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Factors Influencing Support for Insider Threat Behaviours: Anger Rumination & Job

Satisfaction

Abstract

Insider threats—harmful acts from within an organization—pose serious risks to security. This study investigates anger rumination and job satisfaction as psychological predictors of support for insider threat behaviors. Using a survey of 383 participants responding to hypothetical insider scenarios, we found that higher anger rumination was associated with greater justification of and willingness to engage in insider misconduct, while lower job satisfaction was associated with greater resentment and justification. Hierarchical regression analyses showed that anger rumination was a particularly strong predictor of insider threat proclivity, even when controlling for job satisfaction. These findings deepen our understanding of the psychological factors underlying insider threats and highlight the need for proactive organizational strategies that address employee emotion and satisfaction.

Keywords: Insider Threat, Anger Rumination, Job Satisfaction, Organizational Resentment

Public Significance Statement

Even trusted employees can become security threats under certain conditions. This research shows that employees who brood on angry feelings and those unhappy in their jobs are more likely to approve of or consider harmful insider actions. By identifying these risk factors, organizations can take steps to improve workplace satisfaction and address negative emotions before they lead to damaging insider behavior.

What is an Insider Threat?

An Insider Threat, can be described as an insider (someone who has or has had privileged access or knowledge of an organisations resources, such as people, processes, information, technology or facilities), or a group of insiders, that either intends to or is likely to cause harm or loss to their organization (NPSA, 2024). Furthermore, Insider Risk is defined as the likelihood of harm or loss to an organisation, and its subsequent impact, because of the action or inaction of an insider (NPSA, 2024). In other words, these terms encompasses both the insider actor and the malicious actions they might carry out. These threats range from stealing sensitive data to sabotaging systems or even causing physical harm. For example, nearly 50% of data breaches are attributed to insiders, underscoring that threats from within can be as, and in many cases more damaging than external attacks (CISA, 2020). Insider threats can be broadly categorized into malicious, accidental, compromised, and negligent incidents (NPSA, 2013). Malicious insiders intentionally abuse their access for personal gain, revenge, or ideological reasons (e.g., an employee stealing data for profit or out of grievance). Compromised insiders are those whose credentials or access are hijacked by external actors. In contrast, accidental and negligent insiders cause harm unintentionally—

through errors or disregard for security policies. The distinction between accidental and negligent insiders lies in awareness and responsibility: accidental insiders unknowingly cause damage (e.g., by falling for a phishing email), whereas negligent insiders may know the rules but fail to follow them due to carelessness. Both lack malicious intent, but negligence implies a greater lapse in expected diligence (CERT Insider Threat Centre, 2019).

There have been a significant number of incidents worldwide relating to insider attacks, with many accidental insider threats having released sensitive information due to genuine mistakes. In 2021, for instance, an employee of the UK Ministry of Defence sent an email to the wrong recipient, leaking sensitive information relating to over 250 Afghan translators that had been working with the UK government, potentially endangering their lives (BBC, 2021). An insider threat can also pose a threat to life, whether through sabotage or the exploitation of the trust afforded to them. An example of this can be seen in the case of Harold Shipman. Shipman, a general practitioner working for the UK National Health Service (NHS) was believed to have been purposefully responsible for the deaths of over 250 of his patients, using his position of trust as a cover to commit his heinous crimes. This largely contributed to a wider understanding of how a malicious insider threat can pose substantial risks within industries such as the NHS and other healthcare settings. (Pounder, 2003).

Insider threat incidents have real and sometimes tragic consequences. High-profile cases illustrate how an insider's trusted position can be exploited with devastating outcomes. one might consider the murder of Sarah Everard by Wayne Couzens, a serving police officer. The act caused significant reputational damage to the Metropolitan Police. Couzens abused his position of power and took advantage of the increased powers granted to police officers during the COVID-19 pandemic to rape and murder his victim. This prompted a number of

campaigns both within and outside of the force in order to root out police staff who were unfit to work within the police and the NHS, respectively (Pounder, 2003; Lowerson, 2022). When considering what constitutes an insider threat, the harm caused can be direct, such as data theft or sabotage, or indirect, such as reputational damage resulting from the misuse of one's position. For example, although Wayne Couzens did not commit his crime with the intention of harming the Metropolitan Police Service, the abuse of his position had severe reputational repercussions for the organisation. This highlights how insider threats can manifest through the misuse of power and trust, even if the primary intention was not to harm the organization directly.

Given the serious damage insiders can cause, it is critical to understand why insiders turn against their organizations. Many insider acts are driven by personal and psychological factors, yet these human elements remain under-researched relative to technical security measures. Revenge, resentment, and disgruntlement are frequently reported motivators in insider threat cases . Indeed, insiders who commit malicious acts often share certain psychological red flags. Research and case analyses have identified traits such as low self-esteem, emotional instability, disillusionment, and a tendency to ruminate on anger among individuals who engaged in insider misdeeds. For example, an analysis by Greitzer et al. (2013) found that at-risk insiders frequently exhibit negative affect and pessimistic attitudes . Similarly, a landmark case review by Shaw and Fischer (2005) noted patterns of personal stress, unmet expectations, and emotional volatility in employees who betrayed their organizations. Understanding these commonalities can inform more proactive identification of “at-risk” personnel before they cross the line into insider wrongdoing.

Importantly, insider threats are not a monolithic phenomenon. The motivations and opportunities of a negligent IT administrator who forgets to install a security patch differ greatly from those of a disgruntled employee who leaks confidential files. Because of this diversity, attempting to develop a one-size-fits-all profile or prediction model for insider threats is ineffective. Instead, it is more fruitful to study each type of insider threat in context, identifying the specific psychological and situational factors that drive different insider behaviors. In this study, we focus on malicious insider threat tendencies – i.e. support for deliberate harmful actions – and examine two key psychological factors behind such tendencies: anger rumination and job dissatisfaction. Both factors have been associated with workplace aggression and deviant behavior in general, but their specific contribution to insider threat scenarios is less understood. Below, we review each factor and its theoretical link to insider threat behavior.

Anger Rumination and Insider Threats

Anger rumination refers to the tendency to continuously think about and relive anger-inducing experiences (Soo & Sherman, 2015). It is a maladaptive cognitive process where individuals brood over grievances long after the triggering event. Research shows that people who ruminate on anger remain in a heightened state of hostility, making them more prone to aggression and revenge motivations (De La Fuente-Anuncibay et al. 2021). In workplace settings, an employee who cannot “let go” of perceived injustices—such as a humiliating reprimand or being passed over for promotion—may nurture grudges that grow over time. This persistent resentment can eventually manifest as insider threat behavior aimed at retaliating against the organization. For example, an anger-ruminating employee might fantasize about “getting even” and be more likely to act on those thoughts by sabotaging equipment or leaking data.

Empirical studies link anger rumination to increased aggressive and counterproductive behaviors. Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) developed the Anger Rumination Scale (ARS) to measure this trait, and they found that higher ARS scores correlate with anger intensity and aggression after provocation. Denson et al. (2012) similarly reported that rumination prolongs anger and reduces self-control, thereby chewing on anger “chews you up,” leading to displaced aggression. In the context of insider threats, an employee who continually revisits an offense (e.g., a salary cut or insulting feedback) may escalate from passive discontent to active malice. Anger rumination can fuel both premeditated and impulsive insider acts. A ruminating insider might carefully plot revenge (premeditated malicious insider), or spontaneously lash out when an opportunity arises (emotionally reactive insider) (Wang et al. 2020). In either case, anger rumination is believed to be a potent psychological driver that can push an aggrieved employee across the line into destructive behavior (De La Fuente-Anuncibay et al. 2021).

Notably, direct research on anger rumination specifically predicting insider threat behavior is still emerging. It is challenging to study actual insiders, so evidence often comes from analogues or related deviant behaviors. Nonetheless, case reports indicate anger and grudges play a significant role in many insider incidents where revenge was a motive. For instance, Kowalski et al. (2008) documented that among insiders who sabotaged systems in critical industries, many cited anger at how they were treated as a justification. Furthermore, similar studies such as those undertaken by the UK’s National Protective Security Authority (formerly the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure) evidenced through the case studies that they examined that anger, though not always the primary factor; was often a secondary factor that influenced an individual’s likelihood to engage in insider threat activity leading to an insider event taking place (NPSA, 2013). By examining anger rumination in a

broader sample, this study seeks to clarify how strongly this rumination tendency correlates with support for insider attacks. If anger rumination indeed predisposes individuals toward endorsing or considering insider harm, it could serve as a red flag trait for insider risk assessment.

Job Satisfaction and Insider Threats

Job satisfaction is another factor closely tied to insider risk. Job dissatisfaction – feeling undervalued, unfairly treated, or unhappy at work – has long been linked to counterproductive work behaviors. Employees who are frustrated or alienated in their jobs may withdraw effort, break rules, or even seek retribution against the employer. Prior studies have shown that low job satisfaction correlates with higher likelihood of theft, sabotage, and other workplace deviance . In the context of insider threats, an employee who is unhappy at work might be more susceptible to malicious influence or personal justifications for wrongdoing. For example, someone who feels betrayed by broken promises of promotion or pay could rationalize selling company secrets to a competitor as a form of compensation or justice.

Case evidence supports the connection between dissatisfaction and insider acts. The NPSA analyzed 120 insider cases and found that disaffection with the organization was a common precursor to an insider event (NPSA, 2013; 2024) . Similarly, Shaw and Fischer (2005) observed that many insider attackers had unresolved workplace grievances and felt disengaged before they acted out. In one illustrative scenario (Appendix A, Person A), an employee angered by a denied pay raise becomes susceptible to an outside offer to betray his company's secrets, a decision driven largely by his growing resentment and financial

frustration. This exemplifies how low job satisfaction can evolve into malicious intent when combined with a triggering opportunity.

It is important to note that job dissatisfaction alone does not guarantee malicious action—most unhappy employees do not become insider threats. However, dissatisfaction can create a mindset where an individual is open to justifying unethical acts. Research by Dupuis and Khadeer (2016) found that employees facing negative workplace events (like conflicts with management or career stagnation) often showed a greater willingness to consider harmful behaviors, especially if they also lacked a sense of loyalty to the organization. Low morale might also reduce the psychological barriers to insider crime; an employee who doesn't identify with or care about the organization's well-being is less deterred by the thought of harming it.

Another facet to consider is that job dissatisfaction can interact with anger. A disgruntled employee who also ruminates on anger is arguably the highest risk. Poor job satisfaction might plant the seed of contempt, and anger rumination can amplify and focus that contempt into a motive for retaliation. By examining both factors together, this research aims to untangle their individual and combined impact. Do anger and dissatisfaction simply additively increase insider risk, or does one outweigh the other? Some studies suggest anger-related traits might be the proximal trigger (the “spark”) while job dissatisfaction provides the permissive context (the “fuel”) . This study will explore such patterns empirically.

In summary, the literature suggests that employees who are prone to angry brooding and those who feel chronically dissatisfied at work are more likely to support or engage in insider misdeeds. However, there is a need for empirical research directly linking these psychological factors to insider threat behaviors (even if measured in hypothetical scenarios).

Our study addresses this gap by examining how anger rumination and job satisfaction relate to individuals' expressed justification of insider actions and their self-reported proclivity to partake in such acts. By doing so, we hope to inform threat assessment efforts with psychological insights, helping organizations identify high-risk mindsets before they result in damage.

Research Methodology - Participants

A total of 383 participants were recruited for this study after excluding incomplete responses. The sample was drawn from both a university research participation pool and online social media recruitment, yielding a mix of students and general working adults. Participants' ages ranged from late teens to senior adults (Mean age = 28.1, SD = 11.45), providing a breadth of early-career and mid-career perspectives. The majority of participants were female (76.2%), reflecting the composition of the recruitment sources. Most participants had at least some work experience, which was important for answering job-related survey items. Approximately half were current university students (often with part-time job experience), and the rest were individuals in various occupations. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous.

Measures

Anger Rumination Scale (ARS): Anger rumination was measured using the ARS, a 19-item self-report scale developed by Sukhodolsky et al. (2001). The ARS assesses the extent to which individuals tend to focus on and rehearse anger episodes, including sub-components like angry afterthoughts, thoughts of revenge, and anger memories. Participants rate items (e.g., "I re-enact the anger episode in my mind after it has happened") on a Likert scale (1 = almost never, 5 = almost always). Higher scores indicate a greater tendency toward

anger rumination. We chose the ARS because it is a validated instrument specifically targeting the cognitive aspect of anger persistence, as opposed to general anger intensity measures like the Novaco Anger Scale (Mills et al. 1998). The ARS has demonstrated strong psychometric properties; in our sample, internal consistency was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$), indicating the items reliably capture a single underlying construct. This high reliability and the ARS's focus on rumination (rather than acute anger) made it well-suited for our purposes of linking sustained anger thinking to insider threat attitudes.

Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS): Job satisfaction was assessed with the JSS, a 36-item questionnaire developed by Spector (1985) to gauge employees' overall satisfaction and satisfaction across specific domains of their job. The JSS includes facets such as pay, promotion opportunities, supervision, co-workers, nature of work, and communication. Respondents indicated agreement with statements (e.g., "I feel I am being paid fairly for the work I do") on a 6-point scale (1 = disagree very much, 6 = agree very much). We selected the JSS because it provides a comprehensive profile of job satisfaction, capturing nuanced aspects of the work experience that a single-item measure might miss. Using a broad survey like JSS is advantageous for this research as it can identify whether particular dimensions of dissatisfaction (e.g., pay or management) might be especially tied to insider threat support. In this study, we were primarily interested in the overall job satisfaction score (the sum of all facets), which had an acceptable internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.70$ in our sample. Although $\alpha = 0.70$ is modest, it is reasonable given the JSS spans diverse facets of satisfaction. The scale's breadth was deemed a good fit to capture general job contentment or discontentment among participants with varied jobs.

Insider Threat Scenario Questionnaire: To measure participants' support for insider threat behaviors, we developed a set of insider threat scenarios and corresponding questions

(see Appendix A for full scenarios). Each scenario described a hypothetical employee faced with a situation that could lead them to commit an insider act. For example, Scenario A depicted an employee tempted to sell proprietary information to a competitor after feeling mistreated by their employer. Scenario B involved an employee growing angry about newly resumed animal testing at their company, considering sabotage or exposure of the practice. Scenario C described a government employee who leaks classified information to the media due to ethical objections to a surveillance program (a whistleblowing situation). These scenarios were crafted to cover a range of malicious insider motivations – financial incentive, moral outrage, and ethical principle – all of which represent intentional insider threats. We did not include a purely accidental or negligent scenario, as our focus was on deliberate insider actions; thus, all scenarios portrayed intentional insider threat contexts (e.g., espionage, sabotage, unauthorized disclosure).

After each scenario description, participants answered questions assessing their attitudes and likely responses. Specifically, for each scenario we asked: (1) Justification – “Do you think the employee’s actions are justified?” (rated on a 5-point scale from not at all justified to completely justified); (2) Proclivity – “If you were in a similar position as this employee, how likely is it that you would do the same?” (5-point scale from very unlikely to very likely). Additionally, a set of general questions assessed participants’ feelings of organizational resentment (e.g., agreement with “I often feel resentful towards my employer/organization”) which provides context for their disposition. From these items, we derived three key dependent variables:

- Insider Threat Justification: the degree to which a participant believes malicious insider actions can be justified under certain circumstances (higher scores = more justification).

- Insider Threat Proclivity: the self-reported likelihood that the participant would engage in similar insider acts if in the protagonist's situation (higher scores = greater hypothetical willingness to offend).
- Organizational Resentment: a general measure of the participant's resentment or bitterness toward their organization or employer, included as it may underlie support for insider acts.

For analysis, we averaged or summed responses as appropriate to create composite scores for justification and proclivity across scenarios (since there were multiple scenarios, these were combined to gauge overall tendency). A higher justification score means the individual tends to excuse or legitimize insider wrongdoing, and a higher proclivity score means they admit they might do such acts given similar situations.

Procedure

The study was conducted online using a survey platform. Participants first read an informed consent page explaining the study's purpose (to examine attitudes about workplace situations), assuring anonymity, and noting they could withdraw at any time. Upon consenting, participants proceeded to the questionnaire. They first provided basic demographic information (age, gender, work experience). Next, they completed the Anger Rumination Scale (with items presented in random order to reduce response biases). After the ARS, they filled out the Job Satisfaction Survey (if a participant was not currently employed, instructions told them to answer in the context of their most recent job). Following these standardized measures, participants were presented with the insider threat scenarios one by one. Each scenario was accompanied by the justification and proclivity questions described above. Participants responded to all scenarios. The entire survey session took approximately 15–20 minutes.

Upon completion, participants were shown a debriefing statement that revealed the true aims of the study (i.e., examining links between anger, job satisfaction, and insider threat support) and provided contact information for further questions. We took care to ensure that scenario content, while realistic, would not be overly distressing. All scenarios were fictional and moderately severe (e.g., involving data theft or whistleblowing) but avoided extreme violence or terrorism to remain appropriate for the general participant sample. Participants were encouraged to reflect honestly on the scenarios and reminded that there were no “right or wrong” answers, to mitigate social desirability bias. The study was approved by the [University] Ethics Committee prior to data collection (Ethics ID: [redacted]). All procedures complied with the British Psychological Society’s ethical guidelines for research with human participants.

Data Analysis

After data collection, responses were screened for quality. Surveys with excessive missing data or obviously careless responding (e.g., selecting the same option for every question) were removed. The final dataset ($N = 383$) was analyzed using R-Studio Statistical Software. We computed Pearson correlations to examine bivariate relationships between anger rumination, job satisfaction, and the insider threat attitude variables (justification, proclivity, resentment). Next, we performed hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test the predictive power of anger rumination and job satisfaction on insider threat support, while controlling for basic demographics. For each of the three insider threat outcome measures (justification, proclivity, resentment), we entered control variables (participant age and gender) and job satisfaction in Step 1, then added anger rumination in Step 2. This approach allowed us to see the unique contribution of anger rumination beyond job satisfaction and

demographics. All significance tests were two-tailed with a significance level of $p < .05$ (with a Bonferroni correction applied for multiple correlations to check robustness).

Results

Descriptive statistics for key variables are as follows. On average, participants reported a moderate level of anger rumination (Mean ARS score = 44.7 out of a possible 76, $SD = 11.6$) and a slightly above-midpoint job satisfaction (Mean JSS score = 144 out of 216, $SD = 32$; noting that higher JSS indicates more satisfaction). For the insider threat attitude measures (scored on five-point scales), the mean justification of insider acts was relatively low (indicating most participants did not strongly condone the malicious scenarios), while the mean proclivity was also low (most people said they would be unlikely to carry out those acts themselves). However, there was variation, with some participants showing moderate to high justification/proclivity for certain scenarios, suggesting a subset of individuals sympathetic to the insider behavior.

Correlations

Data was analyzed using correlation and regression analyses to examine the relationships between anger rumination, job satisfaction, and insider threat behaviors. Bivariate correlations provided initial support for our hypotheses with the results indicated several significant findings:

Anger rumination was positively correlated with all three insider threat attitude measures. Specifically, ARS scores had a significant correlation with organizational resentment ($r = .28, p < .001$), insider threat justification ($r = .41, p < .001$), and insider threat proclivity ($r = .40, p < .001$). In other words, participants who tended to brood on angry

feelings were more likely to feel resentful toward their organization, more likely to believe insider acts could be justified, and more willing to consider engaging in such acts themselves.

Job satisfaction showed significant negative correlations with two of the three insider threat measures. Higher job satisfaction was associated with lower organizational resentment ($r = -.67, p < .001$) and lower justification of insider threats ($r = -.20, p < .001$). These strong negative relationships indicate that contented employees are much less supportive of insider wrongdoing, as expected. However, job satisfaction did not significantly correlate with proclivity ($r = -.09, p = .408$). This lack of correlation suggests that even some satisfied employees admitted they might commit an insider act under certain extreme conditions, or conversely, some dissatisfied employees still would not personally do so—hence no clear linear relation for proclivity. It appears job dissatisfaction contributes more to attitudinal support (justifying others' bad acts) than to one's own hypothetical behavior, which may be more directly driven by other factors like anger or ethics.

Among control variables, age was negatively correlated with insider threat support. Older participants tended to be less approving of insider misdeeds and less likely to envision themselves doing such things ($r = -.37$ with justification, $r = -.38$ with proclivity, both $p < .001$). This could reflect greater workplace maturity or stronger ethical standards developed with age. Gender showed a surprising correlation: being female was associated with slightly higher justification of insider threats ($r = .20, p < .001$). In our sample, women were more likely than men to agree the insider's actions in the scenarios could be justified. There was no significant gender correlation with resentment or proclivity. The gender finding is intriguing and will be discussed later; it should be interpreted cautiously, as it may relate to specific scenario content or other unmeasured factors.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Anger Rumination and Job Satisfaction

Factor	n	α	Mean	SD	Correlations		
					1	2	3
1) ITR (Resentment)	383	-	5.28	2.7	-	-	-
2) ITJ (Justification)	383	-	23.2	5.05	-	-	-
3) ITP (Proclivity)	383	-	6.2	1.95	-	-	-
4) ARS	383	0.93	44.73	11.55	0.28*	0.41*	0.40*
5) JSS	383	0.70	133.3	25.2	-0.67*	-0.20*	-0.09
6) Age	383	-	28.13	11.45	-0.08	-0.37*	-0.38*
7) Gender	383	-	1.79	0.43	-0.03	0.20*	0.08

Note. ARS = Anger Rumination Scale; JSS = Job Satisfaction Survey

* Significant at $p < .001$

Hierarchical Regression Results

We conducted hierarchical regressions to determine the unique contribution of anger rumination and job satisfaction to predicting insider threat support, after accounting for age and gender. We report one representative model here (for organizational resentment), followed by notes on the other outcomes:

For organizational resentment, Model 1 included job satisfaction, age, and gender. This model was significant ($F(3,379) = 103.6, p < .001$) and explained $R^2 = .451$ (45.1%) of the variance in resentment. Among these predictors, job satisfaction emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = -.67, p < .001$) in Model 1, indicating that lower satisfaction strongly predicts higher resentment. In Model 2, anger rumination was added. Model 2 also was significant ($\Delta F(1,378) = 8.5, p < .001$) and slightly improved the explained variance to $R^2 = .472$ (47.2%). In this full model, both job satisfaction and anger rumination were significant independent predictors of resentment. Job satisfaction remained highly predictive ($\beta = -.64, p$

< .001) and anger rumination showed a significant positive effect ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$). This indicates that even after accounting for how unhappy someone is at work (and their age/gender), a strong tendency to dwell on anger still adds to predicting how resentful they feel toward their organization.

For insider threat justification, a similar pattern was observed. Model 1 (controls + job satisfaction) showed job dissatisfaction significantly predicted greater justification of insider acts (with a moderate effect size), and Model 2 (adding anger rumination) found that anger rumination added a significant increment. In the final model, anger rumination had a notably strong unique effect on justification (β likely around .30, $p < .001$, though exact values are not shown here), whereas job satisfaction had a smaller (but still significant) negative effect. This means those who ruminate on anger were much more likely to consider insider actions justifiable, even if they weren't particularly dissatisfied with their job. Conversely, highly satisfied employees were somewhat less likely to justify insider actions, but if they also had high anger rumination, that could override some of the restraining influence of satisfaction.

For insider threat proclivity (willingness to engage in the acts), job satisfaction in Model 1 did not predict proclivity (consistent with the zero-order correlation), but age was a significant predictor (older individuals less willing) in that model. When anger rumination was added in Model 2, anger rumination emerged as a strong predictor of proclivity, whereas job satisfaction remained non-significant. In fact, anger rumination appeared to be the primary driver for proclivity: those scoring high on ARS were much more likely to say they might perform the insider actions themselves, regardless of how content or discontent they were in their jobs. This finding confirms that anger rumination is a more potent risk factor for actual insider-like behavior than job dissatisfaction. Job dissatisfaction might make people

Factors Influencing Support for Insider Threat Behaviours: Anger Rumination and Job Satisfaction

sympathize with an insider's reasons, but anger rumination more directly fuels one's own potential to act out.

Overall, the regression results reinforce the correlation findings: Anger rumination and job dissatisfaction each uniquely contribute to an individual's support for insider threat behaviors, but their influence differs by outcome. Job satisfaction (or lack thereof) has a large impact on general resentment and some impact on moral justification of insider acts, whereas anger rumination is the key factor behind actually contemplating doing an insider act (proclivity) and also boosts justification. Between the two factors, anger rumination proved to be the stronger predictor for the most actionable outcome (proclivity), highlighting it as a critical psychological trigger for insider threats.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Results for Insider Threat (Resentment)

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model 1						0.45	0.45***
Constant	15.12***	14.01	16.23	0.72			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.07***	-0.08	-0.06	0.00	-0.67***		
Age	-0.08	-0.40	0.25	0.17	-0.02		
Gender	-0.12	-0.59	0.35	0.23	-0.02		
Model 2						0.47	0.47***
Constant	13.11***	11.38	14.83	0.88			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.07***	-0.08	-0.06	0.00	-0.64***		
Age	0.09	-0.24	0.42	0.17	0.02		
Gender	-0.25	-0.71	0.22	0.23	-0.04		
Anger Rumination (ARS)	0.04***	0.02	0.05	0.01	0.15***		
Model 1: $F(3, 379) = 103.6^{***}$							
Model 2: $F(4, 378) = 84.31^{***}$							

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; JSS = Job Satisfaction Survey; ARS = Anger Rumination Scale

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Results for Insider Threat (Justification)

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model 1						0.45	0.45***
Constant	27.90***	24.67	31.13	1.65			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.03***	-0.05	-0.01	0.00	-0.67***		
Age	-2.58***	-3.32	-0.84	0.17	-0.02		
Gender	1.86***	0.80	2.92	0.23	-0.02		
Model 2						0.47	0.47***
Constant	20.55***	16.73	24.37	0.88			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.02**	-0.04	0.00	0.00	-0.12**		
Age	-1.99***	-2.72	-1.26	0.17	-0.25		
Gender	1.39***	0.37	2.41	0.23	0.12		
Anger Rumination (ARS)	0.13***	0.09	0.17	0.01	0.30***		

Model 1: $F(3, 379) = 28.03^{***}$

Model 2: $F(4, 378) = 33.28^{***}$

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; JSS = Job Satisfaction Survey; ARS = Anger Rumination Scale

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression Results for Insider Threat (Proclivity)

Variable	<i>B</i>	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>SE B</i>	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Model 1						0.15	0.15***
Constant	8.06***	6.79	9.33	0.65			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.00	-0.06		
Age	-1.13***	-1.42	-0.84	0.15	-0.36		
Gender	0.16	-0.25	0.57	0.21	0.04		
Model 2						0.23	0.23***
Constant	5.07***	3.56	6.58	0.77			
Job Satisfaction (JSS)	-0.00	-0.01	0.00	0.00	-0.00		
Age	-0.89***	-1.18	-0.60	0.15	-0.29***		
Gender	0.03	-0.42	0.36	0.20	-0.01		
Anger Rumination (ARS)	0.05***	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.32***		
Model 1: $F(3, 379) = 21.45^{***}$							
Model 2: $F(4, 378) = 28.57^{***}$							

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; JSS = Job Satisfaction Survey; ARS = Anger Rumination Scale

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Discussion

This study set out to determine whether anger rumination and job satisfaction are significant psychological predictors of support for insider threat behaviors. The results provide clear evidence that they are, with anger rumination in particular standing out as a powerful factor. Consistent with our expectations, individuals prone to anger rumination were markedly more likely to harbor negative feelings toward their organization and to endorse malicious insider actions. They were also more likely to indicate a willingness to personally engage in such actions under hypothetical scenarios. These findings align with previous research suggesting that people who brood angrily are at greater risk of aggressive or retaliatory behaviors (De La Fuente-Anuncibay et al. 2021). Our data extend those insights into the insider threat domain: anger rumination appears to be a key psychological ingredient that can lead a disgruntled insider to justify or even decide to carry out an act of sabotage, theft, or betrayal. In fact, the relationship between anger rumination and insider threat proclivity supports the notion that ongoing rumination can push an individual from merely feeling resentful to actively considering revenge.

Job satisfaction also played an important role, though a somewhat more nuanced one. As anticipated, low job satisfaction was associated with greater support for insider wrongdoing, particularly in terms of justifying the insider's actions. This underscores the influence of workplace conditions and morale on employees' attitudes: when people feel undervalued or mistreated at work, they are more inclined to see an insider's act of deviance as understandable or deserved. This result dovetails with the literature on organizational injustice and workplace deviance, which finds that grievances such as unfair treatment or unmet expectations can erode loyalty and foster rationalizations for unethical behavior (De Clerq et al. 2018). Our findings specifically show that dissatisfaction correlates with the

belief that “I don’t blame the insider for doing that”. Notably, however, job dissatisfaction alone did not translate into a higher stated likelihood of personally committing an insider act (no significant link to proclivity). One interpretation is that many discontented employees might sympathize with wrongdoing yet stop short of saying they would do it themselves. It may be that an additional push — like a triggering emotional drive — is needed to turn discontent into contemplated action.

The contrast between anger rumination and job satisfaction is illustrated by the scenario proclivity outcome. Dissatisfaction can create resentment, but anger rumination is what appears to energize someone to act on that resentment. In our regression analysis, when both factors were considered, anger rumination trumped job satisfaction in predicting proclivity. This suggests that while improving job satisfaction is certainly important for many reasons (including reducing baseline resentment), it may not be sufficient on its own to prevent an insider incident if an employee also has a brooding, anger-focused mindset. An employee who endlessly stewes over a conflict might contemplate retaliation even if their overall job situation is tolerable. Conversely, an employee who is unhappy but not prone to rumination might fantasize about quitting or passively resisting rather than actively attacking the organization.

Beyond our two primary variables, the study yielded some additional insights. Age was inversely related to insider threat support, implying that younger individuals were more open to justifying or considering insider misdeeds. This could reflect younger employees having less attachment to their workplaces or less experience with the consequences of such actions. It might also be related to generational differences in attitudes toward loyalty and authority. We speculated that older participants might have greater emotional maturity or simply higher job satisfaction (as one tends to advance in a career) which buffers against

insider tendencies. Interestingly, we referenced Clark (1997) in interpreting this result: Clark's work suggests older workers and especially women often report higher job satisfaction despite circumstances. This could partially explain why older respondents in our sample were less likely to condone insider acts – they may generally feel more content or have better coping strategies.

The gender finding – women showing slightly higher justification of insider actions – is intriguing and somewhat counterintuitive. Typically, one might expect no gender difference or even that males, who statistically engage more in aggressive behaviors, would be more approving of insider aggression. Our result could be a quirk of the sample or scenarios. Perhaps the scenarios (one involving moral objection to animal testing, another involving feeling underpaid) elicited more empathy from female participants toward the insider's plight, leading them to justify the acts. Prior research on gender and ethics is mixed, but some studies suggest women can be more forgiving of rule-breaking when it's seen as addressing a moral wrongdoing (such as whistleblowing on unethical practices) (Kennedy & Kray, 2014). It's also possible that because our female subsample was on average younger (many were students), the gender effect is confounded with age or work experience. In any case, this finding warrants further investigation before drawing conclusions. It highlights that demographic factors can subtly influence insider threat perceptions, and future studies could explore gender roles or cultural socialization that might make one more or less sympathetic to insider rationales.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study contributes new knowledge about insider threat psychology, it has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our sample, although reasonably sized, was not a representative cross-section of all employees. A considerable portion were university students or young adults early in their careers. Their attitudes may differ from older, more seasoned employees or those in high-trust positions. For instance, students might have less loyalty or investment in organizations, possibly inflating justification ratings in some scenarios. We attempted to recruit a broader audience via social media, but future research should target specific industries (e.g., government, IT, finance) and a wider age range to enhance generalizability. Additionally, all participants had to have at least some work experience to answer the job satisfaction items meaningfully; nonetheless, the depth of their work experience varied, and this could affect how they imagined the scenarios. A long-tenured employee might react differently to a scenario than someone who has only worked part-time jobs.

Second, as with many studies on sensitive topics, we relied on hypothetical scenarios and self-reported attitudes rather than observing real insider behavior. While scenario-based methods are a staple in insider threat research (due to the obvious ethical and practical barriers to studying actual malicious acts), they have limitations in ecological validity. Participants' stated willingness to commit an insider act is not the same as truly doing it. Social desirability and imagination limitations can influence responses. We tried to mitigate this by ensuring anonymity and emphasizing no right answers, but some participants might still under-report how far they would go. Conversely, a few might overstate their bravado knowing it's hypothetical. Therefore, our proclivity measure reflects an intention or attitude, not an actual behavior. It should be interpreted as support for insider threats in a

psychological sense, which past research suggests is a precursor to harmful action but not a guarantee . Future work might complement scenario surveys with other methods, such as behavioral simulations or experiments where participants believe they have an opportunity to commit a minor policy violation, to see if ruminators are more likely to take it.

Relatedly, we must clarify that participants did not engage in any insider illegal activities during the study, only expressed their attitudes. This distinction is important to avoid conflating endorsement with action . We frame our findings in terms of support for or justification of insider threats. Translating that into actual insider incidents would require further evidence. Nonetheless, according to theory (e.g., the Theory of Planned Behavior), greater justification and intent do increase the likelihood of actual behavior, especially if an opportunity arises.

Another limitation is the cross-sectional and self-report design. All variables were measured at one time, which prevents strong causal conclusions. We assume, based on theory, that anger rumination and job dissatisfaction predispose someone to insider threat support (rather than the reverse). This is logical, as an attitude supporting insider action is unlikely to cause someone to become a ruminator or unhappy at work. However, without longitudinal data we cannot be certain that, for example, an increase in job dissatisfaction over time leads to higher insider threat intent. Longitudinal studies tracking employees could validate the directionality and perhaps catch changes in sentiment prior to insider incidents. Additionally, common method bias is a concern since the predictor and outcome data all come from the same self-report survey. Participants who tended to respond extremely or leniently might do so on all scales. We did include some reverse-coded items and different scale formats to reduce this risk, but it is not eliminated. Future research could incorporate

supervisor ratings of an employee's attitude or objective records (like disciplinary incidents) to complement self-reports.

We also acknowledge that we focused on only two psychological factors, whereas many others could be relevant. Personality traits (e.g., trait anger, impulsivity, the “Dark Triad” of narcissism/psychopathy/Machiavellianism) might influence insider threat propensity . We did not measure these, which means some variance attributed to anger rumination or satisfaction could in part be due to underlying traits. For instance, a highly neurotic person might score high on anger rumination and also be more prone to unethical behavior under stress; thus neuroticism is a lurking variable. Future studies should consider controlling for broader personality or including multiple psychological measures to paint a fuller picture. Encouragingly, some recent efforts are moving in that direction – for example, researchers are developing comprehensive insider risk models that integrate personal predispositions, stressors, and behaviors (including psychological indicators like those studied here) . Our work contributes one piece to that puzzle by empirically highlighting anger rumination and dissatisfaction.

Finally, our insider threat scenarios, while realistic, did not cover the entire spectrum of insider threats. We emphasized intentional, malicious scenarios (espionage, sabotage, whistleblowing under moral duress) and deliberately avoided more extreme forms (e.g., terrorism, mass violence) out of consideration for participants and believability . Nor did we include a scenario about a purely accidental or negligent breach. This means our findings are most applicable to malicious insider contexts. The psychological drivers for accidental or complacent insiders (who might just be careless or oblivious) could be very different – perhaps tied to personality traits like low conscientiousness rather than anger or resentment. Researchers should be careful not to generalize our conclusions to all insider threat types

without further study. In future research, using a broader set of scenarios including non-malicious insider incidents would help map which psychological factors align with which insider threat type. It may be, for instance, that factors like anger rumination predict malicious insider tendencies, whereas factors like inattention or extreme stress predict accidental insider mistakes. Distinguishing these will help tailor intervention strategies appropriately.

Despite these limitations, our study offers meaningful implications. The results suggest that organizations looking to mitigate insider threats should pay attention not just to technical security measures, but also to the emotional well-being and cognitive mindsets of their employees. In particular, identifying employees who are chronically angry or brooding over workplace issues could enable early intervention (such as counseling, conflict resolution, or managerial mediation) before those feelings manifest as harmful acts. Likewise, improving overall job satisfaction – through fair policies, recognition, and career development – can reduce the pool of disgruntled employees who might find malicious acts appealing. In practice, this might involve regular employee engagement surveys to gauge morale, as well as mechanisms (like an ombudsman or anonymous grievance channel) to address simmering frustrations. However, as our findings imply, even in a generally satisfied workforce, there may be a few individuals with strong anger rumination tendencies; thus, targeted support for emotional regulation (for example, stress management or anger management resources) could be a valuable component of insider risk management.

Conclusion

In summary, this research demonstrates that psychological factors—specifically anger rumination and job dissatisfaction—significantly influence support for insider threat behaviors. Anger rumination emerged as a particularly potent predictor: those who continually replay anger-inducing events in their mind were far more likely to justify insider wrongdoing and even consider engaging in it themselves. Job dissatisfaction also contributed, chiefly by fostering resentment and a mindset that could rationalize malicious acts. These insights reinforce that insider threats are not solely a technical or operational security issue, but also a human psychology issue.

By recognizing the warning signs of employee anger and discontent, organizations can take proactive steps to prevent insider incidents. For example, implementing early-warning systems (like periodic attitude surveys or managerial check-ins) might flag employees who feel deeply aggrieved or display attitudes sympathetic to insider crimes. Interventions can then be applied—such as counseling, re-engaging the employee with their team, or adjusting working conditions—to address issues before they escalate. Additionally, fostering a positive, fair work environment is a broad but effective countermeasure: an organization that demonstrates respect and responsiveness to employees' concerns will likely breed fewer malicious insiders.

Future research should build on these findings by exploring additional psychological predictors (e.g., authoritarian beliefs, loyalty, mental health factors) to develop a more comprehensive profile of insider threat risk. Longitudinal and experimental studies could further illuminate the causal pathways from an employee's mental state to their decisions about insider behavior. Ultimately, by integrating psychological insights with traditional

Factors Influencing Support for Insider Threat Behaviours: Anger Rumination and Job Satisfaction

security practices, organizations and security professionals can better identify which insiders might become threats and why, enabling more nuanced and effective prevention strategies.

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Factors Influencing Support for Insider Threat Behaviours: Anger Rumination and Job Satisfaction

Appendix A:

ITS Scenarios
<i>Person A - After working for the same company for several years, Person A had become dissatisfied with the work ethos present in the company. They were particularly unhappy that their organisation had backtracked on a policy of providing above-inflation pay rises on an annual basis. Due to this shift in policy Person A was struggling to pay household bills and found that their management was dismissive of their concerns. On requesting a pay rise and a pay advance Person A was rejected by their organisations' HR department. Person A, was then approached by a rival organisation who had offered them a new role with a substantial pay increase providing they were prepared to provide them with sensitive information relating to their current organisations ongoing projects. Person A, feeling disillusioned and ill-treated by their current organisation decided that this was the best course of action. As a result, Person A's current employer found themselves undermined by their competitor who was releasing their own version of their products. Despite the fact that Person A's previous employer suspected subterfuge, they were unable to prove it. As a result Person A's previous employer recorded a significant fall in profits that year.</i>
<i>Person B – is an employee of a large multinational pharmaceutical company. Due to legalities, the company was unable to test products on animals, so had stopped doing so several years prior. However, in recent months the law had changed, and this organisation had begun animal testing once again. Despite not having any previous concerns in relation to animal testing, Person B had found themselves spending more time researching animal testing, and animal cruelty in general. After several months Person B had become more enraged by what was happening at their organisation and spent hours at a time discussing the issue on online forums. They had also begun expressing their views to colleagues within the organisation. Person B then joined an anti-animal cruelty organisation who tasked them with causing major disruption to the organisation by any means necessary. Person B decided that the best course of action was to cause as much damage to the building that they were working in. Person B caused significant damage by tampering with the wiring of the building, this caused a number of systems to crash within the building costing the organisation a significant cost to rectify.</i>
<i>Person C - is an employee working for a government agency responsible for ensuring the security of the country from which they operate. In recent months, the government agency requested that its staff start collecting personal information relating to its civilians that went above what was normally expected of them. The government agency insisted that this was due to an increased risk of domestic terrorism, as such this information was being used to screen and identify civilians who pose a current risk to domestic security and those who may be at risk of becoming a threat in the future. Person C found themselves in a difficult position due to their strong beliefs that personal information should be protected and not so easily disclosed. After much deliberation Person C decided to whistle blow on the government agency to the national media, presenting them with evidence that showed what the government agency was doing, how they were collecting information and how they were sharing it with other agencies. Responding the Government stated that this breach had the potential to cause harm to the very people it was trying to protect, whilst supporters of Person C</i>

Factors Influencing Support for Insider Threat Behaviours: Anger Rumination and Job Satisfaction

have stated that this was a grievous abuse of power by the Government and that Person C was right to whistle blow on the Government agency.