Abusive Supervision and Deviant Workplace Behavior: The Mediating Role of Work–Family Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The role of work–family conflict as a mechanism through which abusive supervision can trigger deviant workplace behavior has not been given much attention. Based on conservation of resources theory, reactance theory and previous research findings, a model has been developed to demonstrate that abusive supervision could increase the intensity of work–family conflict experienced by employees, which in turn could translate into deviant behaviors which are harmful to organizations. This model demonstrates how the integration of abusive supervision, work–family interface and deviant behavior literatures could provide a better understanding of employee engagement in deviant workplace behavior.

Keywords: abusive supervision, work–family conflict, deviant workplace behavior

INTRODUCTION

Deviant workplace behavior continues to be a problem in organizations and has been reported to have a damaging impact on organizations (Appelbaum, Deguire, & Lay, 2005; Mawritz et al., 2012). There is a growing interest in this topic among researchers (Bennett & Robinson, 2000, 2003; Colbert, Mount, & Dalal, 2005; Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Harter, Witt, & Barrick, 2004; Marwitz et al., 2012) and evidence has shown that managers’ perceptions of employees’ overall performance are strongly affected by deviant behavior (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Deviant workplace behavior has been defined as an intentional behavior that violates organizational norms and poses a threat to the well-being of an organization or its members, or both (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Examples of deviant workplace behavior include theft, fraud, sabotage, vandalism, absenteeism, spreading rumors, aggression, and sexual harassment. One of the main harmful outcomes of such behaviors is the economic threat faced by organizations (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Appelbaum, Deguire, & Lay, 2005). For example, a study conducted in 32 countries across Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America has reported that more than one-third of retail shrinkage was attributed to theft committed by employees (Bamfield, 2007). Besides theft, bullying at the workplace, which is a form of deviant behavior, costs Australian employers between 6 and 13 billion Australian dollars annually (Chappell & Martino, 2006). It has been reported that in the United States the prevalence of deviant workplace behavior results in estimated organizational losses reaching up to USD$200 billion per year (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). In the United Kingdom, unauthorized web surfing (gambling) during working hours has been estimated to cost employers more than £300 million in lost productivity per year (Taylor, 2007).

According to Marcus et al. (2013), the content overlap between measures of workplace deviance and counterproductive work behavior seems almost perfect, and hence, both terms are used interchangeably in this article. Robinson and Bennett (1995) proposed a deviant workplace behavior
The typology in which deviant behaviors are categorized into two dimensions. The first dimension focuses on interpersonal versus organizational dimension, while the second on minor versus major dimension. The interpersonal dimension includes deviance targeted at members of the organization (e.g. acting rudely and arguing, playing mean pranks, making fun of others), while the organizational dimension includes deviance targeted towards the organization itself (e.g. theft, sabotage, aggression, absenteeism violence, coming to work late, damaging organizational property, putting little effort into work). These behaviors can occur singly, simultaneously, or even sequentially (Fagbohungbe et al., 2012). The other dimension focuses on the severity of the deviant behavior, from minor to serious. Besides these two dimensions, four types of deviant behavior are presented; production deviance (e.g. taking excessive breaks, leaving early, intentionally working slow, wasting resources, procrastinating), property deviance (e.g. lying about hours worked, working unnecessary overtime, sabotaging equipment, stealing from company, accepting kickbacks), political deviance (e.g. blaming co-workers, gossiping about co-workers, showing favoritism, competing non beneficially), and personal aggression (e.g. stealing from co-workers, endangering co-workers, bullying, sexual harassment, verbal abuse). Production and property deviance are subsumed under organizational deviance whereas political deviance and personal aggression under interpersonal deviance. Production and political deviance are categorized as minor deviance whereas property deviance and personal aggression are categorized as serious deviance. Besides, Robinson and Bennett’s typology, Spector et al. (2006) proposed a counterproductive work behavior model which includes five dimensions namely, abuse, production deviance, theft, sabotage, and withdrawal, while Gruys and Sackett (2003) proposed an eleven-facet model.

As mentioned earlier, there has been an increased interest in deviant workplace behavior studies among researchers since deviant behaviors tend to decrease job performance and result in organizational losses. However, earlier researchers have focused more on the negative outcomes of deviance behavior and there have been fewer studies on the effects of antecedents on deviant workplace behavior (Wei & Si, 2013). Moreover, there has been a greater emphasis on individual differences as well as attitudes towards organizations (Jones, 2009; Lau, Au, & Ho, 2003; Rodell & Judge, 2009). The interpersonal relations as antecedents of workplace deviance or counterproductive work behavior have not been given much attention. Additionally, there has been limited focus on the mediating role of work–family interface factors including work–family conflict in the antecedent-deviance relationship. This article presents a mediation model in which abusive supervision is the antecedent of deviant workplace behavior and work–family conflict is the mediator. The mediation model is grounded on reactance theory and the conservation of resources theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989), as well as empirical literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reactance Theory

Researchers have used reactance theory as a foundation in investigating employee reactions to abusive supervision (Zellars et al., 2002). Reactance theory suggests that individuals strive to maintain personal control (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). According to this theory, individuals have behavioral freedom that they believe they can engage in. The freedom helps define an individual’s self-identity (Worchel, 2004) and helps establish his or her sense of control over the environment (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Events that threaten or lead to loss of behavioral freedom generate a motivational state (reactance) aimed at reinstating the freedom in question. The importance of the threatened or eliminated freedom and the degree of threat determine the degree of reactance. The attractiveness of a forbidden behavior and the
motivation to display that behavior increase when there is a threat or elimination of freedom. Based on this theory, it can be argued that employees experiencing abusive supervision usually feel that they have little or no control over the environment and to restore this personal control, they engage in deviant behavior.

**Conservation of Resources Theory**

COR theory postulates that people strive to acquire and maintain resources that could help to achieve their goals, and stress results from loss (actual or threatened) of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Resources include conditions, personal characteristics, objects as well as energies. When there is a loss or threat of a loss, individuals are inclined to engage in efforts to prevent further loss. The sense of having control over one’s life, for example, is a resource which an individual may seek to protect (Hobfoll, 2001). Engaging in production deviance helps an individual to gain control of his or her life and escape to replace the depleted resources (Krischer et al., 2010). Based on the COR theory, it is expected that abused individuals will experience work–family conflict. Positive interpersonal relationship is a resource that individuals may need to cope with difficulties arising from conflict between work and family roles. Loss of this resource among abused individuals may result in the experience of stress namely work–family conflict. Similarly, based this theory, it is expected that individuals who experience work–family conflict will engage in deviant behavior. When individuals are confronted with high intensities of work–family conflict, they encounter stress which fosters pressure for corrective action and deviant behavior could be a response mechanism used to maintain work–family balance. When an individual is unable to fulfill family responsibilities due to time pressure, the individual may leave work early to accomplish such responsibilities. The involvement in family matters tends to result in production deviance at the workplace such as producing low quality work. In other words, it is theorized that when demands of work interfere with family responsibilities, employees lack the resources (e.g., energy, time, commitment) to manage family life and subsequently engage in deviant behavior to conserve and replenish resources.

**Abusive Supervision and Deviant Workplace Behavior**

Relationships employees have with their supervisor are more vital than other interpersonal relationships developed at the workplace (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009). Despite its importance, it has been reported that employees have been abused by their supervisors and abusive supervision affects an estimated 13.6% of the United States workforce (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006). Abusive supervision refers to “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178) and it is an important factor that contributes to deviant behavior (Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008; Tepper et al., 2009). For example, Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) in their study of potential jurors interviewed for jury duty in the Southeastern United States found a positive significant relationship between abusive supervision and different types of deviance which include interpersonal deviance, supervisor-directed deviance and organizational deviance. Inness et al. (2005) found that abusive supervision significantly increased supervisor-targeted aggression after the effects of demographic variables and individual’s history of aggressive behavior were controlled. Other researchers have also noted that abused subordinates tend to express their resentment by engaging in acts of deviance against the organization (Schaubhut, Adams, & Jex, 2004; Thau & Mitchell, 2006) which constitutes voluntary actions (e.g. lateness, theft and sabotage) violating organizational norms as well as threatening the well-being of the organization (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).
Abusive Supervision and Work–Family Conflict

The experience of abusive supervision has a profound effect on the subordinate's life both at work and outside of work. While an earlier study (Tepper, 2000) has linked the experience of abusive supervision to work–family interrole conflict and later studies (Carlson et al., 2011; Hoobler & Brass, 2006) to the bidirectional work–family conflict, Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter and Whitten (2012) theorized as well as demonstrated how abusive supervision could lead to both directions of conflict between work and family roles (work–to–family and family–to–work). The results of a study by Long et al. (2011) on 209 employees from a manufacturing company indicate that there is a direct relationship between abusive supervision and work–to–family conflict. A study conducted by Ferguson et al. (2011) on 280 subordinates and partners (matched set) examined how subordinate’s experience of abusive supervision affect both subordinate’s and partner’s family roles. Abused subordinates have been found to experience increased intensity of work–to–family conflict. Similar results have been reported by Hoobler and Hu (2013).

Work–Family Conflict and Deviant Workplace Behavior

Work–family conflict is “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respects, that is participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Work–family conflict experienced by employees can result in serious organizational outcomes (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeux, & Brinley, 2005) such as decreased job satisfaction (Bruck, Allen, & Spector, 2002) and increased turnover intentions (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Collins, 2001). However, research on the link between work–family conflict and deviant behavior is lacking. Using the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), Ferguson et al. (2012) studied the effects of conflict on deviant behavior using 2 studies. The first study, conducted on 344 participants and the second on 190 participants and their partners, indicate that there is an association between family–to–work conflict and deviance. Another study has shown that employees experiencing increased conflict between work and family roles tend to react by violating organizational norms (Darrat et al. 2010).

THE MODEL

Building on the findings of previous researchers, reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) and conservation of resources theory (Barnett & Hyde, 2001) a mediation model is developed. Based on previous findings, it is evident that there is a link between abusive supervision and deviant workplace behavior, abusive supervision and work–family conflict as well as between work–family conflict and deviant workplace behavior. In this model, we argue that changes in the extent of abusive supervision experienced by individuals could lead to changes in the intensities of work–family conflict which in turn could trigger individuals to engage in deviant behavior. In other words, the model postulates that abused employees tend to experience work–family conflict which arises due to incompatible work demands and family demands, and to effectively fulfill their family roles employees engage in deviant behavior at the workplace.
CONCLUSION

To provide a better understanding of the relationship between abusive supervision and deviant workplace behavior, researchers have suggested various intervening mechanisms including justice (Tepper, 2000) and social exchange (Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009). However, there is lack of attention given to work–family interface factor as a mechanism through which abusive supervision can trigger deviant behavior. Based on reactance theory, COR theory and extant literatures a model has been developed to demonstrate that abusive supervision increases the intensity of work–family conflict experienced by employees, which in turn could translate into deviant behaviors which are harmful to organizations. This model demonstrates how the integration of the abusive supervision, work–family interface and deviant workplace behavior literatures could provide a better understanding of employee engagement in deviant behavior.

REFERENCES


