



Organizational supports and organizational deviance: The mediating role of organization-based self-esteem

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 November 2007

Accepted 8 September 2008

Available online 14 October 2008

Accepted by John Schaubroeck

Keywords:

Organization-based self-esteem

Organizational deviance

Belongingness theory

Organizational supports

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon belongingness theory, we tested organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) as a mediator of the relation between organizational supports and organizational deviance. Data from 237 employees were collected at three points in time over one year. Using structural equation modeling, we found that OBSE fully mediated the relation between organizational supports and organizational deviance. Controlling for preexisting predictors of deviance, including personality traits (agreeableness, neuroticism and conscientiousness) and role stressors (role conflict, ambiguity, and overload), did not eliminate the relation between OBSE and organizational deviance. The implications for the OBSE and deviance literatures are discussed.

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In the past decade, the topic of deviant employee behavior has become increasingly popular with organizational researchers. Deviant behaviors, or behaviors initiated by employees which contravene organizational norms, such as theft, staying home from work without cause, and taking unauthorized or extended breaks (Bennett & Robinson, 2003), can have a profound impact on employees and organizations. For employees, 24% of women experience sexual harassment at work (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwachau, & Stibal, 2003); 71% of employees report experiencing workplace incivility at least once in a 5-year time span (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). *Organizational deviance*, a specific form of deviant behavior targeting the organization itself, can have a significant impact on an organization's bottom line, with virtually all organizations being the target of some form of employee theft (Case, 2000). Estimates of lost productivity due to web surfing in the UK indicate that this form of organizational deviance can cost the equivalent of \$600 million dollars per year (Taylor, 2007).

Prior research has tentatively established that supportive aspects of the environment (e.g., supportive relationships with leaders or the organization as a whole; termed here *organizational supports*) may reduce the occurrence of organizational deviance (Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). However, we know little

about the psychological mechanism through which organizational supports influence organizational deviance. In order to shed light on these issues, the present article frames the organizational support-organizational deviance relation within a belongingness theory framework (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Such a framework not only addresses why organizational support matters to employees, but also suggests an underlying process of identity threat, which lowers organization-based self-esteem (OBSE; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989). Although lowered self-esteem has been argued to underlie deviant behavior Leary, Twenge, and Quinlivan (2006), surprisingly, within the organizational realm OBSE has not been examined as a mediator of the relation between organizational supports and organizational deviance, nor has its direct relation with organizational deviance been examined. Thus, the present study addresses an important theoretical and empirical gap in the literature. Below, we review the literature on organizational deviance and its relation to organizational supports; we subsequently outline belongingness theory and present our rationale for why OBSE should mediate the relation between organizational supports and organizational deviance.

Organizational deviance and organizational supports

Deviant behaviors can take many forms; indeed, the early stages of the literature on deviant behaviors examined behaviors such as theft, absenteeism, and drug use as separate entities.

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More recently it has been noted that these behaviors tend to occur, serving similar goals, and should be examined in conjunction with, not separate from, each other (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). As such, researchers have begun to focus on the broader category of *organizational deviance* (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Organizational deviance represents intentional behaviors engaged in by organizational members that are contrary to the norms of the organization, and which carry the potential to harm the organization (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Organizational deviance represents a form of job performance (together with task performance and citizenship behaviors; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002), but remains a distinct construct. For example, individuals engage in both deviant and citizenship behaviors, suggesting they are not simply opposite ends of the same continuum (Sackett & DeVore, 2002).

Given the prevalence and substantial costs of organizational deviance, most research has focused on identifying its antecedents. Contemporary research has focused on two main categories of antecedent variables: individual differences and reactions to organizational experiences (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Individual difference research has conceptualized organizational deviance as a reflection of different personality traits (e.g., low conscientiousness) or examined how personality traits moderate the relations of other variables with deviance (Cullen & Sackett, 2003). In contrast, the literature on reactions to workplace experiences have cast organizational deviance as motivated by the need to express one's displeasure with organizational experiences and/or to reconcile perceived disparities between how one behaves and how one is treated by the organization and its members (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Consistent with this, research has shown that situational variables such as role stressors can relate to deviance (Spector & Fox, 2005).

While the literature strongly corroborates the relation between negative organizational experiences and deviance, this research largely ignores the role of positive ones, despite calls to examine positive aspects of organizational experiences (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Accordingly, research on deviance and *organizational supports*, or positive relationships with the organization and its agents, has only recently begun to emerge. Organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986) suggests that employees develop beliefs regarding the extent to which the organization and its agents (e.g., leaders) care about the employee's well-being. These beliefs can be referenced towards the *organization* (perceived organizational support, or POS) or towards the employee's *supervisor* (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Antecedents of POS include the provision of developmental experiences by the organization and the cumulative experience of positive and negative interactions with powerful others in the organization (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997). The positive consequences of POS are wide-ranging (see Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002, for a meta-analytic review), but most relevant to the present study is that POS has been linked to deviant behaviors (Liao et al., 2004).

While *organizational support* represents an important operationalization of support within the organization, one can also receive support from *supervisors* as well (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). One dominant approach to assessing supervisory support has been to assess the leader-member exchange relationship (LMX). LMX represents the quality of the exchange relationship between a leader and his or her follower (Gerstner & Day, 1997). In contrast to other theories of leadership that focus primarily on the traits of leaders (e.g., the Ohio State leadership studies) or of follower characteristics (e.g., Kelley, 1988), LMX theory is concerned with dyadic relationships that develop between leaders and followers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality LMX relationships are usually characterized by trust, respect, and obliga-

tion, and involve being able to count on the leader for support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).¹

LMX has been linked to a multitude of consequences (see Gerstner & Day, 1997 for a meta-analytic review), but to our knowledge it has yet to be linked with broad measures of organizational deviance (though LMX has been linked to retaliatory and resistance behaviors; see Tepper, Uhl-Bien, Kohut, Rogelberg, Lockhart, & Ensley, 2006, and Townsend, Phillips, & Elkins, 2000). However, both POS and LMX index the quality of the relationship between the employee and the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005); while most research has focused on the positive aspects of support, it is also true that low levels of support can be conceptualized as thwarting an employee's *need to belong*. We propose that belongingness theory provides a unifying framework which can explain not only the relation between organizational supports and deviance, but also suggests a psychological process, gauged by OBSE, through which organizational supports influence organizational deviance.

Belongingness theory

Belongingness theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggests that one of the primary human drives is the need to belong, or to form strong positive interpersonal relationships. The need to belong is a powerful, fundamental human need that individuals constantly strive to satisfy (Baumeister & Leary, 1995); when one's sense of belonging is thwarted (i.e., lower than desired), this can result in adverse reactions (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007). The need to belong is posited to exist across cultures (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), owing to the evolutionary advantages membership in groups confer (Williams, 2007). It represents a pervasive concern for individuals, who are highly sensitive to indicators of acceptance within a group (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). In an organizational context, POS and LMX can be conceptualized as sources of acceptance and belonging within the organization; POS is indicative of the approval and respect of the organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), while high levels of LMX has been conceptualized as being part of the "in-group" (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Within belongingness theory, self-esteem has been proposed to play a special role as an indicator of one's satisfaction of the need to belong (Leary & Downs, 1995). That is, self-esteem levels rise and fall in accordance with one's acceptance and rejection from a group (Williams, 2007); consistently low levels of acceptance result in low levels of self-esteem. In the workplace, self-esteem is assessed with measures of *organization-based self-esteem*, defined as the extent to which individuals believe they are capable, significant, and worthy at work (Pierce et al., 1989). Empirically, OBSE has been linked to POS and LMX in cross-sectional studies (Pierce & Gardner, 2004); consistent with belongingness theory, these results suggest POS and LMX signal to the employee the extent to which the organization values him or her, and whether the employee is included or excluded at work (Pierce & Gardner, 2004).

While individuals strive to maintain high self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004), the interpersonal environment can sometimes frustrate belonging and self-esteem goals by failing to provide support, which communicates to the individual that they are not valued

¹ Given supervisors are considered agents of the organization whose actions may be interpreted as representative of the organization's wishes and not those of the supervisor (Levinson, 1965), one might question whether individuals differentiate between supervisory and organizational support. Factor analyses have shown that supervisory and organizational supports are best modeled as separate factors (Stinglhamer & Vandenberghe, 2003); as well, both LMX and POS have been shown to have unique antecedents and outcomes and to incrementally predict outcomes over and above each other (Wayne et al., 1997), supporting their distinctiveness.

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