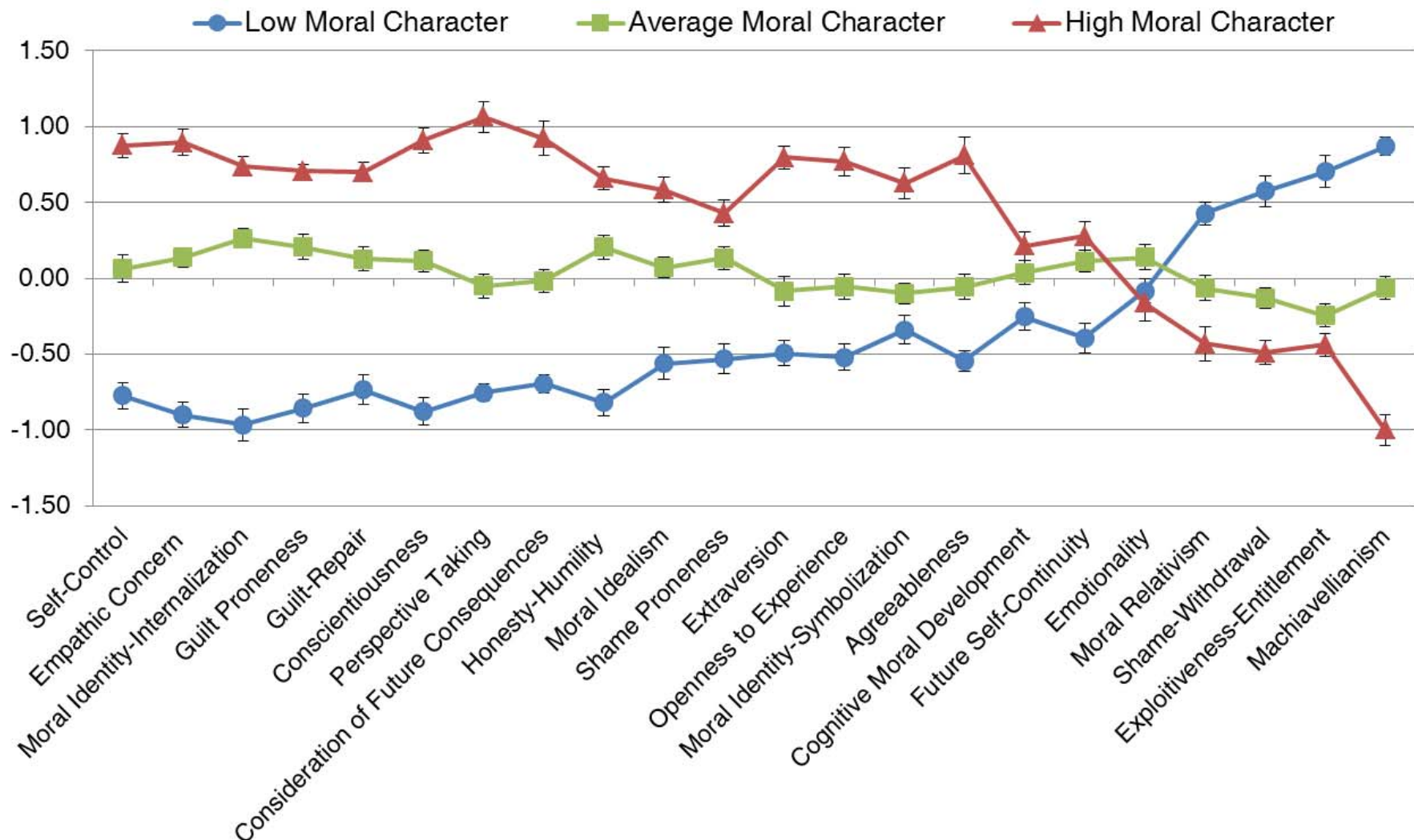
Results: Moral Character

Latent Profile Analysis

o LPA was used to determine which variables best distinguish individuals with low moral character from those with high moral character.

  o LPA categorizes *people* into clusters (latent classes)
  o Individuals in the same latent class are assumed to be similar to others in their class, and different from individuals not in their class.

o We estimated 3 latent classes and identified variables that separated the low-moral-character class from the high-moral-character class.

WECT2011 Latent Profile Analysis (*N* = 1020)
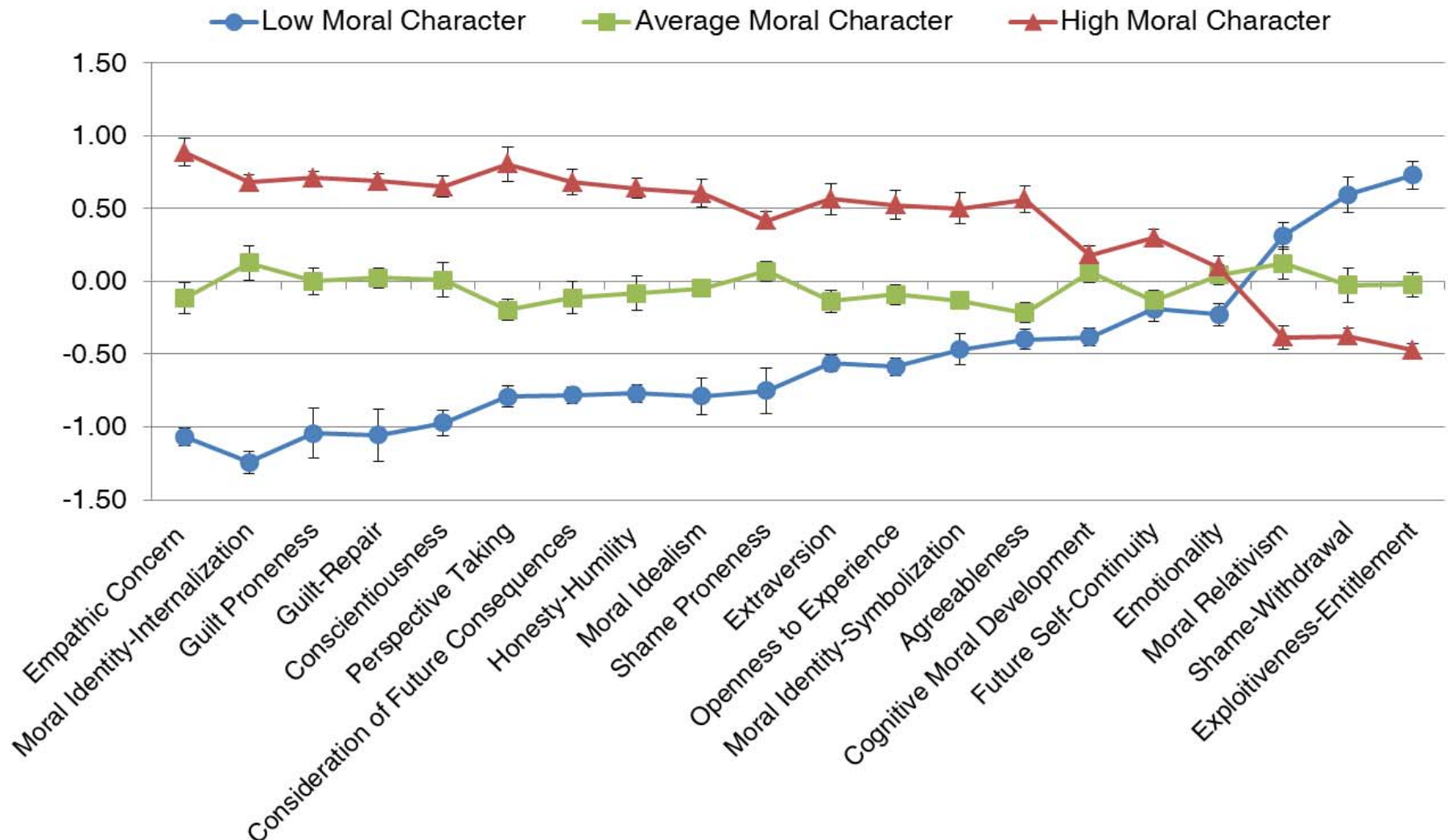
Values represent the average standardized score for each variable for each latent class. Error bars denote one standard error above and below the latent class mean. 22.35% of respondents were classified as low-moral-character, 44.71% as average-moral-character, and 32.94% as high-moral-character.

WECT2012 Latent Profile Analysis (*N* = 494)

Values represent the average standardized score for each variable for each latent class. Error bars denote one standard error above and below the latent class mean. 30.57% of respondents were classified as low-moral-character, 46.36% as average-moral-character, and 23.08% as high-moral-character.
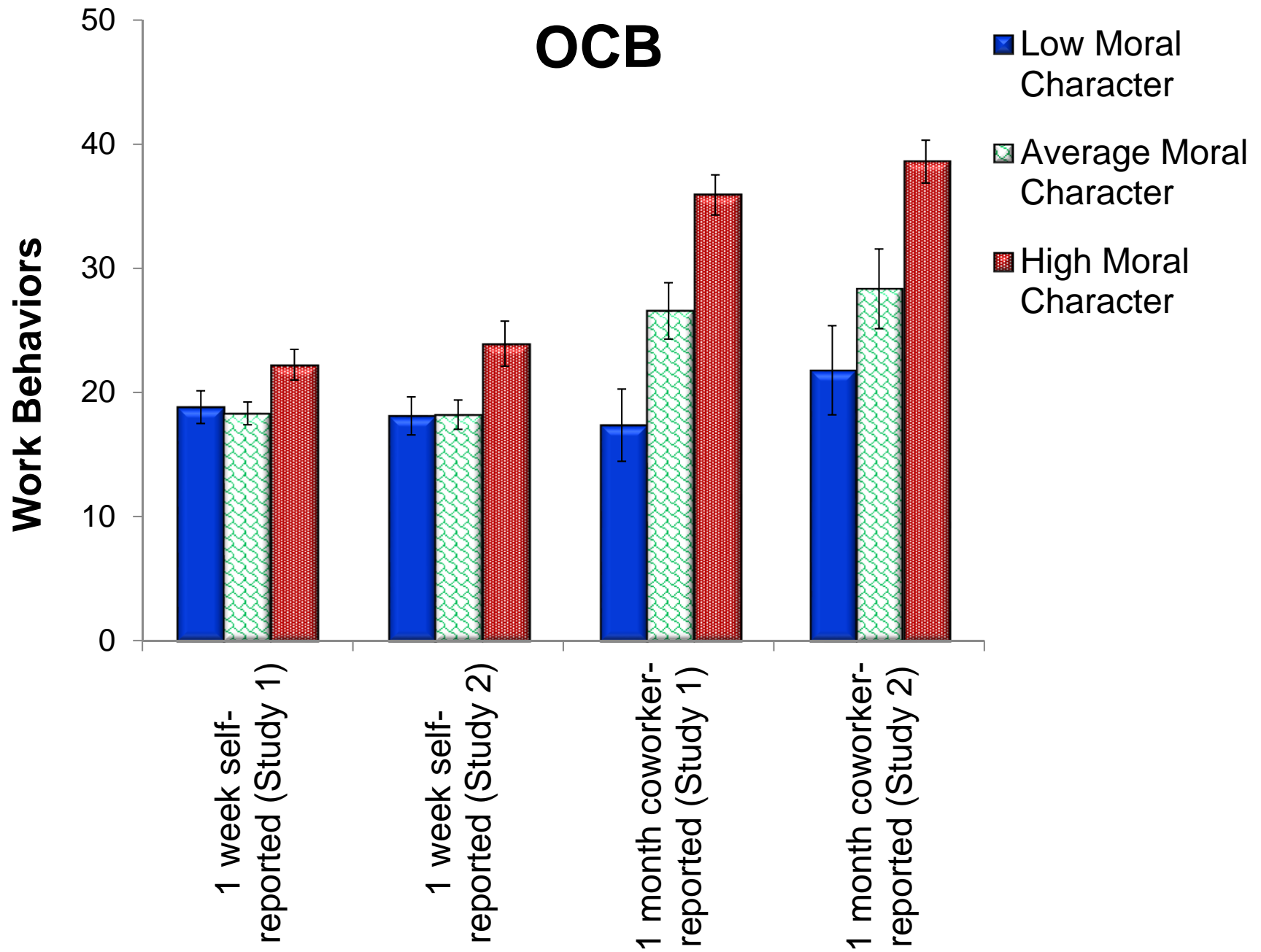
Work Behaviors

o Groups identified by the LPA differ, but do these differences indicate that one group is more or less moral than another?

  o Is it appropriate to label some people "low-moral-character" and others "high-moral-character"?

o If the latent classes are indicative of moral character, then we should observe corresponding differences in the amount of CWB and OCB committed by the members of the groups.

CWB

- Low Moral Character
- Average Moral Character
- High Moral Character
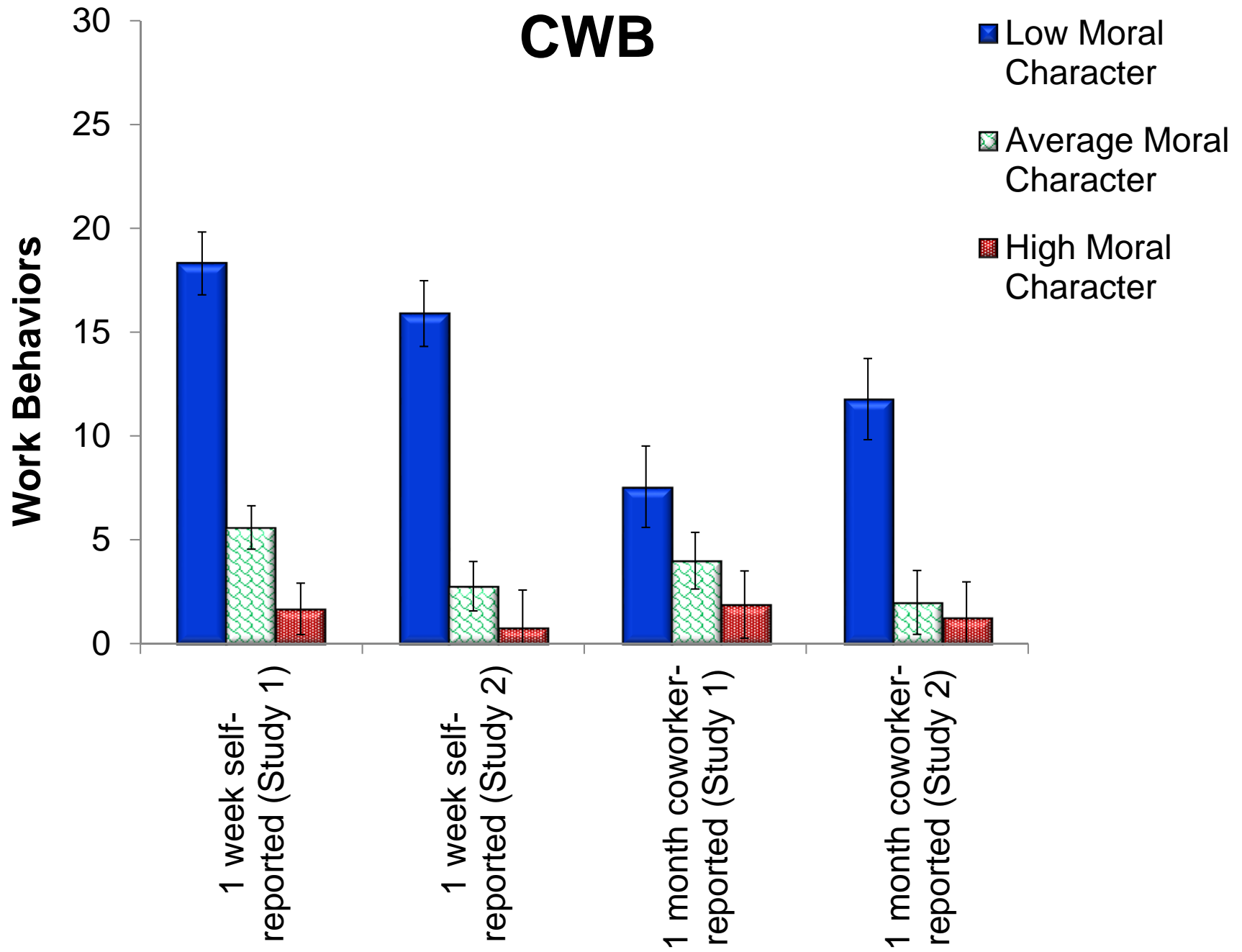
Work Behavior Results

o Low-moral-character employees committed more CWB and less OCB than high-moral-character employees.

o Regression models that included demographic (e.g., gender, age) and organizational controls (e.g., ethics code, income) established the robustness of the results.

  o None of the control variables had reliable effects.

o *Moral character traits predict harmful and helpful work behaviors more strongly and robustly than do basic demographic and organizational characteristics.*

Characteristics of Moral People

(variables that distinguished the low and high latent classes by ≥1.5 SDs)

- **Refrain from manipulating others**
  - Low Machiavellianism

- **Consider other people's perspectives and feelings**
  - Perspective Taking & Empathic Concern

- **Value integrity and want to see themselves as moral**
  - Moral-Identity-Internalization

- **Anticipate feeling guilty and engaging in repair-oriented actions if they did something wrong**
  - Guilt Proneness & Guilt-Repair Orientation

- **Disciplined, prudent, organized, good at resisting temptations**
  - Conscientiousness & Self-Control

- **Think about future consequences of their behavior and act accordingly**
  - Consideration of Future Consequences

- **Sincere, modest, and fair**
  - Honesty-Humility

Less Diagnostic Characteristics

o Five variables in which the low-character and high-character classes differed by less than one standard deviation across both studies:

1. **Cognitive moral development (i.e., moral reasoning)**
2. **Emotionality**
3. Future self-continuity
4. Moral relativism
5. Moral identity-symbolization

o These constructs are not as diagnostic as the others included in the analysis.

Kendall's Tau-b correlations (WECT2011 & WECT2012 combined)	CWB 1 week self-report (N = 1072)	CWB 1 month coworker-report (N = 325)	OCB 1 week self-report (N = 947)	OCB 1 month coworker-report (N = 269)
Empathic Concern	-.18**	-.19**	.09**	.19**
Moral Identity-Internalization	-.17**	-.14**	.08**	.25**
Guilt Proneness	-.17**	-.19**	.11**	.22**
Conscientiousness	-.22**	-.13**	.09**	.23**
Honesty-Humility	-.22**	-.17**	.06*	.20**
Cognitive Moral Development	-.03	.004	.04	.09*
Emotionality	.04	.06	-.001	-.04
Extraversion	-.15**	-.13*	.14**	.20**
Agreeableness	-.14**	-.17**	.04*	.09*
Openness to Experience	-.12**	-.07	.12**	.22**

**p < .001, *p < .05

Moral Reasoning?

o Cognitive moral development is indicative of the complexity of a person's thoughts about difficult moral dilemmas.

- o We measured this construct with the most widely-used test of moral reasoning ability—the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1986). [we used the 3-dilemma short-form version]

o Prior research suggests that this test predicts unethical choices at work (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010).

- o *However, our results suggest that moral reasoning ability is not as relevant to moral character as the other constructs.*

Emotionality?

o Emotionality is indicative of a person's fearfulness, anxiety, dependence, and sentimentality.

   o We measured this with the HEXACO-60 inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

o Prior research with the Big Five suggests that Emotional Stability predicts unethical behavior (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007)

   o *But, our results corroborate prior research with the HEXACO showing that Emotionality is less central to integrity than Conscientiousness and Honesty-Humility (Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007).*

Mapping the Moral Character Landscape

1. ***Consideration of others***

    o   Empathy, perspective taking, honesty-humility, guilt proneness, guilt-repair orientation, and low Machiavellianism

2. ***Self-control and concern for the future***

    o   Self-control, conscientiousness, and consideration of future consequences reflect this construct, and guilt proneness

3. ***Desire for a moral identity***

    o   Not represented by multiple inventories in our studies (just moral-identity-internalization), but conceptually it seems to represent a different construct than the previous two.

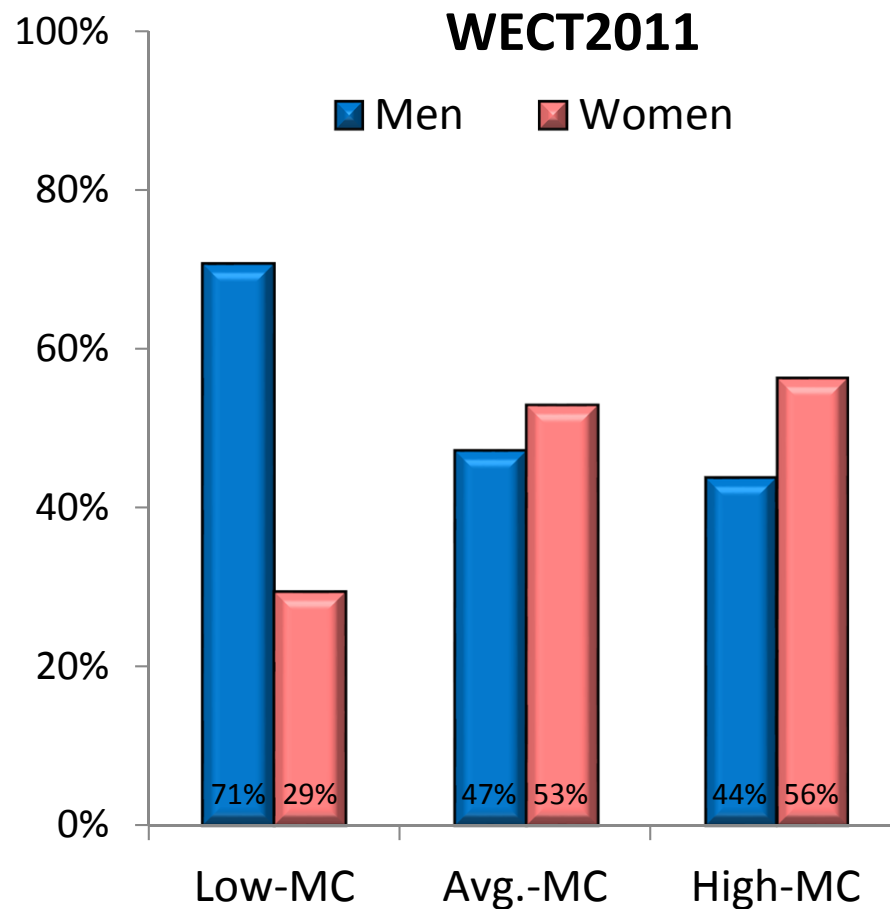# Gender & Age

o How do gender and age relate to moral character?
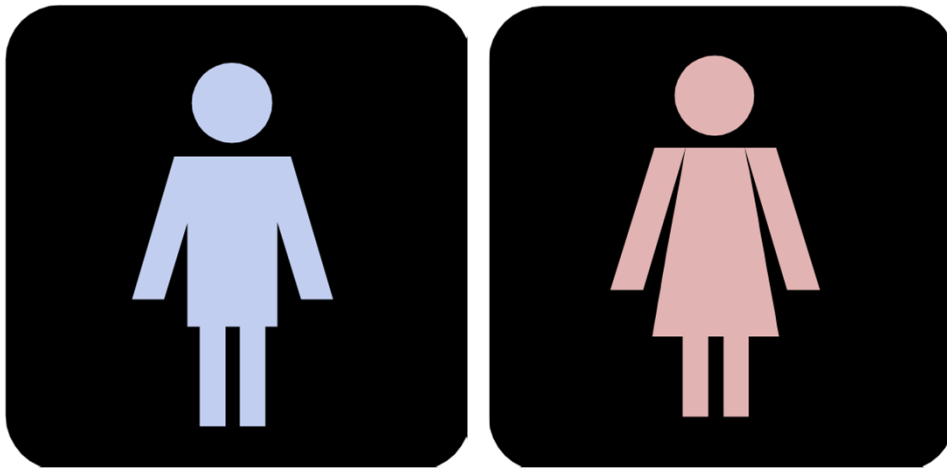
Men *more* likely than women to be classified as low moral character, and *less* likely than women to be classified as high moral character ($ps < .001$).

Age
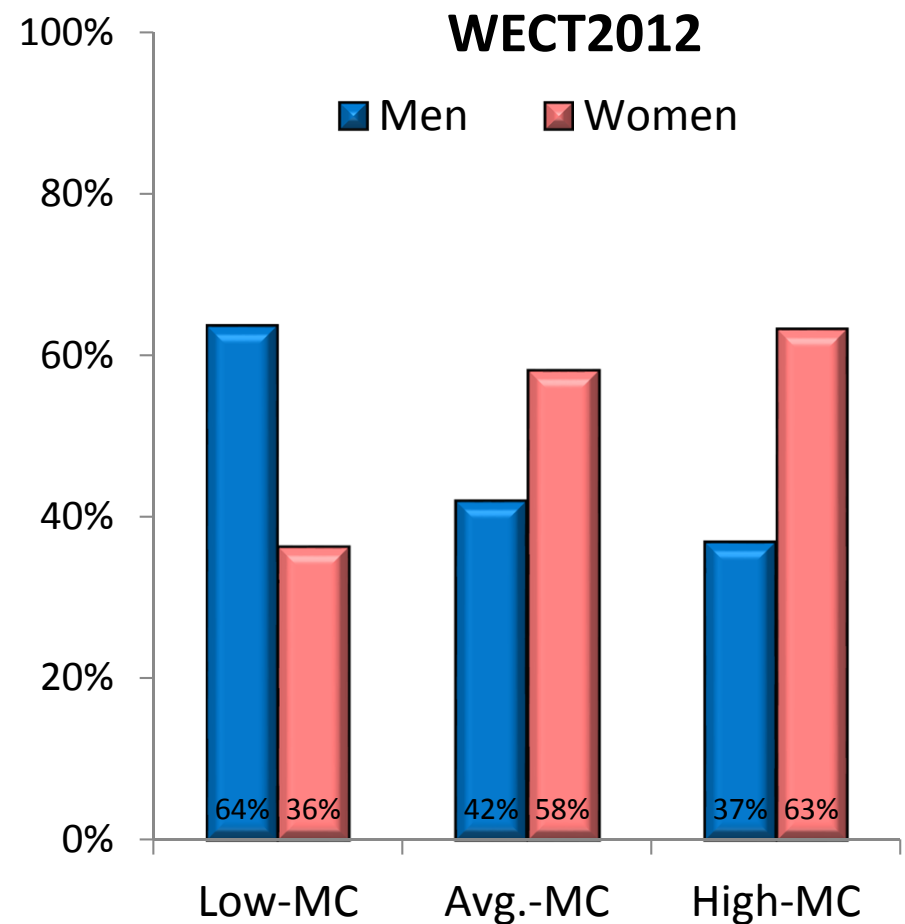
Younger adults were significantly more likely to be classified as low-moral-character than were older adults ($ps < .001$).

	WECT2011	WECT2012
Low Moral Character	35 years (*SD* = 10)	36 years (*SD* = 11)
Average Moral Character	38 years (*SD* = 11)	43 years (*SD* = 11)
High Moral Character	42 years (*SD* = 12)	43 years (*SD* = 10)

The Reciprocal Relationship between Mistreatment & CWB

The moderating effect of moral character
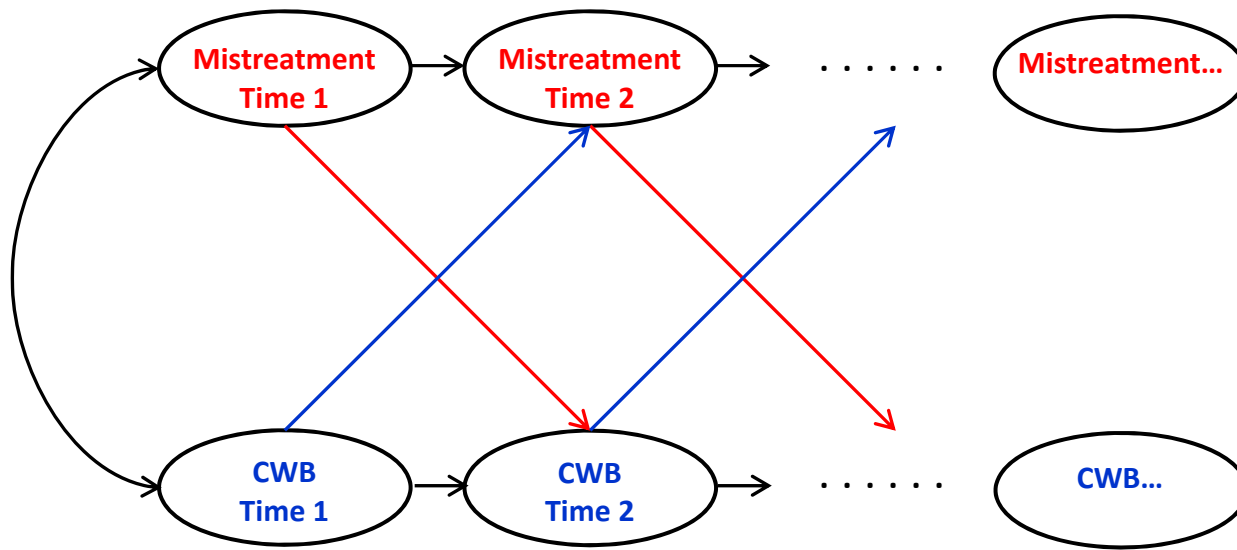
Workplace Mistreatment

o *Mistreatment:* Disrespect, aggression, isolation, and other behaviors that make employees feel unfairly treated

o Four types of mistreatment assessed in WECT Project (in weekly surveys):

   o Interpersonal Conflict at Work

   o Discrimination at Work

   o Abusive Supervision

   o Workplace Ostracism

Mistreatment CFA (WECT2012, Week1, n=380)

o Employees' perceived mistreatment.
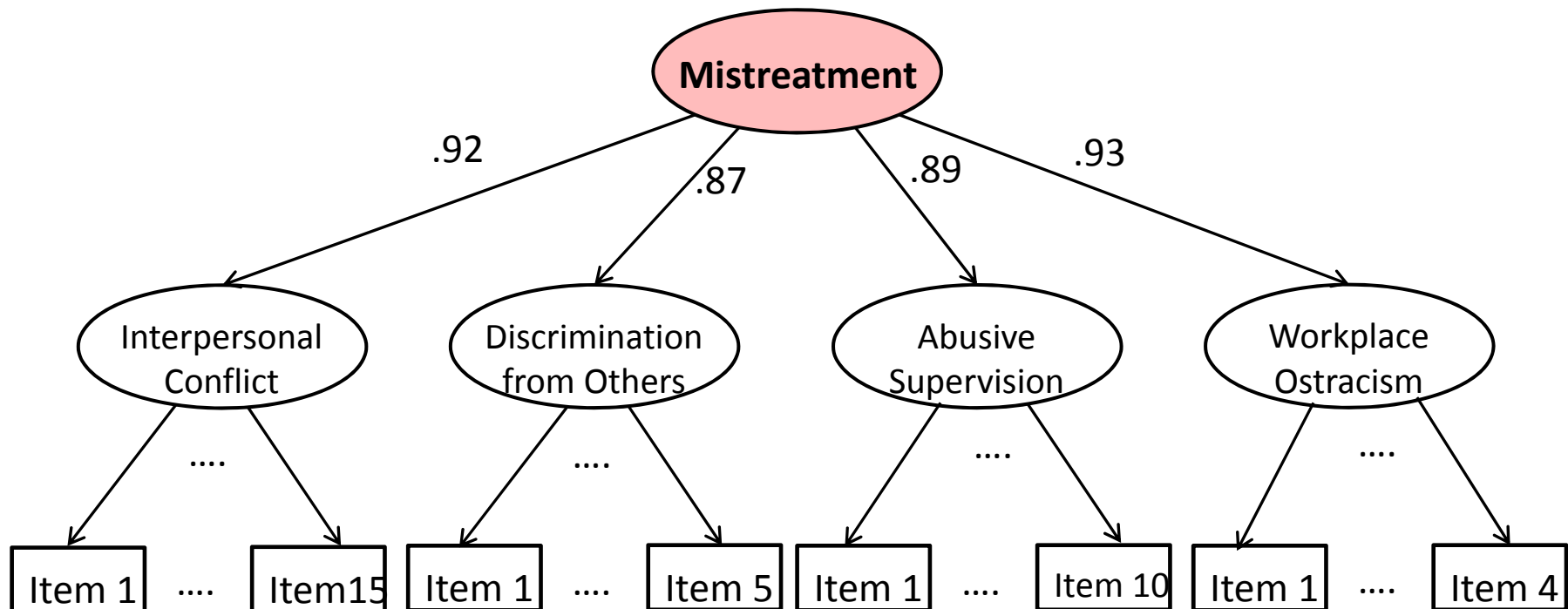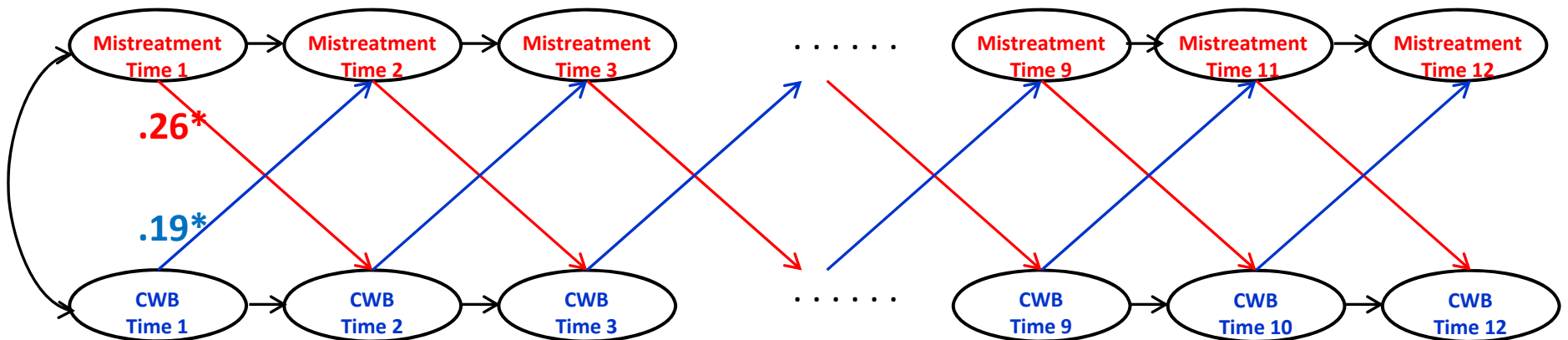

All factor loadings > .80

Chi-Square	Degrees of Freedom	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
818.797	523	.99	.99	.039

Reciprocal Relationship (WECT2012, n=460)

○ Reciprocal relationship between mistreatment and CWB (n=460)

Autoregression coefficient of mistreatment: .62*
Autoregression coefficient of CWB: .59*

Wk1 CWB with Mistreatment:
r = .75*

Cross-lagged effect of CWB on mistreatment: .19*
Cross-lagged effect of mistreatment on CWB: .26*

High Moral Character (WECT2012, n=104)

o For *high moral character* class, no subsequent CWB in response to mistreatment.
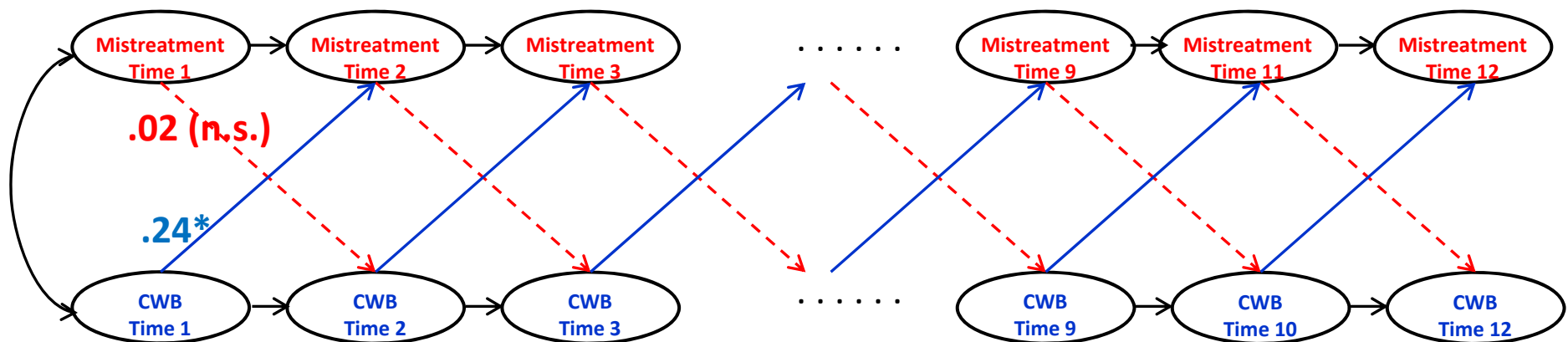
Autoregression coefficient of mistreatment: .70
Autoregression coefficient of CWB: .83

Wk1 CWB with Mistreatment:
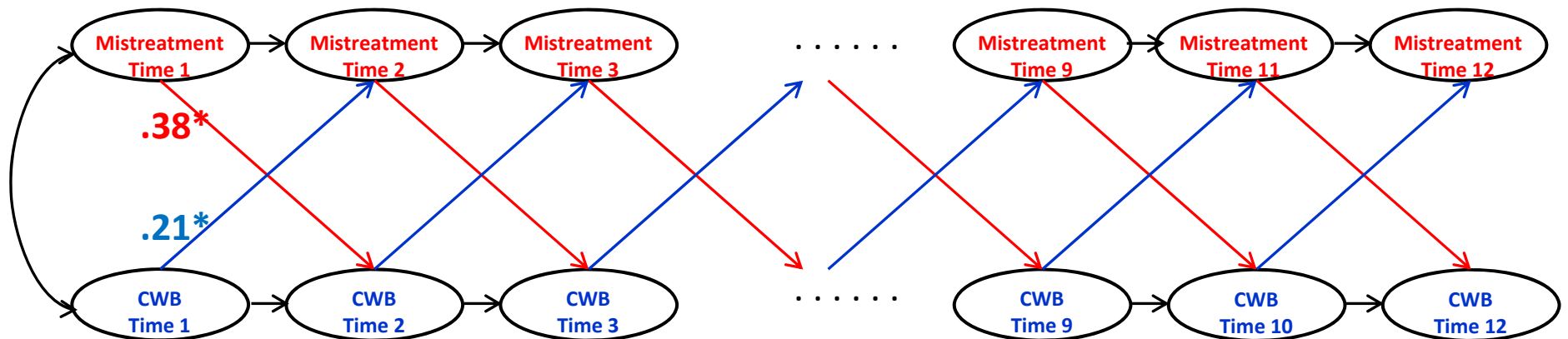*r = .17 (n.s.)*

Cross-lagged effect of CWB on mistreatment: .24*
Cross-lagged effect of mistreatment on CWB: .02 (n.s.)

Low Moral Character (WECT2012, n=151)

o For *low moral character class,* reciprocal relationship between mistreatment and CWB.

Autoregression coefficient of mistreatment: .55*
Autoregression coefficient of CWB: .48*

Wk1 CWB with Mistreatment: r = .79*

Cross-lagged effect of CWB on mistreatment: .21*
Cross-lagged effect of mistreatment on CWB: .38*

CWB & Mistreatment

o Evidence of a vicious cycle between CWB and workplace mistreatment, *but not for employees high in moral character.*

- o When employees are mistreated at work, they tend to respond with CWB; and, when employees commit CWB, they tend to be mistreated.

o Moral character, however, circumvents this negative spiral of disrespect and abuse.

- o Low-moral-character employees reciprocate mistreatment; high-moral-character employees do not.

Thank you!

Questions? Comments?

tcohen@cmu.edu