

## Workload, Job Stress, Family-To-Work Conflict and Deviant Workplace Behavior

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### Abstract

Past studies have found that among the stress factors that contribute to the prevalence of deviant workplace behavior are workload and job stress. Yet, very limited studies have focused on non-job-related factors as stress factors that contribute to deviant workplace behavior. This paper presents a model on deviant workplace behavior with workload and job stress as job-related factors together with family-to-work conflict as a non-job related factor that contribute to this behavior. The model was developed based on the general strain theory as well as previous research-based literature. This model may perhaps improve the understanding of deviant workplace behavior by expanding the literature on this behavior deviance with the inclusion of family-work interface factor as a stressor.

**Keywords:** Workload, Job Stress, Family-To-Work Conflict, Deviant Workplace Behavior, General Strain Theory

### Introduction

Deviant workplace behavior has become a significant concern in organizations (Appelbaum et al., 2005) and has received much attention among researchers (Bennett & Robinson, 2000,

2003; Colbert et al., 2004; Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Liao et al., 2004). Robinson and Bennett (1995) defined deviant workplace behavior as an intentional behavior that violates significant organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization or its members, or both.

According to Appelbaum, Deguire and Lay (2005), deviant workplace behavior has accounted for a great amount of profit loss and can be damaging to workplace atmosphere. Theft, fraud, vandalism, sabotage, absenteeism, spreading rumors, aggression, and sexual harassment are examples of deviant workplace behavior. Such behaviors can be harmful to the well-being of an organization (Bennett & Robinson, 2003), as well as become an economic threat to the organization if it is not curbed. For example, more than one-third of all retail shrinkage was attributed to employee theft as shown by a study conducted in 32 countries across Europe, Asia Pacific, and North America (Bamfield, 2007). Also, Chappell and Martino (2006) calculated that bullying (a form of deviant workplace behavior) costs Australian employers between 6 to 13 billion Australian dollars each year. Harris and Ogbonna (2006) found that the presence of deviant workplace behavior in the United States produces organizational losses estimated to reach up to \$200 billion annually.

Much of the studies on deviant workplace behavior that investigate stress factors contributing to the prevalence of deviant behavior have focused on job-related stress factors such as workload and job stress (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Fox et al., 2001; Lee & Allen, 2002; Omar et al., 2011). While there have been a number studies on the relationships between job-related stress factors, very limited studies have focused on non-job-related factors. For example family-to-work conflict, as a stress factor that could contribute to deviant behavior, has not been given much attention. This study presents a model on deviant workplace behavior with workload, job stress and family-to-work conflict as factors that contribute to this behavior.

Robinson and Bennett's (1995) in their typology of deviant workplace behavior propose that deviant behaviors vary along two dimensions, firstly, interpersonal versus organizational dimension, and secondly minor versus major dimension (*Figure 1*). The interpersonal versus organizational dimension includes deviance directed at members of the organization (interpersonal) such as making fun of others, playing mean pranks, acting rudely and arguing, to deviance directed towards the organization itself (organizational) such as damaging organizational property, theft, sabotage, aggression, absenteeism violence, coming to work late, and putting little effort into work. These behaviors can occur simultaneously, singly, or even sequentially (Fagbohunbe et al., 2012). The other dimension represents the severity of the deviant workplace behavior, from minor to serious. Apart from the two dimensions, the types of deviant workplace behavior are divided into four; production (leaving early, taking excessive breaks, intentionally working slow, wasting resources, procrastinating), property (sabotaging equipment, accepting kickbacks, lying about hours worked, stealing from company), political deviance (showing favoritism, gossiping about co-workers, blaming co-workers, competing non beneficially), and personal aggression (sexual harassment, verbal abuse, stealing from co-workers, endangering co-workers). Production and property deviance are categorized under organizational deviance while political deviance and personal aggression under interpersonal deviance. Production and political deviance are considered as

minor deviance while property deviance and personal aggression are considered as serious deviance.



Figure 1. "A typology of deviant workplace behaviors: A multidimensional scaling study," by Robinson, S. L., & Bennett, R., 1995, *Academy of Management Journal*, 38(2), 555-572. Copyright [1995] by the Academy of Management.

There are three distinct research trends on deviant workplace behavior. The first includes studies in which deviance is conceptualized as a reaction to experiences at work. The second includes studies that examine deviance as a reflection of employees' personality, and the last includes studies that investigate deviance as adaptation to the social context at work (Bennett & Robinson, 2003).

### General Strain Theory

General strain theory (GST) seeks to identify the stresses or strains that would cause deviant behavior (Agnew, 1992). The prevalence of deviant behavior is in part due to strains which foster negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and depression. Consequently, the negative emotions create pressure for corrective action and deviant behavior is one of the ways some individuals respond. GST focuses on factors of strain such as the negative treatment by others, inability to achieve goals, and the loss of valued possessions. GST has also been applied to studies on deviance such as corporate crime, police deviance, suicide, bullying, and terrorism. The theory claimed that the presence of strains increases the likelihood to engage in deviance.

### **Workload and Deviant Workplace Behavior**

Workload is defined as the amount of work which an individual has to finish within a given period (Chen & Spector, 1992) and excessive workload or role overload is one of the job stressors (Penny & Spector, 2005) or task-related stressors (Fox et al., 2001). Past studies have shown that workload has a significant relationship with deviant workplace behavior. Employees are likely to exhibit deviant workplace behaviors in response to increases in job stressors. For example, a study done by Jonge and Peters (2009) found that the prevalence of deviant workplace behavior among health care workers was due to excessive workload that the workers have to accomplish. Other studies have also found that role overload as a job stressor was positively associated with deviant behaviors (Miles et al., 2002; Bayram et al., 2009).

A deviant behavior specifically bullying is reported to prevail especially in hostile working environments due to excessive workload (Hauge et al., 2007; Agervold, 2009). Apart from that, Stouten et al. (2011) suggested that leaders should ensure that their employees do not experience role overload in order to reduce the occurrence of deviant behavior namely bullying at the workplace.

### **Job Stress and Deviant Workplace Behavior**

Job stress is defined as an emotional experience that is connected with strain, anxiety and tenseness that originates from a job or occupation (Cooke & Rousseau, 1984). A study conducted on 162 employees from a public organization in Malaysia revealed that there was a positive relationship between job stress and deviant workplace behavior (Omar et al., 2011). In this study, employees who experienced negative emotions such as frustration and irritation due to work-related stress were more prone to exhibit deviant behaviors at their workplace. According to Spector and Fox (2005), deviant workplace behavior occurs due to employee's reaction to job stress and other factors that can induce negative emotions. Other studies have also shown that job stress is a major factor that causes several forms of deviance behavior (Sulksky & Smith, 2005; Spector & Fox, 2005) and among the forms of deviance are absenteeism, alcoholism, substance abuse, low job motivation and low productivity (Safaria et. al., 2010).

### **Family-To-Work 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 respect. 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). Family-to-work conflict occurs when demands or situations in the family domain interfere with work domain like the presence of young children, children and elder care responsibilities and unsupportive family members. Employees experiencing family-to-work conflict may be prone to engaging in production deviance. There are two reasons for this. First, the pressure inherent in conflict drains the employee's resources such as energy and concentration needed to engage in work productively, and hence, he or she ‘slacks off’ at work. Second, the experience of the conflict may prompt an employee to look for opportunities for protection and replenishment of resources. One of the resources which an employee may seek to protect is the feeling of

having control over his or her life (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees may engage in production deviance as a means of gaining control of their lives and escape to replenish the depleted resources (Krischer et al., 2010). For example, an employee who is unable to meet family expectations due to time pressure may leave work early (without permission) to fulfill family responsibilities. Likewise, employees' preoccupation with family matters may result in production deviance such as rushing through a task and producing low quality work.

Based on the general strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and previous literature on the relationships between stress factors and deviant workplace behavior, we develop a model on the influence of stress factors on deviant workplace behavior (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2.* The Influence of Stress Factors on Deviant Workplace Behavior

We predict that employees with heavy workload, high job stress and high intensity of family-to-work conflict have the tendency to exhibit deviant behavior at the workplace. This model provides research-based evidence which indicates that not only do job-related factors generate deviance, but a non-job related factor such as family-to-work conflict may trigger deviance as well. It expands the understanding of the role of stress factors in deviant workplace behavior.

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