Perceptions of Deviant Behaviour in the Workplace

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Employee misconduct in the workplace is relatively common and may be counterproductive in social and material terms. To identify which undesirable behaviours are considered acceptable is the first step to develop ways to reduce deviance in organizational settings. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived acceptability of deviant behaviour in the workplace, and to analyse the relation between the degree of such acceptance with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and organizational tenure. Data was obtained from 223 adults employed full-time. Results suggest a positive relationship between the degree of acceptability of certain forms of deviant behaviour and organizational commitment, but not with job satisfaction. They further indicate that tenure was the factor having the most impact on the acceptance of deviant behaviours. Implications of the findings for the management are discussed.

Keywords: management, deviant behaviour, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and tenure

Perceptions of Deviant Behaviour in the Workplace

Deviance in the workplace is fairly prevalent and many employees at some point engage in such behaviours (Bolin & Heatherly, 2001; Kaptein, 2011; Kidwell & Martin, 2005; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006; Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Depending on the offense in question, the consequences can be serious and costly for the organization and its stakeholders. Various terms have been used to refer to employee deviance; namely, deviant behaviour (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), counterproductive behaviour (Fox & Spector, 1999), or organizational misbehaviour (Vardi & Wiener, 1996). All these concepts cover a range of undesirable and ethically questionable forms of behaviour that are considered deviant from an organizational point of view but they differ in their focus (Kidwell & Martin, 2005).

Deviant behaviours have been defined as intentional acts conducted by employees that break significant organizational norms and threat the well-being of the organization, its members or both (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). The criteria used to define a given behaviour as deviant are the intention underlying the act, the breach of organizational norms or rules, the target and the potential damage inflicted on the organization and/or its members and stakeholders. Deviant behaviours have been classified as interpersonal

and organizational according to whether they are directed toward individuals or the organization, and also according to the degree of gravity, ranging from minor to serious (Robison & Bennett, 1995; Bennett & Robinson, 2000). They have been further divided into extra-organizational and intra-organizational behaviours (Jones, 1990), depending on where they occur, and production deviance, property deviance, political deviance and personal aggression, depending on the target (Bennett & Robinson 2000).

As noted above, deviant behaviours constitute a serious problem for organizations and business owners. To identify which undesirable behaviours are considered acceptable is the first step to develop ways of intervention. However, little information is available regarding what behaviours are acceptable or unacceptable from the employee point of view. Moreover, although it has been recognized that cultural factors influence the acceptance of given workplace behaviours (Power et al., 2011), research on the subject is still scarce in many countries. It is thus important to extend the previous research to different cultural contexts.

Furthermore, as Becker and Bennett (2006) point out, investigating the link between employees' organizational commitment and deviance may be the key to better managing the latter. Nevertheless, few studies to date have scrutinized the possible effects of organizational commitment and job satisfaction upon employee acquiescence in deviant behaviour (Cullen, Parboteeah, & Victor, 2003; Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006).

Given the above, the aim of this study was twofold: first, to examine the perceived acceptability of deviant behaviour in the workplace; second, to examine the relation between the degree of such acquiescence with organizational commitment and job satisfaction. It begins with a review of the literature, followed by the empirical study. This is succeeded by the research findings and a discussion.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Deviant behaviours may be attributable to 'bad apples' (Treviño & Youngblood, 1990), that is, to individuals with characteristics such as negative affect and trait anger (Fox & Spector, 1999; Penney & Spector, 2008). They can also be attributable to 'bad barrels,' that is to organizational factors such as cultures that encourage unethical decisions (Kaptein, 2011), reward systems and leaders that encourage deviance (Treviño & Brown, 2004), psycho-sociological context (Biron, 2010) including deviant group influences (Kidwell & Valentine, 2009), and to a combination of all of these (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010; Sims, 2010).

Research on deviant behaviour in organizations has shown that employees may engage in such acts to benefit themselves, to retaliate against the organization or to harm coworkers (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010).

Whatever the cause, emotions have been found to be crucial in triggering deviant behaviours, and the most relevant events that prompt deviant behaviour are those that elicit negative emotions (Penney & Spector, 2008). For example, feelings of anger and frustration were found to be related to sabotage and absenteeism (Fox & Spector, 1999). Negative emotions may be triggered by mistreatment at work, abusive supervision and lack of support (Biron, 2010).

Theft has been found to be associated with pay reduction (Greenberg, 1990; Tomlinson & Greenberg, 2006) and job insecurity was related to tardiness, spending time in idle conversations, and decreasing effort at work (Lim, 1996). Violations of an implicit psychological contract were also found to be associated with the motivation to seek revenge and engage in workplace deviance (Bordia, Restubog, & Tang, 2008). Together this suggests that the desire to reciprocate mistreatment may be more important than following the organizational norms (Biron, 2010).

Furthermore, deviant behaviour has been interpreted as a way of restoring an inequitable relation (Blau, 1964), as a reaction to aversive work conditions, and as an attempt by the employees to regulate negative emotions (Penney & Spector, 2008). Job dissatisfaction has been found to be a significant predictor of different forms of workplace deviance (Hollinger 1986; Lau, Au, & Ho, 2003; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2010) namely withholding effort (Kidwell & Valentine, 2009), chronic lateness, unexcused absence, and internet browsing (Blau & Andersson, 2005; Lau et al., 2003).

Social exchange theory has provided the theoretical framework to explain employee deviance (Biron, 2010). This theory posits that interpersonal relationships are guided by calculations of a subjective cost-benefit analysis in search of a greater balance and fairness in the relationships (Blau, 1964). Employees weigh the benefits provided by the organization with the costs, and the outcomes are determined by the difference between the two. If they believe the relationship is reciprocal and fair, they tend to behave in ways consistent with the organizational norms and will act in ways that protect its interests. Conversely, if they believe the organization fails to reciprocate their efforts, they may be more prone to engage in deviant behaviours.

Employee commitment has also been identified as a determinant of an individual's feeling and behaviour in the workplace. For instance, uncommitted employees tend to take more frequent sick leaves and are late more often (Lau et al., 2003). Organizational commitment is a bond linking employees to organizations and expresses itself as a wish to stay with the organization, a belief in its goals and a willingness to exert effort on its behalf (Meyer & Allen, 1997). To sum up, there is evidence that suggests that the committed and satisfied employee will be less inclined to accept or engage in any kind of deviant behaviour.

Given the aforementioned, it was hypothesised that both organizational commitment and job satisfaction would be positively related to the non-acceptance of deviant behaviours in the work environment. More specifically, the following hypotheses were formulated: The degree of non-acceptance of deviant conduct would be positively associated with organizational commitment (Hypothesis 1); The degree of non-acceptance of deviant conduct would be positively associated with job satisfaction (Hypothesis 2).

The influence of demographic variables on employee deviance has been well studied, and there is evidence that deviant workplace behavior is higher among young male employees with fewer years of tenure, and those with low organizational status (e. g., Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007; Greenberg & Barling, 1996; Holinger, Slora, & Terris, 1992). Given these differences it was expected that the degree of acceptance of deviant conduct would be positively associated with being young, male and having few years of tenure (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

To obtain the respondents from a variety of functional areas and structures, different companies were approached through personal contact during 2011 in the north of Portugal. The large majority were private (70%) and the rest public; 45% were large (more than 100 employees) and 38% were small (up to 20 employees) and the remaining were medium sized companies. The final sample of the respondents comprised 223 full-time employees. Respondents were all volunteers and were told that their answers would be totally confidential. Mean age was 37.62 ($SD = 10.07$) and 57% were women. Organizational tenure ($M = 9.84$, $SD = 7.84$) ranged between one and 31 years. Approximately 14 per cent were blue-collar workers, 46% were administrative, 18% health professionals and 19% had managing positions. In terms of education, 47% had completed a first degree, 11% postgraduate studies, 32% secondary education, and 9% basic education.

Measures

Deviant behaviours scale. A questionnaire was developed to assess the attitudes towards deviant behaviours, which employees may meet with in a workplace setting. Items were derived from Jones's (1990) Workplace Unethical Behaviours scale, Bennett and Robinson's (2000) Workplace Deviant Behaviour scale, and Spector et al. (2006) Counterproductive Work Behaviours scale.

The basic list of behaviours had already been used with a Portuguese sample (Wilks, 2011) and low base rated behaviour items (high frequency of 'very unacceptable' responses) were later eliminated. Minor alterations

were made according to the organizational settings. The final list covered production deviance, property deviance, political deviance, and personal aggression. Sample items included 'chatting excessively with coworkers during work hours' (production offenses), 'taking home a few office supplies' (property deviance), 'the director/supervisor shows favoritism' (political deviance) and 'blaming coworkers for mistakes' (personal aggression).

The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they found each of the 21 behaviours acceptable. Five response options were provided ranging from 1 = very acceptable to 5 = very unacceptable. Higher scores corresponded to greater acceptability. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability for this scale was .90.

Job satisfaction. The degree of job satisfaction was assessed with 6 items from the Warr, Cook, and Wall (1979) measure. The scale covers the key job facets widely used in similar research. Sample items include 'How satisfied are you with the way the company is managed' and 'How satisfied are you with the payment.' Respondents were asked to rate their degree of satisfaction with each item on 5 Likert scale (1 = from very unsatisfied to 5 = extremely satisfied). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability of the scale was .92.

Organizational commitment. Commitment to the organization was assessed with 3 items: 'I feel I a am part of my work organization,' 'I feel I should do my best for the organization' and 'The organization deserves all my efforts' (from 1 = not all to 5 = very much). Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability of the scale was .67, which was not considered low because there were only three items.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify their age, sex, educational level, occupation, the length of employment in the organization (in years), and organizational position.

Results

The most unacceptable behaviours were 'purposely doing work incorrectly' (*M* = 4.68, *SD* = .69), followed by 'ignoring safety procedures endangering himself/herself and other people' (*M* = 4.63, *SD* = .57), 'telling other people outside what a lousy place you work for' (*M* = 4.64, *SD* = .53), and 'blaming a colleague' (*M* = 4.64, *SD* = .57). Table 1 displays the mean ratings for the 'uncertain' responses.

Exploratory Factor Analyses were conducted on the 21 items of deviant behaviour. A Varimax rotation extracted three factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, accounting for 52% of the variance. A minimum factor loading of .40 was used as a criterion for assigning a variable to a factor. Three items were found to cross load on two factors and were dropped. The fi-

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of 'Uncertain' Responses

Deviant behaviours	*M*	*SD*
1 Reading private emails during working hours	3.10	1.15
2 Making a personal copy on the organization photocopy machine	3.31	1.19
3 Browsing the internet for personal benefit	3.42	1.14
4 Using working time for personal benefit	3.58	1.05
5 Using the organization car to make a personal trip	3.69	1.11
6 Taking home a few office supplies	3.79	1.05
7 Showing favouritism	3.81	1.11
8 Making up excuses for coming to work late or leaving earlier	3.90	1.02
9 Staying in the most expensive hotel at the company expenses	3.93	1.03
10 Talking with coworkers instead of working	3.98	0.92

nal list included 18 items. Considering the pattern of loadings, two factors represented organizational production and property deviance. Of these, one consisted of minor forms of deviance and the other of more serious forms. The third factor represented interpersonal interaction and included mainly political and personal aggression deviance. The third factor will be referred to as 'interpersonal deviance.' Factor scores were computed for each of these factors and used as dependent variables in the subsequent analyses. Lower values indicated acceptability.

Exploratory Factor Analyses were also performed on job satisfaction and organizational commitment scales and one factor was extracted for both, accounting respectively for 74.38% and 71.60% of the variance.

Descriptive statistics, internal consistencies (alpha coefficients) and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 2. Means are given based on the 5-point response scales. An analysis of the correlations of responses to the subscales of deviant behaviours with the study variables showed that the three forms of deviance were positively correlated, all above .40; job satisfaction and organizational commitment were also highly correlated. The non-acceptance of minor and serious forms of deviance was significantly positively correlated with both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, interpersonal deviance was not correlated with either. Age was correlated with non-acceptance of minor forms of deviance and tenure was positively correlated to the three forms of deviance, but not with job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of demographic and organizational factors and to test the hypotheses. For all the three forms of deviance, more than 20% of the variance was accounted for. However, the contribution of each factor was different for each form of behavior. Tenure and organizational commitment made a significant contribution to the non-acceptance of minor deviance, meaning that committed

Table 2 Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficients Alpha of Internal Consistencies and Intercorrelations of Variables

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	3.76	.75	.89	–						
2	4.53	.48	.80	.46**	–					
3	4.11	.69	.66	.50**	.42**	–				
4	3.37	.83	.92	.20**	.20**	.00	–			
5	3.94	.69	.67	.24**	.20**	.00	.69**	–		
6	10.09	7.92	–	.25**	.18**	.25**	.00	.06	–	
7	37.62	10.07	–	.14*	.04	.95	.08	.14	.69**	–

Notes $* p < .05$; $** p < .01$. Higher values indicate non-acceptance. Variables: 1 – minor deviance, 2 – serious deviance, 3 – interpersonal deviance, 4 – job satisfaction, 5 – organizational commitment, 6 – organizational tenure, 7 – age.

employees with longer tenure were more likely to reject minor deviant behaviours. Tenure and organizational commitment positively predicted the non-acceptance of serious deviance and age negatively predicted this form of deviance. Neither job satisfaction nor organizational commitment made significant contributions to the non-acceptance of interpersonal deviance. However, the contribution of tenure for this form of deviance was large ($\beta = .47$, $p < .01$). Lower education and blue collar status negatively predicted the non-acceptance of interpersonal deviance in both small and large organizations. Table 3 displays the regression results.

Discussion

The current study examined the perceived acceptability of deviant forms of behaviour and its relationship with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and demographic variables. Respondents could not clearly decide if behaviors, such as reading private emails, browsing the internet or using working time for personal benefit, were unacceptable. They were also undecided over taking a few office supplies, using the company car for personal use or staying in the most expensive hotel at the company expenses. On the other hand, ignoring safety procedures and intentionally making mistakes offered no doubts. The findings show therefore that respondents tended to be undecided over the acts that might not adversely affect the organization whereas more severe offenses were generally seen as unacceptable. As noted before, the most common cases occurring in organizational settings fall into the category of minor offenses and 'grey areas' such as chatting with work colleagues during work hours. Nevertheless, this kind of behaviour can affect productivity and is thus undesirable.

Although this study focused on the individual evaluation of deviant behaviour rather than the behaviour itself, there were clear indications that

Table 3   Results of Regression Analysis

Predict.	Minor deviance			Serious deviance			Interpersonal		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
1	−.49	.11	−.12	−.05	.07	−.05	−.12	.10	−.08
2	.50	.20	.20*	.20	.12	.13	.55	.19	.24
3	.17	.19	.11	−.05	.11	−.05	.15	.17	.10
4	−.03	.18	−.02*	−15	.11	.16	.16	.17	.11
4	−.56	22	−.27	−.26	.14	−.19	−.68	.21	−.34**
5	−.05	.14	−.03	.00	.08	.00	−.14	.13	−.10
6	−.33	.19	−.12	−.02	.12	−.02	−.32	.18	−.20
7	−.29	.16	−.10	−.13	.09	−.13	−.49	.15	−.34**
8	−.39	.16	−.25*	−.00	.09	−.00	−.36	.15	−.25*
9	.03	.00	.29**	−.01	.00	.29**	.02	.00	.28**
10	−.00	.00	−.03	−.00	−.00	−.19*	−.00	.00	−.06
11	.21	.10	.20*	.18	.06	.27**	−.05	.09	−.05
12	.09	.09	.09	.11	.05	.18	.10	.08	.12

Notes   Minor R^2 = .24; ΔR^2 = .18; serious R^2 = .28; ΔR^2 = .23; interpersonal R^2 = .21; ΔR^2 = .15. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Predictors: 1 – sex, 2 – basic education, 3 – secondary education, 4 – higher education, 5 – blue collar workers, 6 – white collar workers, 7 – high hierarchical position, 8 – small organizations, 9 – large organizations, 10 – tenure, 11 – age, 12 – organizational commitment, 13 – job satisfaction.

some forms of production and property deviance might be considered unacceptable from the organizational point of view but not from the employee point of view. Prior research (Fox & Spector, 1999; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Bennett & Robinson 2000) did not focus on this topic but on self or other reported deviant behaviours. It was therefore not possible to compare the results with those studies. It was possible however, to compare the responses to the same items as used by Jones (1990). Despite cultural and other differences, respondents in this study showed a similar hierarchy of acceptance to those in Jones's study. In both cases, using the copying machine was considered to be more acceptable than using the telephone, taking office supplies home or using the company car. It was noticeable that, whereas in Fox and Spector (1999) 'telling other people outside what a lousy place you work for' was considered as a minor organizational counterproductive behaviour, in this study the same action was seen as one of the most unacceptable.

Analysing the findings for intention, the most accepted behaviours were not the behaviours directed towards harming the organization and co-workers, but towards gaining a personal benefit. Employee withdrawal, such as calling in 'sick' or leaving early, might be a response to the reduced levels of job satisfaction or engaged in merely for personal benefit and

not intended to harm the organization. The same could be said for misap-propriating a few office supplies or staying in the most expensive hotel at company expense.

It was hypothized that the degree of non-acceptance of deviant conduct would be positively associated with organizational commitment and with job satisfaction (Hypotheses 1 and 2). This was not entirely confirmed. Orga-nizational commitment was found to be associated with the acceptance of deviant behaviours for minor and more serious production and property of-fenses though not for interpersonal deviance. An explanation for this could be that, although highly associated, the three forms of deviant behaviour were deemed distinct and this was reflected in the degree of acceptance. Being dissatisfied with the job might be associated with the behaviours di-rected towards the organization but not to the people in it. It should also be noted that the three forms of deviant behaviour found in this study rep-resent the division between interpersonal versus organizational, and minor versus serious, but do not represent entirely the four categories of Robison & Bennett's (1995) workplace deviance typology. Job satisfaction was not associated with any of the three types of deviance, suggesting that there is no relationship between the degree of satisfaction with the job and the degree of acceptance of deviant behaviours.

It was expected that the degree of acceptance of deviant conduct would be positively associated with being young, male and having briefer job tenure (Hypothesis 3). Of these factors, only the organizational tenure was positively correlated with the three forms of deviance and was the factor which contributed to the greater or all the three forms of deviance. As previ-ously mentioned, this is consistent with prior research. For instance, Sims (2002) found that tenure was a significant factor in the likelihood of reported ethical rule breaking.

Since tenure was not associated with either organizational commitment or job satisfaction, it may be inferred that its effects are independent of the other two. Sims argued that long tenure employees might have more to lose in breaking the rules. Tomlinson and Greenberg (2006) also points out that employees with tenure identify more with their organizations and are thus less likely to engage in employee theft and other deviant acts. Another possible explanation is that they may have more fully internalized the orga-nizational norms and expectations. Ultimately, organizational commitment is about behaving according to organizational interests (Wiener, 1982). This being the case, the lower acceptance of deviant behaviours might simply be a corollary of adaptation. This is an interesting point at a juncture when job tenure is being eroded due to the phasing out of jobs for life. Still another possible explanation is that the degree of acceptance of deviant behaviours reflects an attitude towards the organization. However, the relationship may

not be straightforward. The employee's reference and identity group may count more in the shaping of an attitude than the organization in general. If the main source of reference is the professional group, what is regarded as acceptable is likely to be informed more by the deontological principle rather than the organization, though these may well coincide. An employee may have little commitment to the organization, but still be actuated by professional codes.

Findings were in line with the research that found no or minimal differences for sex and age concerning the ethical issues (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Similarly, no difference was found for the organizational position. In this respect, it is worth noting that Jones's (1990) findings showed that the hierarchical position (president versus employee) had an impact on the perceived acceptability of deviant behaviours, although Murdack (1993) did not find such differences. Literature reviews on ethical decision-making indicate either that education has little or no influence, or that higher education levels are associated with greater ethical sensitivity (Lau et al., 2000). Results here indicated that lower education levels were positively associated with non-acceptance of minor deviance.

Attitudes assessed by the degree to which a person accepts a given behaviour is clearly not tantamount to actually engaging in it, but gives an insight into how employees judge a specific form of conduct. In analyzing the results however, it must be kept in mind that the behaviours assessed excluded those that could cause serious harm to the organization and/or its members. As noted above, it is significant that the behaviours deemed least acceptable could potentially cause greater harm either to the organization or its members, while those most accepted were motivated merely by personal advantage and do not seem to indicate a lack of job satisfaction.

Practical Implications and Limitations

Findings indicate that employees are uncertain regarding behaviours that may be considered deviant from an organizational point of view. To identify which undesirable behaviours are considered acceptable is the first step to develop the ways of intervention. To set up a code of ethics or proper conduct, it is crucial to clarify the boundaries of what is considered unacceptable from the organizational point of view and to implement the procedures that may guide employees. Research has shown that organizational climates with a strong emphasis on ethical behaviour tend to have less deviance. Therefore, management must be attuned to employee attitudes and communicate explicit expectations of what is considered unacceptable from the organizational point of view.

By providing information about employee attitudes on the acceptability of deviant behaviours, this study makes a contribution to the literature on

the subject. It also responds to calls for a greater knowledge of what is considered acceptable by given cultures (Power et al, 2011; Sidle, 2010). However, limitations should be acknowledged. One limitation is that undesirable behaviours are particularly hard to assess due to possible social desirability bias. Although it can be expected that a social desirability bias occur less where respondents are required only to indicate their degree of acceptance than where they are asked to indicate if they engage in such behaviours, the possibility of a bias cannot be ruled out. Future studies should thus include a measure of social desirability. Another potential limitation is that the use of scales provides no insight into the reasons for acceptance or non-acceptance of a given behaviour. Clearly, emotions alone cannot adequately explain the motive (Spector et al., 2006). There are also rational calculations and other reasons that can only be captured by the use of qualitative methodology as noted above. Still, another limitation is the cross-sectional design, which may limit the generalization of results. As a result, future studies should extend the scope by the addition of other samples.

Tenure needs further investigation if its effects are to be fully understood. Future research may gain insights by looking at the number of years worked in the organization in relation to other factors. These latter may exist associated with the acceptance of deviant behaviours, and were not examined in this study. Future studies should add other variables (individual, organizational and extra-organizational) and include alternative forms of assessment.

Conclusion

This study suggests that organizational commitment and tenure are the key parameters in framing the acceptance of undesirable behaviours in organizations. In consequence, these are clearly the factors to be considered in any attempt to minimize such conduct. Furthermore, to devise a code of ethics or proper conduct, it is crucial to clarify the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable and then implement the procedures that may guide the employees.

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