

Antecedents of Deviant Work Behavior: A Review of Research

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Abstract

Context: Deviant work behavior reflects a class of behaviors generally referred to counter-productive work behaviors that are deliberate, intended to cause harm to the organization and its employees, and in some cases can result in workplace homicide. Identifying antecedents of counter-productive work behaviors (i.e., deviant work behaviors) are important in reducing such behaviors. The dynamics of the work environment when examined critically shed light on the antecedents of deviant work behaviors. Deviant work behaviors usually enacted by employees in unfavorable working conditions, perceived mistreatment by the organization, among other psychological factors.

Objective and methods: The rationale of this mini-review is to identify antecedents of deviant work behavior. Specifically, research findings on the explanation and antecedents of deviant work behaviors provided to enable organizational science researchers and practitioners to design programs to reduce incidents of deviant work behavior. In this mini-review, journal articles selected from the organizational science literature to identify antecedents of deviant work behavior.

Conclusion: In order for organizations to reduce incidents of counter-productive work behaviors (i.e., deviant work behaviors), identifying and understanding antecedents of counter-productive work behaviors are extremely important. Therefore, organizational science researchers and managers can develop programs to reduce incidents of these behaviors.

Keywords: Counterproductive work behavior; Deviant work behavior; Emotions; Job performance; Personality

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Introduction

Personnel selection is an important activity within the human resource domain. The rationale behind a successful personnel selection activity is the notion that selected employees will perform their jobs effectively. In the last decade, organizational science researchers have identified several components of work performance, and one of the important components is counter-productive work behavior (CWB) or deviant work behavior. Deviant work behavior reflects a class of behaviors generally referred to counter-productive work behaviors that are deliberate, intended to cause harm to the organization and its employees, and in some cases can result in workplace homicide [1-3]. According to Mount, Ilies and Johnson [4], "these deviant behaviors are pervasive and costly both to organizations and

to employees." Muchinsky and Culbertson [5] identified five categories of counterproductive work behavior, which includes verbal behaviors (e.g., rudeness, ostracism, spreading rumors, and sarcasm), physical behaviors (e.g., bullying and overt violence), sabotage (e.g., damage to a company's property, products, or reputation), work-directed behaviors (e.g., lateness, excessive absence, theft, and working slowly), and workplace homicide. These categories of CWB can be further differentiated into two classes of CWBs, namely interpersonal CWBs (i.e., verbal and physical behaviors) and organizational CWBs (i.e., sabotage and work directed behaviors) [4]. In the last few years, workplace homicide and other related deviant behaviors have been on the increase [5]. Organizational science researchers have concluded that the negative psychological impact of deviant work behaviors can reduced employee morale, increase rates of absenteeism

and turnover, and decrease productivity levels [6,7]. Therefore, identifying antecedent factors of counterproductive work behaviors is important in reducing deviant work behaviors [8,9].

Explanation of Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

The results of organizational science research support the central role of psychological factors in work-place aggressive behaviors and CWBs. For example, numerous personality traits have been examined for their association with CWB and include trait anger, negative affectivity, emotional stability, narcissism, self-esteem, and trait anxiety [1]. Trait anger, self-control and narcissism have consistently shown to be significant predictors of CBW [1,4]. Deviant work behavior can also result from a person's attitudinal evaluation of his/her work, namely job satisfaction [4].

A myriad of other factors has been proposed to explain CWB, which could stem from abusive supervisors and customers toward employees to violation of psychological contract (e.g., termination of one's employment on grounds of perceived supervisor vendetta rather than one's poor job performance), work events, and unfavorable working conditions [10-13]. Deviant work behavior can result from employees who feel mistreated by others in the organization and could be a way to retaliate against other employees. For example, Scott [14] found that employees were more likely to engage in retaliatory acts because of disparaging remarks made against them.

In the review of the literature on the antecedents of CWBs (i.e., deviant work behaviors), Munt and colleagues [4] proposed and tested an integrative model that considers both personality traits (characteristics of the individual) and attitudinal evaluations (reflective of one's job). In this model, it states that job satisfaction mediated the relationship between personality traits and CWBs. Considering that job satisfaction can mediate the relationship between personality traits and CWBs, it is important to note that deviant work behavior represents a cathartic means of adjusting to, or restoring control over, a frustrating or dissatisfying job [15]. Consistent with other research [16], employees may engage in CWB as a way to regulator their emotions and cope with work stressors. In a recent study [17], narcissism, a facet of the Big Five personality traits, has shown to be the dominant predictor of CWB after controlling for the other facets of personality.

Examination of cross-sectional research on the antecedents of CBW shows that CWB is often a response to negative emotions elicited by situations. For example, feelings of anger and frustration predicted various forms of CWB such as sabotage, abuse, and absenteeism [18] and within-person research on the antecedents of CWBs shows that state hostility mediated relations of interpersonal unfairness with job satisfaction, and job dissatisfaction mediated relations of state hostility with CWB [19]. Consistent with these findings, other investigators have demonstrated that negative emotions fully mediated daily relations of interpersonal unfairness and CWB [20].

Theoretical Models

The antecedents of CBWs identified through affective events

theory (AET) [21], emotion-centered model of voluntary work behavior [22], and integrative model of personality traits and job satisfaction [4]. According to AET, stable features of the work environment (e.g., a permissive organizational culture) predispose emotional responses, and these emotional responses trigger CBWs. Existing research supports many components of AET, demonstrating associations of work events with positive and negative emotions [23,24] and showing that these affective states in turn shape work attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction) [25] and behaviors [26].

Spector and colleagues [1,22] introduced a conceptual variant of AET called the emotion-centered model of voluntary work behavior to account for varying sources of CWB. This model posits that positive emotions invoked by the appraisal of work situations are likely to encourage approach-type behaviors to remain in the situation, such as citizenship behaviors (i.e., behaviors exhibited to help fellow employees and promote the organization positively). In contrast, negative emotions resulting from appraisal of the situation as threatening elicit avoidance- and retaliation-type actions such as CWB. Such behaviors, although harmful for the organization, may serve as catharsis for the employee exhibiting such behavior, consistent with social exchange studies [27,28].

Another variant of AET is a model of personality traits and job satisfaction as predictors of CWBs [4]. According to this model, job satisfaction mediates the relationship between personality traits and CBWs. This model posits that employees with job dissatisfaction, assuming low scores on agreeableness and conscientiousness scales of a personality measure are likely to engage in CBWs and those employees with high job satisfaction, assuming high scores on the agreeableness and conscientiousness scales, are less likely to enact CBWs. AET, emotion-centered model and personality traits-job satisfaction model are consistent with appraisal theories of emotion, as they include work events and stressors as triggers of employee emotional reactions. Research has shown that conscientious individuals are less likely to enact CWBs [27], as these individuals have high impulse control, which facilitates task and goal directed behavior, such reporting to work on, delaying gratification, following norms and rules of the organization.

Two related conceptual arguments that are especially relevant to understanding the relationship of job satisfaction to CBWs are social exchange theory [28,29] and the norm of reciprocity [30]. Social exchange theory predicts that individuals who perceive that they are receiving unfavorable treatment are more likely to feel angry, vengeful, and dissatisfied. Consistent with the norms of reciprocity, when individuals are dissatisfied with the organization or boss, they may reciprocate with negative work behaviors such as withholding effort, arriving late at work. All of these are examples of CBWs directed at the organization. Alternatively, the individual may exchange their dissatisfaction with co-workers by engaging in CBWs directed at them, such as cursing them or sabotaging their work. In summary, these theoretical models predict that employees retaliate against dissatisfying work events (conditions) and unjust workplaces by engaging in behavior that harms the organization or other employees.

Practical Implications and Intervention

In order for organizations to provide a healthy work environment for all employees, it is important that organizations consider the antecedents of CWB in developing interventions or programs that reduce, preferably eliminate CWBs. Organizations that do not have a policy regarding CWB should adopt one. The policy should be comprehensive to reflect various forms of CWB. Newly hired employees should be required to sign this document and be aware of the consequences of violating any part of the policy. Swift action from management, ranging from suspension to termination can be considered as personnel decisions to mitigate future incidents of CWB.

One of the main causes of CWB stems from working conditions. Working conditions can reflect a broad range of issues from supervisor-employee relationships to work stress. This paper provides enough rationale that as management promotes healthy relationship between supervisors and employees, treating employees with dignity and respect, employee's ability to focus on the job at hand tends to increase, thereby, decreasing the probability to engage in CWBs. Thus, training for supervisors in how to deal with and manage employee emotions can be very beneficial to both the organization and the employee.

While the paper presents literature identifying conscientiousness, a personality trait as a predictor of CWB, individuals low on conscientiousness are likely to exhibit CWB. Although this might be the case for a small number of employees, using personality measures as part of the selection process can identify individuals with low scores on conscientiousness. The problem with personality measures is that they are based on self-reports, and the results obtained from these measures are constrained by employee faking. Where personality measures are not feasible or because of faking, the selection process can be enhanced through employees' previous appraisal reports from the previous employer.

The decision to engage in CWB as presented in this review, may be attributed to ones' emotions and personality. However, the most insidious form of CWB (e.g., workplace homicide) may be due to psychopathology (e.g., schizophrenia). Managers are not clinicians; therefore, they are not able to diagnose or treat psychopathology. Incidents of psychopathology can be referred to a clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist.

Conclusion

The paper has shed light on antecedents of counter-productive work behavior (i.e., deviant work behavior). In order for organizations to reduce incidents of CBWs, identifying and understanding antecedents of CBWs are extremely important. Therefore, organizational science researchers and managers can develop programs to reduce incidents of CBWs. As previously stated, CBW can be both costly and harmful to individuals in the organization.

Limitations of Current CBWs Studies and Future Direction for Research

Current research in CWB suffers from methodological problem rooted in the correlational nature of data used in statistical

analysis. This methodological flaw limits researchers from drawing causal inferences among study variables [4]. There is a dearth of research investigating the link between deviant work behavior and psychopathology [31]. The dearth of research in this area of investigation is partly due to the complex issue of psychopathology, broadly defined, and trying to capture components of psychopathology that have utility in explaining deviant work behavior can be challenging [7,8]. Psychopathology can range from anxiety to depression. One particular type of psychopathology correlated with behavior in general and studied extensively, is depression. However, the research linking depression to CWB is scant.

Another avenue for research is to investigate the mediating effects of job performance domains (i.e., task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors with different facets of CWB. Task performance refers to actual job behaviors reflective of one's job description; organizational citizenship behaviors are mostly positive voluntary behaviors for the good of the organization. Sackett [32] reviewed performance studies conducted between 1990 and 1999, and found negative correlations between organizational citizenship behaviors and various facets of CWBs. Although these findings shed important information regarding the dimensionality of CWB and its relationships with facets of job performance, new data on these variables aids in shedding more light on the antecedents of CBWs. Beyond the antecedents of CBW, organizational science researchers should carry out studies investigating the effectiveness of various programs designed to reduce or eliminate incidents of CBWs.

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