



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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Workplace Deviance in Public and Private Organizations

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Summary

There is a continuous upward shift in the number of deviant activities at the workplace, causing severe financial and reputational implications for the organizations. In this paper, we identify the prominent acts of deviance in the workplace and the organizational processes adopted to handle them. Drawing upon data collected through in-depth interviews with deviant handlers from public and private organizations in India, the study highlights interesting patterns around the nature and frequency deviant activities. Results indicate that the deviant cases in public organizations predominantly relate to property and political categories of workplace deviance, while private organizations highlight cases of production deviance and acts which were interpersonal in nature. Strict and rigorous approach was reported against it by all organizations, although the implementation of remedial actions varied across different organizations. The study offers implications for theory and practice and opens avenues for further research.

Keywords: Deviance Handling Mechanisms, Normalization, Private Organization, Public Organization, Workplace Deviance

Track: Organizational Psychology

Word Count: 1227 words (excluding title, summary and keywords)

Introduction and Rationale for the Study

Workplace deviance is increasing in its magnitude in the current business environment. It can lead to organizational dysfunction especially when it is pervasive in the organization. Several behaviors could be classified as deviant such as sexual harassment, bullying, fraud, sabotage, and time theft. Many of these behaviors have existed in the organizations for a long time, however with the infusion of technology these behaviors are morphing and new deviant behaviors are emerging, such as cyber loafing, data theft, cyber bullying and spewing derogatory material about the firm on the Internet. Most of the previous work on workplace deviance is focused on specific types of deviant behaviour such as theft (Greenberg, 1987) and absenteeism (Rosse & Hulin, 1985) whereas the recent work looks into these behaviors under the wider domain of workplace deviance. The recent studies have focussed on looking at the antecedents of deviant behaviour at the workplace. In some organizations the deviant acts are sporadic and sparse while in others, deviant behavior is well accepted and is the norm, however there has been little work on normalization of workplace deviant behaviour.

Robinson and Bennett (1995) proposed the widely accepted conceptualization of workplace deviance - defining it as an intentional behaviour of an individual which goes against the important norms of the organizations and in the process, harms the well-being of the organization or its members, or both. The act being intentional means that either the individual is motivated to violate the organizational norms or is not motivated much to follow the prevailing expectations (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Organizational norms include both explicit and implicit norms determined by the various procedures, rules and policies of the organization (Feldman, 1984).

Robinson and Bennett (1995) used two criteria (namely, minor as opposed to serious and interpersonal as opposed to organizational) to map and categorize deviant behaviour on a matrix. These dimensions cross to form a 4-quadrant typology. The four quadrants are: 1) Production deviance (minor-organizational) – not giving to the set norms of minimum desired quality or quantity; thus, lowering the productivity of the organization; 2) Property deviance (serious– organizational)- acquiring or damaging the property of the organization directly; 3) Personal aggression (serious–interpersonal)- causing harm to another employee in the organization; and 4) Political deviance (minor–interpersonal)-misusing power and authority within the organization.

In this paper, we first identify the prominent acts of deviance in the workplace and the organizational processes adopted to handle them. We focus on the differences in the acts of the public and private organizations. They differ from each other with respect to goals, resource ownership, leadership and managership, decision making, organization structure, culture and design (Khan & Khandaker, 2016). Public organizations depict more goal complexity (Rainey & Bozeman, 2000), higher ambiguity about roles, higher rule-boundedness and higher priority to social relations than the private organizations (Sinha & Sinha, 1990). Public organizations have less significance on work as the primary anchor of daily routine (Sinha, 2002; Mathur, Aycan & Kanungo, 1996). These findings point to a difference in the nature of deviant cases in public and private organizations, along with how these cases are handled in such organizations.

Data for this study is collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with HR managers and deviant handlers in seven organizations in India. The interviewing technique helped to

probe such a sensitive subject and answer questions about triggers, experience and meaning from the stand point of the participant (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015). In doing so, we respond to the call by researchers working in the area of workplace deviance for going beyond the prominently used survey method, which may not provide a holistic view of workplace deviance.

Prominent Findings

The findings reveal interesting comparison between private and public organizations around the nature and frequency of the deviant acts. Deviant acts were reported in all organizations, but difference was observed along the typology offered by Bennett & Robinson (1995). Acts in private organizations could be placed under the quadrant of production deviance whereas acts in public organizations fall mostly under political deviance and property deviance. Personal aggression acts were also acknowledged to be commonplace but under-reported in both public and private organizations. The nature of deviance in public and private organizations also varied with distinction between group level and solo acts of deviance respectively. The cases in public organizations are not just restricted to single employee acts, but involve employees from different layers of the hierarchy. In order to understand the differences in the deviant behaviors and reasons for institutionalization of such behaviors we attempt to understand the precursors of deviant behaviour in organizations. The variables gleaned from the interviews were categorized as situational, interpersonal and individual factors. Respondents reported that a deviant act could be a combined effect of these factors. The individual determinants were pointed out by almost all the respondents. Situational factors were reported to play a more influential role in the deviant acts of public organizations whereas interpersonal causes were more prominent for deviant acts in private organizations.

The role of technology was inferred both as a facilitator and controller for the occurrence of deviance acts in the organizations. Where, on one hand, technology can be used to keep a check on the employees' behaviour in the organization and maintain various records, on the other hand, it can be misused by the employees to commit serious deviant acts like cyber frauds and cyberbullying which can prove disastrous for the organizations. Technology has also been reported to minimize human interactions, which has adverse consequences in the long-run.

It was inferred that the organizational culture plays a pivotal role in handling of the deviant cases within an organization. The documentation of the remedial actions for deviance cases is stronger for public organizations, but they lack in the implementation of those remedial actions. The cases in public organizations are carried out in multiple enquiries with different people in the hierarchy, thus delaying the completion of the remedial process. In private organizations on the other hand, such cases are settled at the earliest leading to quick judgements. This leads to the higher probability of normalization of deviant acts in the public organizations. The deviant act gets ingrained in the culture of the organization, and is viewed as normal thereon. The employees in the public organizations lack the planning and risk-taking capabilities. The bureaucratic culture is to be blamed such that even if the new young employees want to come out of it, they are trapped by the organizational culture, as it can't be changed in a short span of time. This normalization of deviance can lead to disastrous repercussions as once the deviance behavior is ingrained in the organization, the organization may even fail to see its drift towards failure.

This study offers rich theoretical and practical insights that we plan to use to inductively build a model for normalization of workplace deviance. It also captures the distinction between the deviant acts of public and private organizations and displays the glitches in the implementation of the deviance handling mechanisms.

Prior to the conference, we plan to collect additional data, refine the themes from the interviews and build a model for normalization of deviance. The role of various variables in the occurrence of deviant acts would be examined further. We would focus on understanding and strengthening the findings around normalization of deviance in the organizations.

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