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Ain't Misbehavin': Deviance in the Workplace as Countermeasures against Authority

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Abstract :

Organizational authority and control may be intended to reduce workplace deviance, but they may have the opposite effect and instead encourage it. This is because the dissatisfaction caused by power enactments encountered by organizational members on a regular basis might lead to deviant behavior. In this study, the authors analyze why power causes workplace deviance in organizations and, especially, how forms of power determine the shape that workplace deviance takes.

Keywords: *deviance; power; resistance; organization*

Introduction :

Research on workplace misbehavior or deviance is essential due to its pervasiveness and associated costs. In a previous assessment, it was discovered that 33% to 75% of workers had participated in actions like as vandalism, sabotage, inappropriate absence, and theft (Harper, 1990). Recent studies imply that downsizing, reorganizing, and increased global competition have all contributed to tense work environments and high rates of wrongdoing in organizations. Each year, 1.7 million Americans are victims of workplace violence (U.S. Department of Justice, 2000). According to research conducted by Rayner, Hoel, and Cooper (2002), about 11% of British workers had experienced bullying on the job during the last six months. The damage that kind of conduct does to a company is enormous. Theft from inside accounts for an annual loss of \$15.1 billion for U.S. shops (Hollinger & Davis, 2003). Employee fraud costs Australian businesses an average of \$2.1 million each incidence, according to research by KPMG Forensics (2004). Workplace deviance has been demonstrated to have a significant detrimental influence on productivity and performance, in addition to these direct expenses (Dunlop & Lee, 2004).

Because of the high prevalence and high cost of organizational deviance, it is crucial that we identify and address its root causes. Here, we take a look at how deviation in the workplace might function as a sort of subversion against authoritative management. Financial, social, and working situations have all been cited as potential causes of deviance in the workplace (Robinson & Bennett, 1997). However, the incidents and power systems used by organizational members to control, inspire, organize, and lead others as a possible and major source of workplace deviance have not yet been comprehensively investigated. We contend that people's reactions to the exercise of power in organizations may be unpleasant even when the actors' intentions are good. In a nutshell, we contend that abuses of power may cause victims to feel like they've lost control over their lives and their identities, and that this, combined with a sense of unfairness, can lead to anger and, perhaps, criminal activity (J. W. Brehm, 1966; S. S. Brehm & Brehm, 1981). We will further argue that how power is exerted will determine how likely it will be to generate deviant behavior and the shape that deviant behavior could take. We're not saying power exercises always meet with pushback or that all protests include bad behavior. Instead, we think there's untapped potential in the idea that organizational authority may inspire workplace transgression. This essay aims to do just that by developing a hypothesis of how organizational hierarchy affects employee misconduct.

There are multiple possible additions to this article. It does this in a few ways. First, it bridges the gap between the older field of study dealing with organizational power and resistance and the more recent field of study focusing on workplace deviance and counterproductive practices. Despite their common themes, these literatures have grown independently throughout time. Such behaviors as absenteeism, shirking, sabotage, gossip, and physical aggression have been treated in the literatures on both deviance and resistance, and yet the cross-fertilization between these study areas has been rather small. However, combining them might increase our knowledge in both fields. A second potential contribution of this article is that it may help to contextualize the study of workplace deviance. Although harmful organizational behavior is inherently perceived as dysfunctional and counterproductive by definition (Robinson & Greenberg, 1999), more recent theorizing has noted that such behavior may also have functional aspects (e.g., Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004; Warren, 2003). Although deviant actions may be perceived as dysfunctional by the organization itself, they may be functional to those engaging in them because, as we will argue, they serve to maintain and protect their needs for autonomy and sense of self-

respect and fairness.

Finally, our theory may provide a useful counterbalance to the accepted but untested causal relationship between managerial actions and employee deviance (Robinson & Greenberg, 1999). A long history of agency theory (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989) suggests that organizations can and should increase managerial control to ensure employees act in the interest of the firm. In contrast, our theory would suggest that managerial attempts to control and limit dysfunctional workplace behavior may increase such behavior, rather than reduce it.

We present our argument in three main sections. First, we discuss how power in general leads to frustration, which in turn affects workplace deviance as resistance to that power. Next, we drill down in our analysis to explore how specific dimensions and types of power can produce specific forms of workplace deviance. In the final section, we discuss the implications of our model for theory and practice.

The Primary Relationship Between Power and Workplace Deviance

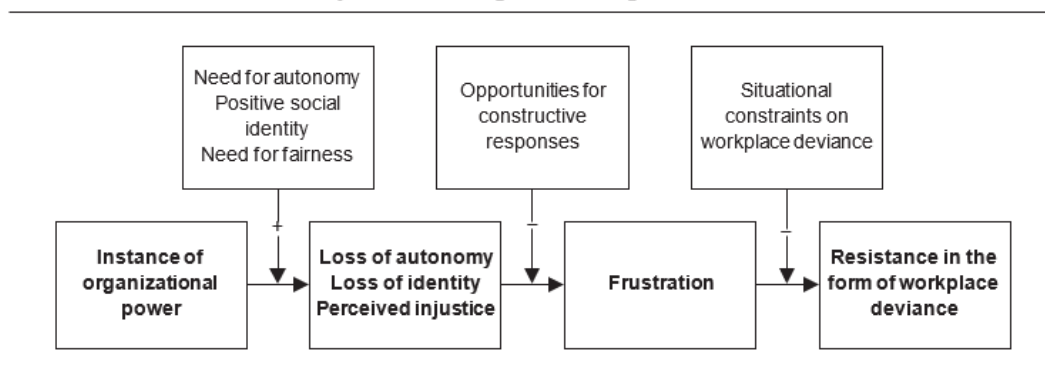
Organizational power reflects actions of any individual or organizational system that controls the behavior or beliefs of an organizational member. We contend that such enactments of power provoke workplace deviance, defined here as voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and thus is perceived as threatening the well-being of the organization or its members (Robinson & Bennett, 1997). When power provokes workplace deviance, it is a form of organizational resistance: Resistance involves an action, inaction, or process whereby individuals within a power structure engage in behaviors stemming from their opposition to, or frustration with, enactments of power (Collinson, 1999; Knights & McCabe, 1999). Deviant behavior is only one of many forms of resistance identified in the literature.

Workplace deviance as organizational resistance is important and widespread because all organizations are sites of power and resistance (Clegg, 1989; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). The structures, systems, and cultures of organizations act as circuits of power that control the actions of organizational members (Townley, 1993). Organizational structures provide the basis of legitimate authority (Pfeffer, 1981), whereas cultures and systems control members through rewards and sanctions and the articulation of what is understood as normal and desirable (Clegg, 1989; Townley, 1993). Within these cultures and structures, organizational actors regularly enact power in attempts to influence, persuade, or otherwise motivate organizational members to act in particular ways (Yukl & Falbe, 1990).

Workplace deviance is driven by provocations (Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Robinson & Bennett, 1997). Such provocations come from perceived disparities between a current state and some ideal state, need, or desire, which creates frustration (Robinson & Bennett, 1997). The frustration stemming from these provocations may motivate deviant behavior that is either instrumental or expressive in nature (Sheppard, Lewicki, & Minton, 1992). We argue that organizational power has the potential to create at least three forms of perceived disparity that produce frustration: (a) disparity between the need for autonomy and an experienced loss of freedom, (b) disparity between one's social identity and threats to that identity, and (c) disparity between a need for justice and experiences of unfairness. (See Figure 1.)

Need for autonomy. Reactance theory argues that the enactment of power can create a feeling of reduced autonomy on the part of employees, and this threat in turn motivates those employees to restore it by engaging in the restricted behaviors, or behaviors similar to them

Figure 1
The Primary Relationship Between power and Deviance



(J. W. Brehm, 1966; S. S. Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974). Enactments of power have the potential to thwart basic needs of employees, such as their sense of autonomy and self-control (Adler, 1930). Although

individuals vary in their need for autonomy, such needs are critical to individuals because they believe that they can control their own destinies; it is only through the freedom to make decisions and choose actions that they can maximize their own satisfaction (J. W. Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974). In terms of our model, we posit that enactments of power reduce autonomy, and the ensuing frustration can lead to deviant behaviors that are intended to resist that loss of autonomy.

Proposition 1: Instances of organizational power are more likely to lead to the frustration that underpins workplace deviance as resistance either when it significantly reduces the autonomy of individuals and/or when the targets of that power have a high need for autonomy.

Social identity. A second psychological mechanism through which power can lead to frustration and thus to deviant behavior involves the potential threat to an employee's social face, or desired identity. Social face refers to an interplay of attributes and social identities that the employee would like to project in a given social environment (Erez & Earley, 1993). Enactments of power in organizations can undermine or threaten one's identity in the organization as a strong, independent, equal individual. Such a threatened or damaged identity potentially provides the frustration that can lead to deviant behavior (Averill, 1982; Berkowitz, 1993; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994): When individuals' identities or social face are threatened, they tend to engage in defensive self-presentation (Schlenker, 1980) and are more likely to act with aggression (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994; Morrill, 1992) or seek revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1995; Bies, Tripp, & Kramer, 1997). As Andersson and Pearson (1999) argued, revenge is a way for individuals to demonstrate that they have socially valued attributes and are deserving of respectful behavior: Revengeful behavior may help to reestablish one's lowered sense of self or build up one's identity (Kim & Smith, 1993). Following our general model, acts of power undermine one's social identity, which in turn causes frustration and leads to a variety of deviant behavior intended to either seek revenge or restore that threatened loss of social face.

Dimensions of Power and Workplace Deviance

In this section, we drill down in our preceding analysis to examine relationships between dimensions of power and dimensions of workplace deviance. Research shows that organizational resistance can take many forms and that its strength, influence, and intensity are likely to be variable and to change over time (Brown, 1992). The type of resistance in which one engages depends on the particular context and content of what is being resisted (Jermier, Knights & Nord, 1994). Whatever form resistance takes is intertwined with the systems of power exhibited within the organization (Collinson, 1994). Therefore, the nature of deviance as a form of resistance depends on the nature of the power that provokes it.

To explore this issue, we first articulate the nature of power with a two-dimensional typology, and the nature of workplace deviance, with a similar typology. Next we examine how the nature of power affects the particular nature of deviance that emerges.

Conclusion

In this article, we have developed a theory of workplace deviance as a form of resistance to organizational power. We have argued that workplace deviance is often sparked by the systems and episodes of organizational power that lead organizational members to feel frustration, which in turn motivates them to resist, potentially with deviant behaviors. We further argued that different forms of power will prompt specific types of workplace deviance. Forms of power that are systemic (discipline or domination) will tend to incite deviance directed at the organization, whereas episodic power (influence or force) will tend to provoke deviance targeted at individual organizational members. Power that objectifies the employee (force or domination) will tend to encourage relatively severe deviant responses, whereas power that relies on the target's agency (influence or discipline) will tend to incite less severe deviance.

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