

Differential Association and Imitation as Moderators of Workplace Deviance



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Workplace deviance is pervasive disease in organizations throughout the world. The consequences are severe and are registered through various empirical findings. However, very few researches have focused on its antecedents and even fewer are the attempts to study the social learning factors responsible for dysfunctional behavior of the employees. This study makes use of logistic regression to identify the contribution of two social learning variables i.e. differential association and imitation in deviant behavior of the employees.

Keywords: Workplace Deviance, Differential Association, Imitation, Dysfunctional behavior, Unethical behavior

1. Introduction

1.1 Genesis and Evolution of Workplace Deviance

The birth of workplace deviance as a subject of study is generally traced back to the 1940 when Edwin Sutherland published his research defining the concept of white collar crime, or in more refined words crime/criminal behavior committed by a person of respectability and high social status at the place or course of his occupation (p. 9). Since then several researches have advanced this study and defined the many facets of this offensive behavior such as deviant behavior in the workplace, antisocial behavior workplace behavior, employee deviance, dysfunctional behavior, counterproductive behavior and organizational misbehavior etc. (Akers, 1973; Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997; Griffin, O'Leary-Kelly, & Collins, 1998; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Sackett, 2002; Vardi & Weitz, 2004).

The most commonly used term for such behaviors is 'Workplace Deviance' and is generally understood by its definition provided by Robinson & Bennett (1995) i.e. voluntary behavior that break significant organizational norms and threaten the well-being of the organization and/or its members. Researchers give so much importance to the studies concerning workplace due to the severe consequences that organizations and its employees have to bear because of deviant behavior. Sharma & Paluchova (2014) asserted that an organization is equivalent to a living body supported by individual organs working coherently. If anyone organ deviates from what it is supposed to do than the entire body begins to underperform and gradually if it is deprive of proper treatment and care, it collapses. Another important research conducted by Sims (1992) pointed out that unethical behavior of employees at all levels of the organization is very alarming. Study conducted by Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly (1998) revealed that as much as 33 to 75 percent of all employees(participated in the study) have engaged in some form of deviant action towards organization or its workers, and shockingly almost 42 percent of women employees have been sexually harassed at one point or other during their work. Tracking down the financial losses that workplace deviance is responsible for Robinson, Greenberg (1998) remarked on the basis of their study that annual costs that organizations have to bear due to workplace violence are roughly estimated to be as high as \$4.2 billion, it was also estimated that approx. \$200 billion loss is incur due to employee theft and \$400 billion for various other types of fraudulent behavior. Quite clearly this whole affair of workplace deviance is extremely costly to organizations and hence it becomes imperative for them to take remedial actions.

1.2 Typology of Workplace Deviance

According to Robinson and Bennett's (1995) typology of workplace deviance, there are two dimensions of deviant behavior, minor versus serious and interpersonal versus organizational (Figure 1.1). Interpersonal deviance comprises of those behaviors which are unswervingly harmful to other employees within the organization. Examples of this deviance can be sexual harassment, aggression, bullying, and incivility etc. On the other hand organizational deviance includes those behaviors which are directly harmful to organization, like fraud, cyber slaking, sabotage and theft etc. These two dimensions of workplace deviance further disintegrate into four specific types of deviance. Less severe behavior that is targeted at individuals reflects "political behavior," the engagement in social interaction that puts other individuals at a personal or political disadvantage (Robinson & Bennett 1995, p566) and includes things such as gossip, rumor spreading, scapegoating, or favoritism. More severe forms of behavior targeted at individuals, labeled personal aggression, include behavior such as harassment, verbal attacks, and threats to cause physical harm. Deviance that is less severe and directed at the organization reflects "production deviance"(Robinson & Bennett, 1995, 1997) and includes taking excessive breaks, calling in sick, intentionally working slow, and generally violating norms regarding the minimal quality and quantity of work to be

accomplished. And finally, severe deviance targeting the organization reflects “property deviance” and includes behaviors such as theft from the organization, insubordination, intentional mistakes, and sabotaging machinery or equipment.

This study is more focused on the two broad dimensions of the workplace deviance i.e. interpersonal and organizational deviance. Their sub-parts are not important and hence during the analysis or discussion, no comments on the same are given. The purpose is to simply understand the role of social learning and how it contributes to workplace deviance and not to pinpoint their exact contribution to individual deviant acts of employees.

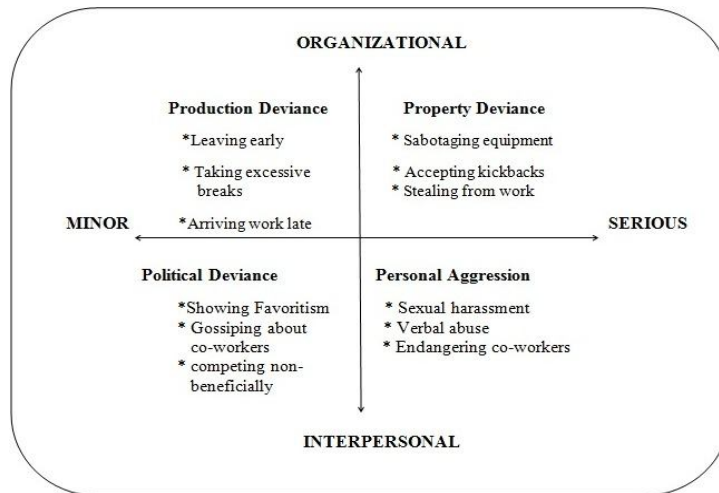


Figure 1.1 Robinson and Bennett's Conceptualization of Deviance (2000)

2. Social Learning Theory and its Connection with Workplace Deviance

The subject of this paper is to address two antecedents of workplace deviance i.e. Imitation and Differential Associations by the employees. Usually the studies concerning the causes of workplace deviance in organizations are focused on the perceived injustice on part of employees, employee stress, personality traits etc. but quite surprisingly not much stress is given on the social learning aspect of employees. It is a known fact that organizations are run by the joint effort of its employees and hence it is but obvious that they influence each other in some manner or other during their routine work.

Social learning theory begins with Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association. This turns out to be so inspirational that Sutherland's model for learning in a social environment is still the most recognized model within the social learning perspective. Sutherland (1947) reasoned that all criminal and deviant behavior is learned through interaction with intimate personal groups. Through this learning process, individuals absorb techniques, motives, drives, rationalizations and attitudes for committing crime. As people are exposed to these associations, they start defining laws and rules on basis of favorable or unfavorable. Finally at the stage where an excess of definitions (self-made) in favor of law or rule violation is met, criminal behavior occurs.

Twenty years ahead of Sutherland's conceptualization of differential association, Burgess and Akers (1966) and Akers (1973, 1985, 1998) stretched the theory to include other measures of learning as well like the concept of reinforcement, which increases or decreases the strength of a behavior. They developed social learning theory to explain deviancy by combining variables which encouraged delinquency (e.g., the social pressure from delinquent peers) with those variables that discouraged delinquency (e.g., the parental response to discovering delinquency in their children). This theory is actually the basis of this paper.

2.1 Components of Social Learning

According to social learning theory four components became integral measures for understanding social learning theory: differential reinforcement, imitation, definitions, and differential associations. For the current study only two components i.e. imitation and differential associations are considered to keep the equations simple and draw a basic conclusion on whether or not the social learning variable contribute in the occurrence of workplace deviance. Imitation occurs when individuals observe other employees indulging in certain behaviors and then themselves engage in those behaviors. Sutherland (1947) contended that imitation occurred principally through direct interaction with peers, yet Akers (1998) claimed that employees can imitate others through indirect interaction and observation as well. This may include different forms of the media, where individuals learn “modeling, vicarious reinforcement and moral desensitization for criminal behavior” (Akers, 1998). However, Akers (1998) also argued that the effects of imitation are weak when compared to the other measures of social learning.

On the other hand, Differential associations consist of the individuals with whom one employee interacts, such as peers and family. According to Akers (1998), Differential associations are “direct and indirect, verbal and nonverbal communication, interaction, and identification with others” (Akers, 1998). Individuals who spend more time with peers are more likely to

learn behaviors based on these processes because of consistent reinforcement. Also significant here is the duration of the associations, which is somewhat similar to Sutherland's (1947) argument. Erratic, short term involvement with one peer group will not affect behavior as much as regular, intensive involvement with a different peer group.

Applications of social learning theory to employee crime and deviance appear limited. Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly (1998) used a perspective that is closely related to social learning to understand the influence of work groups on antisocial behavior in the workplace. The attraction-selection-attrition perspective argues that "individuals carefully analyze their work environments and adjust their individual actions accordingly" (Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998, p. 659). Many studies have indicated a relationship between peer influence and occupational crime, but social learning theory itself is not tested (Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007; Appelbaum & Shapiro, 2006; Brown & Trevino, 2006; Bryant & Higgins, 2009; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996; Trevino, 1992). It is important to mention these studies, because it illustrates that there is little done with social learning theory in studies of employee crime and deviance. It is also worth noticing that not much research has been done on this subject in Indian settings and hence this study becomes all more important due to its applicability.

3. Research Objective, Methodology and Results

3.1 Research Objective

To establish the relationship between social learning components (Imitation and differential association) and workplace deviance (Organizational deviance and Interpersonal deviance) in Indian Universities.

Based on the above objective this study seeks to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Imitation is significantly related to organizational deviance.

H2: Differential association is significantly related to organizational deviance.

H3: Imitation is significantly related to interpersonal deviance.

H4: Differential association is significantly related to interpersonal deviance.

3.2 Research Design

This study made use of a non-experimental quantitative research design. A self-report questionnaire was administered at a single point of time. The present study was articulated in a way to examine the existing relationship between imitation and differential association as independent variables with workplace deviant behavior (organizational or interpersonal) as dependent variable.

Participants involved in this study are 135 employees (both teaching and non-teaching) chosen randomly from 5 Universities (3 state + 1 deemed + 1 private University) of India. These Universities are Guru Jambheshwar University, Invertis University, Dibrugarh University, Graphic Era University and CJSM Kanpur University. Majority of respondents are Males (57%), teaching employees (55.6%) and belongs to 21-30 age bracket (48.9%). In total 200 questionnaire were distributed i.e. 40 questionnaires in each University but only 135 were received back and hence the response rate is 67.5%. SPSS ver. 21 was used for analysis of data.

3.3 Instrument

Based on literature review no surveys could be located that permitted an examination of the relationship between social learning and different types of deviance committed by University employees. Hence, one had to be developed. Questionnaire of current study consisted of 4 sections i.e. Demographics, Personal Behavior, Imitation and Differential association. In personal behavior section 11 items are present (6 for organizational deviance and 5 for interpersonal deviance) built on the research of Robinson and Bennett (1995, 2000). Likert 5 point scale was used to measure the responses of employees. The reliability and validity was tested for the same and values of Cronbach's Alpha and KMO were found to be highly satisfactorily (.854 & .827 respectively). For the same 11 items, 11 items (each) were constructed for Imitation and Differential association scales. Cronbach's Alpha for imitation and differential association was .893 and .891 respectively. Similarly the values of KMO were also found satisfactory which are .865 and .863 respectively.

3.4 Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive of workplace deviance is given in table 3.1 below. It is clear from the table itself that the data is not normally distributed. We also performed Shapiro-Wilk test and it was confirmed that data is not normally distributed and hence we cannot administer the parametric test on the data.

Since we can't use OLS regression for our analysis we have to use binary logistic regression. The assumptions of binary logistics suggest that dependent variable must be dichotomous. To accomplish this, the eleven observed behaviors were transformed into dichotomous variables. Responses to the questions regarding involvement in each type of deviance were originally coded as follows: never (1), 2-3 times a year (2), 2-3 times a month (3), 2-3 times a week (4), and daily (5). To dichotomize each behavior, responses of "never" were left as 0, while the other four responses were collapsed and recoded as 1 to signify the involvement in deviant behavior. 0 defines no involvement in deviance and 1 signifies involvement in deviance. In the same way the social learning items were also dichotomized. For the variable measuring differential association, the response categories were originally coded as follows: disapprove (1), depends (2), approve (3), don't care (4) and don't know (5). These were collapsed into disapprove (0) and approve/depends/don't care/don't know (1). Similarly, for the variable measuring differential association, the response categories were originally coded as follows: can't say (1), all (2),

most (3), few (4) and none (5). These were collapsed into no involvement (0) and involvement (1). Data is now ready for logistic regression applicability.

Table 3.1 Descriptive for Workplace Deviance

	Almost daily	2-3 times a week	2-3 times a month	2-3 times a year	Never	Total (100%)
Late to workplace	5(3.7 %)	8(5.9%)	35(25.9%)	49(36.3 %)	38(28.1%)	135
Damage equipment	0	8(5.9%)	9(6.7%)	8(5.9%)	110(81.5%)	135
Leave workplace without permission	2(1.5%)	7(5.2%)	14(10.4%)	32(23.7%)	80(59.3%)	135
Read newspaper, magazines and play computer games	14(10.4%)	11(8.1%)	24(17.8%)	24(17.8%)	62(45.9%)	135
Daydreaming or fantasizing instead of working	2(1.5%)	9(6.7%)	27(20%)	26(19.3%)	71(52.6%)	135
Neglect instructions of superiors	0	9(6.7%)	10(7.4%)	26(19.3%)	90(66.7%)	135
Act rudely with someone*	5(3.7 %)	8(5.9%)	11(8.1%)	26(19.3%)	85(63%)	135
Playing mean prank*	2(1.5%)	6(4.4%)	16(11.9%)	10(7.4%)	101(74.8%)	135
Use Unsocial language*	6(4.4%)	3(2.2%)	7(5.2%)	20(14.8%)	99(73.3%)	135
Lost temper at workplace*	6(4.4%)	5(3.7 %)	19(14.1%)	41(30.4%)	64(47.4%)	135
Come under the influence of hard drinks*	6(4.4%)	4(3.0%)	10(7.4%)	7(5.2%)	108(80%)	135

* Interpersonal Deviance

3.5 Logistic Regression Analysis

As discussed in earlier sections, the majority of the responses indicating involvement in the different types of deviant behavior were greatly skewed toward no involvement. Because the dependent variables were not normally distributed, this violated a major assumption of OLS regression. Two binary logistic regression models were run for organizational and interpersonal deviance. The results are shown below in table 3.2, table 3.3, table 3.4 and table 3.5.

The first binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict the involvement in organizational deviance for 135 University employees using Imitation and Differential Association Variables as predictors. Prediction success (table 3.2) overall was 88.9% (12.5% for no involvement and 99.2% for Involvement). The Variables in the equation table made it quite clear that only Differential Association (DAO) made a significant contribution to prediction ($p = .054$). Imitation (IO) was not a significant predictor (table 3.3). EXP(B) value indicates that when a person observes that other employees approves the deviant behavior the odds ratio is 12 times as large and therefore chances of himself involving in organizational deviance is 11 more times more than the usual.

Table 3.2 Prediction Success for Organizational Deviance

Observed	Predicted			
	Organizational Deviance		Percentage Correct	
	No	Yes		
Step 1 Organizational Deviance	No	2	14	12.5
	Yes	1	118	99.2
Overall Percentage				88.9

A. The Cut Value Is .500

Table 3.3 Logistic Regression Variables for Organizational Deviance

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
IO	1.303	1.068	.222	3.680
DAO	2.524	1.308	.054	12.478
Constant	-1.633	1.516	.282	.195

A. Variable(S) Entered On Step 1: Io, Dao

Hence on the basis of data interpretation and cause result it has been found that H1 was rejected and H2 is accepted. In the same way, another binary logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict the involvement in Interpersonal deviance for the same respondents using similar independent variables for interpersonal deviance i.e. Imitation and Differential Association Variables as predictors. Prediction success (table 3.4) overall was 74.8% (62.7% for no involvement and 82.1% for Involvement). The Variables in the equation table made it quite clear that both Differential Association (DAO)

and Imitation(IO) made a significant contribution (tables 3.5) to prediction ($p = .008$, $p=.000$). EXP(B) value indicates that when a person observes that other employees approves the deviant behavior the odds ratio is 3 times as large and therefore chances of himself involving in interpersonal deviance are 3 more times more than the usual. Similarly, when an employee observe its coworkers indulging in the deviant behavior chances if himself involving in interpersonal deviance are 8 times more profound than the usual. Therefore, we conclude that H3 and H4 are accepted on the grounds of data interpretation and cause result.

Table 3.4 Prediction success for Interpersonal Deviance

Observed		Predicted		
		Interpersonal Deviance		Percentage Correct
		No	Yes	
Step 1	Interpersonal Deviance No	32	19	62.7
	Yes	15	69	82.1
Overall Percentage				74.8

A. The Cut Value Is .500

Table 3.5 Logistic Regression Variables for Interpersonal Deviance

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
DAI	1.240	.470	.008	3.454
Step 1 ^a II	2.120	.523	.000	8.333
Constant	-2.132	.601	.000	.119

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: DAI, II.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between workplace deviance within Universities and the components of social learning theory (imitation and differential association). The behaviors were based on the research framework of Robinson and Bennett (1995, 2000) who defined workplace deviance as two broad categories of behavior – one directed against the organization (organizational deviance), and the other directed against fellow workers (interpersonal deviance). The current study was one of the first to apply this framework of employee deviance to the Universities in India and test social learning theory along this context. This makes a contribution to the literature on social learning theory and employee deviance and providing a direction for future studies. From the research findings it is clear that social learning variables play an important part in occurrence of workplace deviant behaviors. The odds of committing each type of employee deviance increased if employees thought coworkers were deviant, especially in case of interpersonal deviance both the social learning variables play a significant part. Hence it can be put forward based on the findings of this study that employees do get influenced by their peers and superiors at workplace and it is quite possible that they get involved in deviance due to this reason. This study becomes all more important as it was conducted on University employees, majority of which belongs to teaching fraternity. Teachers by the nature of their job are strong influencers and hence it can be argued that if they are involved in deviance then they may also influence students to involve in such acts. This possibility can be the foundation of future studies and if found to be significant then it is a matter of grave concern as the future of country depends on it. It is also worth pointing out that study was conducted on 5 universities located in different locations and hence cultural differences are somewhat neutralized. Talking about the limitations, sample size is quite low to generalize the results for entire country. Besides this major limitation, future researches shall also consider other social learning variables such as differential reinforcement to make the research more meaningful. It will also be interesting to conduct similar research in other sectors like IT and banking. To sum up “We are what we observe our coworkers are” this is the prime outcome of this research. In order to contain the ill effects of workplace deviance, it is necessary to keep a check on those employees which have proven track of dysfunctional behavior as they possess the dangerous ability to influence people around them.

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