Workplace Deviance and Social Learning Theory: An Understanding of its Relationship

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ABSTRACT

Workplace deviance has become a significant concern for organizations across the globe. Employees indulge themselves in counterproductive work behaviors that affect both the organization and their coworkers. Despite the hazardous outcomes, organizations have done little to keep a check on such employee behavior. Academic research on the subject is mostly confined to developed economies, and hence, there is a need to understand this phenomenon and study it in developing economies such as India. The following paper attempts to explore the subject and recommends to analyze it in the Indian context further.

Keywords: Workplace Deviance, Employee Deviance, Counterproductive Work Behaviors, Social Learning.

1. Introduction

In an organization, people from different backgrounds, knowledge, culture, and diverse nature meet and exhibit their behaviors. These behaviors have a long-lasting impact on their co-workers as well as the organization at large. Ideally, these behaviors should fall well within the boundaries established through organizational norms. Applebaum et al. (2007) defined organizational norms as a superset consisting of expected employee behaviors, linguistics, principles, and postulations that allow a suitable steady performance for any workplace. However, in reality, these employee behaviors may very well fell out of expected norms set by the organizations. Appelbaum et al. (2007) further concluded that some times, due to reasons such as lack of motivation to meet normative expectations, employees violate organizational norms.

Unethical Behavior and Workplace Deviance

Researchers, social scientists, and practitioners are increasingly interested in studying unethical behaviors at the workplace and believed that unethical behavior is eating up the productivity of organizations these days. Sims (1992), in the study, concluded that employees' unethical behavior of different kinds and at all levels of the organization is an alarming situation. Peterson (2002) stressed that workplace deviant behaviors such as theft, fraud, aggressive behavior, harassment are prevalent in all types of organizations and soon turning itself into a big challenge for management. Thus, managers, executives, and researchers need to find ways to identify such behaviors and stop them (Robinson, O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

There can be many reasons for the deviant behaviors of employees rooted in their individual, sociological, or other economic backgrounds. Researchers thus may be interested in analyzing variables such as education, work culture, group dynamics, or maybe personality type of perpetrators. Deviant behaviors of an employee can be observed through the change in his attitude, performance, sincerity towards work, etc. Magyar (2003), in his study, mentioned that sometimes deviant behavior of an employee is signal to the management that there is a need to change in an organizational setting to correct such employee behaviors for the greater good.

Constructive/Positive Deviance

It is natural to believe that deviant behaviors have a negative orientation and that it is harmful to organizations that its employees are engaged in them. However, some researchers state the deviance among employees can have positive outcomes too. Appelbaum et al., (2007) defined positive deviance as intentional employee behavior that though departs from the organization rules and regulations, it results in an honorable outcome for the organization. These positive deviances thus may include certain innovative behaviors exhibited by workers, their noncompliance with some dysfunctional directives, and/or criticizing incompetent bosses and leadership styles. In simple words, these are the behaviors which are not recognized/authorized by the organizations, but still help the organization in the end towards reaching its goals. Thus, organizations must instead empower and support employees who are indulged in positive or constructive deviance.

The current research focus will be on the negative deviant workplace behavior, and whenever and wherever the term employee deviance is used, it shall be understood as negative deviant workplace behavior only.

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The Cost Associated With Workplace Deviance

There are various costs associated with workplace deviance. Appelbaum et al. (2007), in their research, cited that as much as up to 75 % of employees at one point of time engage in activities such as theft, sabotage, or behaviors such as absenteeism. In the US alone, of all the covered organizations in their study, approximately 95 % of them reported some form of employee deviance (Appelbaum et al., 2007). The occurrence of such/similar employee behaviors is found to be prevalent in all different types of industries. Theft, which is considered as one of the significant forms of deviance, costs US companies between $20 and $200 billion every year. Further, Greenberg and Barling (1996), in their research, explained that these thefts account to be a significant factor in at least 20% of all bankruptcies in the US.

These thefts are also linked to Intellectual property, and other vital information of any organization, and the estimated loss accounted for such deviance is upward of $45 billion in US companies. Besides these monetary costs, there are certain non-monetary costs also that an individual or an organization has to bear from time to time from these deviant behaviors. These non-monetary costs exert stress, job dissatisfaction, higher turnovers, and, subsequently, high non-productivity.

Terminologies of Workplace Deviance

The amount of research into deviance and discussion of the topic has grown substantially during the past few years, and among the most prominent areas of study that relate to deviance, behavior is anti-social behavior, counterproductive behavior, dysfunctional behavior, and organizational misbehavior (Table 1).

Workplace deviance typology

Table 1: Various Terminologies of Workplace Deviance

Construct	Author	Definition	Examples
Deviance Behavior	Robinson & Bennett (1995)	Voluntary behaviors that break significant organizational norms and threaten the well-being of the organization and/or its members.	Production deviance (damaging quantity and quality for work), property deviance (abusing or stealing company property), political deviance (bad-mouthing others, spreading rumors), and personal aggression (being hostile or violent toward others).
Antisocial Behavior	Giacolone & Greenberg (1997)	Actions that bring harm or are intended to bring harm to an organization, its employees, and/or the — —	Aggression, theft, discrimination, interpersonal violence, sabotage, harassment, lying, revenge, and whistleblowing, focused mainly on personal and property interactions.
Counterproductive Behavior	Sackett (2002)	Intentional behavior of employees that are perceived as dangerous to the legitimate interests of an organization.	Refers to elements of job performance such as theft, destruction of property, misuse of information, unsafe behavior, poor attendance, and shoddy quality work.
Dysfunctional Behavior	Griffin, O'Leary-Kelly, & Kelly & Collins (1998)	Actions by employees or groups of employees that have a negative consequence for an individual, a group, and/or the organization itself.	Violent and deviant (aggression, physical, verbal assault, terrorism) and nonviolent and dysfunctional (alcohol and drug use, revenge, absence, theft).
Organizational Misbehavior	Vardi & Weitz (2004) and Vardi & Weiner (1996)	Acts that violate core organizational and/or societal norms, intentional workplace acts that violate rules pertaining to such behaviors.	Intending to benefit the self and the organization and intended to inflict damage, wasting time, absenteeism, turnover, crime, and sexual harassment.

Source: Adapted from Kidwell and Martin (2010, pp. 6).

The following authors proposed classifications of deviant behavior:

Early researchers in this field picked up some forms of deviance and classified into various categories such as Property deviance and Production deviance (Mangione and Quinn, 1974), severe and non-serious organizational rule-breaking (Wheeler, 1976) and punishable offenses (Robinson and Benett, 1995), etc. Based on previous research, Hollinger and Clark (1982) proposed a comprehensive framework build on the concepts of property deviance and production deviance. However, the above framework failed to provide insight into the interpersonal nature of deviance such as physical assault, etc. and thus, many researchers pointed out the need for more exhaustive research on the subject. Robinson and Bennett (1995) also stressed the need for including certain social aspects that led to organizational-directed employee deviant behaviors. They further presented a workplace deviance typology in their research, which included two dimensions and a total of four types of employee deviance. Two dimensions in the framework included:

(1) Minor vs. Serious form of deviance (to explain the severity of employee deviance)

(2) Interpersonal vs. Organizational directed deviance (to explain the resultant victim of employee deviance)

The combination of the above two dimensions results in four different deviant behavior types, namely production deviance, property deviance, political deviance, and personal aggression (Figure 1). The total number of elements belonging to these four quadrants is quite high; hence, only a few of them are shown in the figure below.
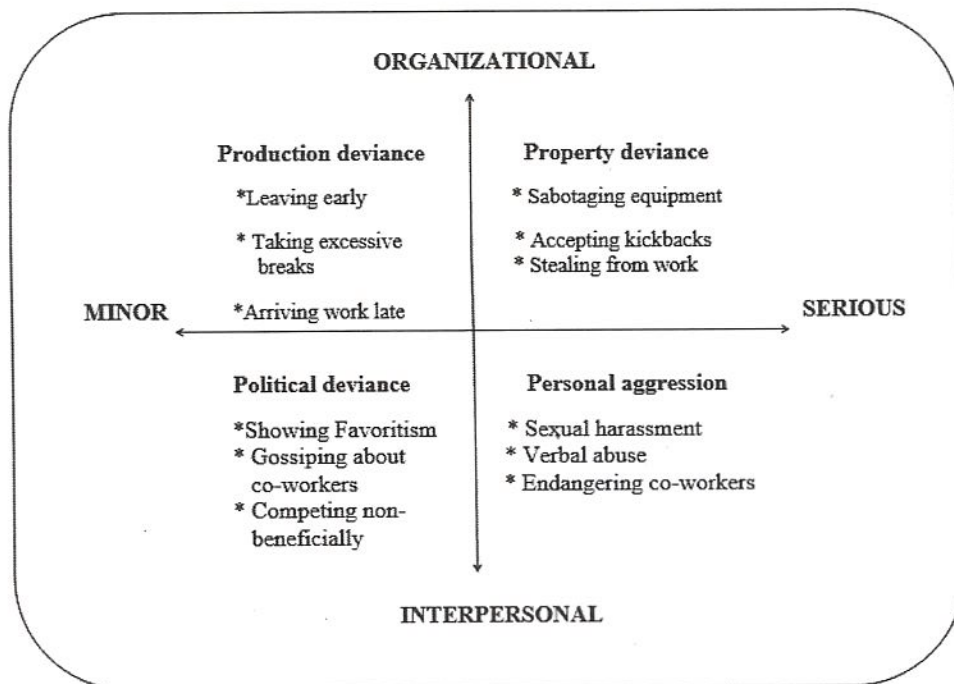

Figure 1. Robinson and Bennett's Conceptualization of Deviance (2000).

Robinson and Bennett (1995, 2000) categorized workplace deviance into two different behavioral types – Organizational deviance directed at the organization as a whole and Interpersonal deviance directed at the other employees within the organization. Deviance against the organization was separated into production and property deviance. Production deviance was considered a minor form of organizational deviance due to the less serious nature of the effects of the actions. Behaviors such as leaving the workplace early, taking excessive breaks than the permitted ones, consuming alcohol or drugs while working, or wasting resources were considered production deviance. Property deviance, on the other hand, was considered a severe form of organizational deviance due to the more serious, and often criminal, nature of the actions. Behaviors such as sabotaging equipment, lying about work hours, and stealing items from the company were considered property deviance.

In contrast to Organizational deviance, Interpersonal deviance consisted of behaviors that occur between co-workers in an organization (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; 2000). Interpersonal deviance is generally divided into political deviance and personal aggression. Political deviance was considered minor interpersonal deviance

because the actions do not pose a physical threat to employees. Behaviors such as showing favoritism, gossiping about co-workers, and blaming co-workers for specific work-related outcomes were considered political deviance. Personal aggression was considered dangerous interpersonal deviance due to the physical and harmful nature of threats against employees. Behaviors such as sexual harassment, bullying (verbal abuse), stealing from co-workers, and endangering co-workers were all considered to be forms of personal aggression.

Organizational Deviance

Production Deviance

Production deviances by employees are defined as those norms violating behaviors that affect the quality and quantity of work to be accomplished. Some of the examples of production deviance in organizations are late arrival or early leaving, taking excessive breaks, deliberate withholding of efforts, misusing/wasting resources, absenteeism, etc. (Robinson & Bennett 1995). In simpler words, production deviance is known for the activities which disrupt the flow of the production process.

Property Deviance

Property deviance by employees consists of those occurrences which involve unauthorized acquisition or damage to the tangible properties or assets of the organization (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Property deviance is considered to be a severe form of organizational deviance. Some of the acts considered under property deviance are sabotaging of official equipment, accepting kickbacks, disclosing confidential information related to the organization to unauthorized persons, work-related intentional errors, misusing/stealing money/property. Though some of these acts may lead to direct financial loss to the organization, many of them have productivity-related consequences as equipment are loss or needs time to repair and become fully functional, and hence costs associated due to these circumstances go even further (Everton et al., 2005).

Interpersonal Deviance

Political Deviance

According to Robinson and Bennett (1995, 2000), political deviance is considered a minor form of interpersonal deviance and consists of showing favoritism, gossiping about co-workers, and blaming co-workers for specific work-related outcomes. While this type of deviance itself is studied very little in the literature on employee deviance, it is essential to mention it since aspects of political deviance briefly have been considered alongside other types of employee deviance.

Personal Aggression

Violent employees are found in all different kinds of organizations across the globe. Personal aggression, though criticized, is still prevalent at workplaces. It is defined as an aggressive or hostile behavior shown towards other individuals within the organization. Some of the examples of personal aggression at the workplace include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, physical assaults, sabotaging others' work, destroying the assets/property of individuals and rape. (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Due to its nature, personal aggression is considered a severe form of workplace deviance and shall be treated severely if someone is found to indulge in it. Personal aggression is generally linked with the individual personality traits of an employee rather than an organizational climate (Appelbaum et al., 2005).

Social Learning Theory

Origin

Social learning theory has its roots in the theory of differential association proposed by Sutherlad (1947). This theory aimed to establish that various deviant behaviors of individuals are learned through their interaction with certain close personal groups. Consciously or subconsciously, individuals through these groups imbibe within themselves some techniques, motives, attitudes, or drives that lead to crime/deviance in the future (Sutherland, 1947). Individuals, through their exposure to these groups and associations, develop a separate understanding of laws/rules in terms of convenience, favorable or unfavorable. This then further lead to their involvement in deviant acts.

Based on this theory, Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess further developed and proposed social learning theory. This theory aims to explain deviance in individuals through the inclusion of key variables that supports delinquency (such as the social pressure) and discouraged delinquency (such as parental response to discovering delinquency in their children).

Social Learning Components

Burgess and Akers (1966) and Akers (1973, 1985, 1998), over the years, added to Sutherland's theory by adding other measures of social learning such as reinforcement to it. Thus, contemporary researchers refer to four different components to understand and apply social learning theory. These four social learning components are differential reinforcement, imitation, definitions, and differential associations.

Differential Reinforcement

Differential reinforcement occurs when certain behaviors are rewarded or punished. Akers (1998) argued that the chances that deviant behavior will occur are based on "the relative frequency, amount and probability of past, present, and anticipated rewards and punishments perceived to be attached to the behaviors" (Akers, 1998,

p. 66). If an individual perceives the likelihood of punishment below for a specific behavior, he or she will likely engage in that behavior. Also, if the peers one associates with are encouraging the act, it is likely that the individual will engage in that behavior because it is being positively reinforced.

Imitation

Researchers over time have explained imitation as an act where individuals observe specific behavior of people and then inculcate them in their acts. Akers (1998) has argued that individual through 'modeling' involves in deviant acts when they observe other people doing the same.

Definitions

Definitions refer to the meaning that is attached to certain behaviors through differential associations. According to Akers (1998), these are "beliefs, attitudes, justifications, and orientations" that influences behavior. If deviant behavior is defined as positive by one's peers, that individual is more likely to engage in deviance than if the behavior was defined as negative by the peer group (Akers, 1998, p. 52).

Differential associations

Differential associations consist of constant interaction of an individual with people around him/her. These may include peers, family members, work colleagues, societal members, etc. The more close and frequent interaction with these members results in more learning of the behaviors that may be deviant in nature and approved by these members.

Social Learning Theory and Employee Deviance

Despite the tremendous attention given to social learning theory in the past few decades, its application in understanding employee deviance is still in the nascent stage of research. The authors integrate this with social learning theory to suggest that in the work environment, employees use their co-workers to understand beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are appropriate in that setting (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Previous research results indicated that groups influence the behavior of employees at work. Correctly, the attraction-selection-attrition theory plays a significant role. In this context, "groups with stronger antisocial climates appeared to have greater ability to influence individual members' antisocial actions" (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998, p. 667).

This theory is similar to social learning, as it indicates that individual employees are affected by peer-related variables in the workplace, such as peer attitudes and behavior. Attraction-selection-attrition theory has also been applied in other work-related studies as an extension of social learning (Schneider, 1975, 1987; Schneider & Reichers, 1983).

Despite many attempts to explain the relationship between workplace crime and peer pressure, extensive use of social learning theory as a possible explanation to workplace deviance is not attempted (Bryant & Higgins, 2009; Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007; Appelbaum & Shapiro, 2006). So far, most of the research consisting of social learning theory and employee deviance has been conducted for the restaurant's employees. Studies focusing solely on social learning theory and employee deviance in Universities are thus very fewer.

2. Significance of the Study

Employee deviance is a costly burden on the shoulder of the organization; this cost is of utmost tangible, leading to frauds, scandals, and downfall of the organization and its people. The tangible loss that any individual or organization bears are conceived from several intangible causes that are deliberately or deliberately overlooked by the management or co-workers. Besides financial and economic costs, non-monetary costs should also be taken into account; for instance, various interpersonal deviance can cause stress and less job satisfaction subsequently leading to more turnovers. Despite knowing all these consequences and impact of employee deviance, still very little has been contributed to this area by the Indian researchers. This research borrows the social learning perspective and applies it to the workplace deviance concepts to explain the phenomenon.

3. Review of Literature

Some of the relevant research in the field of deviance and social learning are:

Naman Sharma (2018): University employees are though mildly involved in deviant behaviors, this accounts for an alarming situation as they can influence the students (future employees) to be deviant in their future jobs. This is especially true for the teaching employees as their students regularly observe their behavior and in most cases, accepted.

Anthony C. Klotz and M. Ronald Buckley (2013): It is often lamented that employees "these days" are not as dedicated to their employers, do not work as hard for their managers, and are not willing to put in the necessary sacrifice for their job as employees in past generations. This sentiment is likely compounded by the fact that due to the availability of information provided by the internet, stories about worker misconduct seem much more prevalent than in the past. As such, it is easy for managers to focus on counterproductive behaviors in their employees and gravitate toward McGregor's (1960) Theory X assumptions regarding human nature (e.g. the average employee has an inherent dislike of work), and subsequently, use the command and control management style that accompanies these assumptions. However, as this review shows, Counter Workplace Behavior aimed at

Organization (CWB-O) has been a central phenomenon in organizations for centuries. Thus, managers should understand that most, if not all employees, do feel, and likely always have felt, that they are entitled to engage in some degree of behavior that technically harms their organization.

Vonai Chirasha, and Mildred Mahapa (2012): Workplace deviance behavior is a phenomenon in which every organization will face and has significant direct economic consequences to the organization. Managers often neglect workplace deviance behavior until it is too late. Managers must know the root causes of such behavior so that they come up with relevant solutions.

Goode (2008): There are four components that must exist in order for deviance to occur: a) a rule or norm must be violated in the presence of an audience, b) that audience must have a reaction or make a judgment, c) the reaction is usually adverse, and d) it is about the deviant behavior.

Shu Zhang, Xiao-Ping Chen, and Guoquen Chen (2008): The strength of interpersonal group identity moderated the relationship between peer monitoring and deviant behaviors, in a way that a high level of peer monitoring will exacerbate workplace deviance for group members with a high interpersonal group identity, whereas a low level of peer monitoring will alleviate deviant behaviors for these members.

Steven H. Appelbaum, Giulio David Iaconi, and Albert Matousek (2007): It is vital for an organization seeking long-term success to discourage negative deviant behavior from developing within the workplace, and encouraging positive workplace behaviors that contribute to their organizational goals. Reevaluating a remodeling an organization's norms, attitudes and social values is necessary for the survival of organizations in the face of deviant employees.

Jackie M. Wellen and Matthew Neale (2006): The presence of a single negative deviant resulted in lower levels of perceived task cohesion, suggesting that deviant individuals may threaten the extent to which workgroups are collectively committed to achieving group goals. Perceptions of social cohesion varied depending on perceivers' self-typicality. Whereas the presence of a deviant was negatively related to social cohesion for those high in self-typicality, the direction of this relationship was reversed for low self-typicality participants.

Steven H. Appelbaum, Kyle J. Deguire, and Mathieu Lay (2005): Due to the expenses involved, organizations are always worried about the occurrence of deviant behavior of employees. This problem must be developed, measured and solved by organizations if they are to survive. More organizations need to step forward and make a conducive work culture that enables employees to make ethical decisions. Employees need to feel that they are supported in their actions by management and the entire organization. Moreover, this positive cultural environment should be maintained so that it does not subside to more aggressive and deviant behaviors that have been so detrimental to organizations in the past.

Studies discussed above have provided a shred of insights on the prevalent nature of workplace deviance, its effects and perpetrators. Social interactions within the organizations help behaviors of deviant employees to be noticed by other members of the organizations leading to an increase in its spread. Although deviant behavior within organizations itself is an under-researched area of management, social learning is even rarely studied. This phenomenon needs more attention from practitioners as well as researchers.

4. Conclusion

Workplace deviance is overlooked research in the Indian context. Very few researchers can record and document deviant behaviors in Indian organizations (See Sharma, 2017; Sharma & Singh, 2018; Malik, P., & Lenka, U., 2019, etc.). With several frauds uncovering in the past few years in the country, it is essential to study workplace deviance and design techniques and tools to counter it. The role of social learning becomes all more important to understand this phenomenon as employees observe and imitate their co-workers, especially in the case of deviant behaviors. More emphasis should be given to identify such behaviors and taking appropriate measures to contain it.

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