ABSTRACT

There is growing interest among researchers concerning the causes and consequences of deviant workplace behaviors. The losses produced by employee delinquency and deviance were proved to be huge. Employing Social cognitive theory, Organizational socialization and Social exchange theory, we propose that supervisor or employee’s workplace deviances which may destroy the organizational ethical climate and norms will pass on to their coworker’s deviant work behaviors. We further propose that different types of deviant work behaviors will spread differently. That is, minor deviant work behaviors and organizational deviant work behaviors will pass faster and more than serious and interpersonal deviant work behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Deviant work behaviors, Social cognitive theory, Organizational ethical climate, Contagion

INTRODUCTION

There is growing interest among researchers and practitioners concerning deviant workplace behaviors in the consequences of these negative behaviors. Research by Meiners (2005) illustrates that organization in the USA losses 6% of its annual revenues which is almost $660 billion annually by only one types of deviant work behavior----theft. In addition, based on the sample of 5065 USA managers and employees, KPMG (2008) finds that 74% of the respondents observed deviant work behavior in their organizations. Moreover, research in large organizations in five countries, which conducted by the Compliance and Ethics Leadership Council (2008), shows that among all the respondents, 7% of them observed falsification of expense claims, 11% theft, 15% discrimination, and 16% harassment in their organizations. Previous studies is growing rapidly which examines issues like theft, vandalism, lying, fraud, spreading malicious rumors, aggressive behavior, withholding effort, and sexual harassment in the workplace (Griffin, O’Leary-Kelly, & Collins, 1998). The reason of the growing interest in those deviance work behaviors is their increasing prevalence and the enormous costs associated with them (Peterson, 2002). Not only the financial impact, but also the social and psychological effects of negative workplace behavior have been explored by several studies (Hollinger & Clark, 1982, 1983; Murphy, 1993; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). The loss was
proved to be huge which produced by employee deviance and delinquency (Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

However, only a few of empirical researches have addressed the cause of this darker side of employee behavior. There has been very little valid research focus on the relationship between organizational factors and workplace deviance in this area (Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). Therefore, these provide a research gap for examining other organizational factors that may be related to deviant workplace behavior. Trevino (1986) proved that situational and organizational factors could influence the behavior and attitudes of the employees. There are some researches focus on the organizational injustice and inequity in causing workplace deviance (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Greenberg, 1990; Hollinger & Clark, 1983).

In addition, organizational climate is one of organizational factors that have been tested to have a significant impact on employee’s behavior (Tumipseed, 1988). According to Victor and Cullen (1987), what is ethically correct behavior and how ethical issues should be handled in the organization formed the ethical climate of an organization. Researches have demonstrated that the ethical climate of an organization significantly influences the ethical behavior of the employees. Low intensity deviant behaviors were proved to violate workplace norms (Pearson & Andersson, 1999). Since deviance behaviors could violate organizational norms, it is possible that workplace deviant behavior could be predictable from the deviant behavior of manager or other employees.

We intend to fill in the research gap by answering the following question: Can deviant work behavior be transferred from manager to employees? Does deviant work behavior pass on between employees? If so, what kinds of deviant work behavior could pass on to other employees? Does organizational ethical climate affect those contagions? Does different deviant work behavior spread differently? Our research is significant because to our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted to examine the contagion of deviant work behavior in workplace, especially focus on the different between the spread sources and behavior types. While researchers have shown that deviant work behavior of other employees could cause negative influence on employee performance, how those deviant work behavior could transfer to employees remains to be answered. We identify a few factors that may impact such transfer in this paper.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following sequence. First, we review the previous literature in relation to the deviant work behaviors, and this is followed by the review of theories that we based on to build the hypotheses---- Social Cognitive Theory, Organizational socialization and Social exchange theory. Second, we classified the sources of deviant work behaviors into manager and coworker that we argue the difference of contagion of those two sources under the context of organizational ethical climate. Thirdly, we further examined the contagion difference of different types of deviant work behaviors. Then five propositions are presented based on the literature collected. Lastly, we conclude this research by discussing the implications and pointing out future research directions and limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Deviant Work Behavior

Robinson and Bennett (1995) defined workplace deviance as voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in turn threatens the well-being of an organization and its members. The concept of deviant workplace behavior was fully developed by the topic of
several investigations (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998). Comprehensive typology of deviant workplace behaviors was empirically developed and methods for measuring workplace deviance were fully developed. Hollinger and Clark (1982) divided deviance workplace behaviors into two categories: property deviance and production deviance. Property deviance refers to damaging property belonging to one’s employer (e.g. stealing from the company, sabotaging equipment); while production deviance refers to the process in which an individual violates organizational norms regarding quantity and quality of work performed (e.g. leaving early, taking excessive breaks, intentionally working slow and wasting resource). In addition, deviant behavior was also discussed in a lower frequency form as incivility in the workplace (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Andersson and Pearson (1999) describe an incivility spiral model in which individual perceptions about a norm has been violated, which may be a stimulus for an upward spiral that leads to reciprocation.

Here in this paper, we focus on the Robinson and Bennett (1995)’s category of deviant workplace behavior. They applied the multidimensional scaling procedure to derive the typology of workplace deviance. They divided deviant workplace behaviors into two dimensions: One was labeled as the organizational-interpersonal dimension. The dimension differs from deviant behavior targeted at the organization (e.g., stealing equipment) to deviant behavior primarily aimed at a member of the organization (e.g., spreading rumor). This dimension mainly focuses on the target of the deviant behavior. The second dimension demonstrated the severity of the deviant behavior. In this dimension, deviant behavior varied from minor forms of deviance (e.g., blaming fellow employees) to serious forms of deviant behavior (e.g., verbal abuse).

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory states that the conduct of an objective representation of the human being is formed by the exchanges amongst other behavior, cognition, and the atmosphere of the environment (Bandura, 1986). An individual’s behavior will be influenced by the exposure to particular stimuli (Bandura, 1989). Bandura (1986) intimated that an individual’s behavioral activity can be affected by some aspect in the environment which would alter the individual’s cognition, or aptitude, to complete a specific task. What is being theorized about the contagion is that as the deviant behavior of manager or other employees is being constantly displayed in presence of or towards other employees, they will internalize it when this event occurs repeatedly; thus, they themselves will display some kinds of deviant behavior in response towards the business and job outcomes. As a consequence, seeing someone else behave unethically could be used as a justification that the deviant behavior is morally acceptable in the organization. As long as the observed behavior is not punished or disapproved of, employees will take it as appropriate or allowed (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Goldstein et al., 2008). As time goes by, people will be susceptible to participant in similar behavior as well.

Organizational Socialization

Organizational socialization is defined as a learning and adjustment process that enables an individual to adopt an organizational role that fits both organizational and individual needs. It is a dynamic process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role. In order to successfully assume an organizational role and participate as an organizational member, organizational socialization teaches newcomers the values, behaviors, social knowledge, and necessary work place skills needed in the organization (Louis, 1980). So I assume that in the process of organizational socialization, employees will not only learn the organizational role but also some underlying roles which may cause deviant workplace behaviors such as taking excessive breaks or stealing from company,
etc. This study examined the phenomenon of employee’s deviant workplace behavior as a learning process influenced by processes of manager and coworker’s contagion.

**Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory presents as theoretical foundations for organizational socialization. Guided by rules of exchange, such as social norms, Social exchange theory describes a type of ongoing, dynamic relationship in a series of interactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). However, different scholars have different definitions of social exchange. Blau (1986) stated that social exchange involved the more ambiguous and relationally oriented exchange based on reciprocity, which excluded the economic or negotiated exchange. Cohen and Bradford (1989) stated that the basis of many organizational interactions was expected to be reciprocity. People should either through this reciprocity in returning of favors from others or reduction of resources offered to others.

Leader-member exchange theory is a type of social exchange. It states that through a process of exchanges or interactions, work roles between a leader and member are developed and established over time. The leaders provide membership benefits and increased responsibility to their subordinate, while in return subordinate offers their increased commitment and contribution to their supervisor (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Utilizing Leader-member exchange theory, we were able to determine that the contagion of deviant workplace behaviors spreading from manager to employees is stronger than coworker’s deviant work behavior.

**THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HYPOTHESES**

**The Contagion of Deviant Work Behavior**

Kohlberg (1969) indicated that employees search for cues within their social environment as for what behavior is morally acceptable and what is not. His study provided a suitable stepping stone for the following research in exploring the relation between social influence and deviant workplace behavior. Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini (2000) proved that when the environment was clean, individuals litter less than they litter in an environment that has been littered much already. Moreover, when people violate a social norm like entering a room with a “no enter” sign, other people will be more likely to violate this social norm as well (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008). Robinson and O’Leary-Kelly (1998) found that group’s deviant workplace behavior will positively lead to an individual’s inclination to engage in a deviant workplace behavior. Some scholars even found that cheating behavior of student or colleague is a valid predictor of cheating behavior among colleges and universities (e.g. McCabe & Treviño, 1993; McCabe, Treviño, & Butterfield, 2002). In addition, Jones and Kavanagh (1996) conducted a research showed that a positive effect of peer influence on other’s ethical decision making. In this study, I assume that the deviant work behavior of managers and coworkers could pass on to other employees. I refer this phenomenon as deviant work behavioral contagion.

Workplace deviance can be classified into two general groupings: coworker and supervisor deviance (Reio, 2011). Coworker workplace deviance refers to uncivil behaviors that are instigated by individual coworkers, such as blaming emails, gossip, and shunning (Reio, 2011); while supervisor incivility refers to workplace deviances that are originate from the supervisor. There are several literatures related to the manager’s and coworker’s deviant work behavioral contagion. Based on the literature review of organizational socialization and social exchange theories, Rajashi, Thomas and Hyejin Bangb (2013) analyzed the influence of supervisor and co-worker incivility on employees’ socialization-related learning and turnover intent. Workplace
deviance are shown to have a significant negative impact on employee well-being, satisfaction, health, morale and job performance (Lim, Cortina, and Magley, 2008; Porath and Erez, 2007; 2009).

As for the peer’s contagion, deviant youth was proved to become even more deviant is through unrestricted interaction with deviant peers (Thornberry & Krohn, 1997) “If employees within business units are not getting along well together due to frequent incidents of interpersonal deviant work behavior, it is likely that this type of behavior will contribute to a negative interactive base within a business unit, thus overall performance will suffer” (Patrick and Kibom, 2004). The unethical misconduct in organizations also triggered the influence that employees may spread over each other (e.g. Treviño et al., 2006; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998; Jones & Kavanagh, 1996). Being frustrated and treated uncivilly by supervisors and coworkers, Fox and Spector (1999) argued might lead to a number of unproductive organizational outcomes from employees such as poorer job performance and increased absenteeism.

Sufficient theoretical and empirical basis shows that individuals are strongly influenced by what others do. As mentioned above, Social learning theory explains why people instigate deviant behavior among each other as it underscores the observational character of learning. Bandura (1977) argues that by observing and imitating others, individuals learn how to behave. Moreover, in a given context, behavior of others also provides information about what the social norms seem to be (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). Behavior of others teaches employees the acceptable or even the normative way to behave in the organization (Tsang, 2002). Interpreting the situation and establish attitudes about what is appropriate is our nature to make use of the information around us (Bandura, 1977; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998; Smith & Mackie, 2007).

Based on those previous explorations of the possible cause of workplace deviance and social cognitive theory, we believe that manager or employee’s workplace deviances which destroy the organizational ethical climate and norms will have great influences on other employee’s deviant work behaviors. Following this logic, we have the following two propositions:

**P1:** Manager’s deviant work behavior, which violates the organizational ethical climate, will pass on to employees.
**P2:** Co-worker’s deviant work behavior, which violates the organizational ethical climate, will pass on to employees.

**Contagion Difference of Manager and Coworker**

Deviant work behavioral contagion from both manager and coworker could have detrimental impacts on the frustration, anger, and anxiety of workers, and their associated behavioral responses (Fox & Spector, 1999; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). However, being treated uncivilly by supervisors may be especially problematic because this may lead to employee’s perceptions of autonomy and identity loss, and injustice (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The attitudes of management and managers will trigger off and foster workplace deviance among employees of various organizations (Justin & Scholarstica, 2011).

Work place deviance is considered to be closely related to abusive supervision (Litzky et al 2000). Abusive supervision will lead to employee’s retaliation (Vonai and Mildred, 2012) Mount, Johnson, Hies, and Barrick (2002) found that work place deviance is significantly correlated with
supervisor ratings of job performance. Thomas and Sandra (2007) examined how and why the organizational power could provoke workplace deviance.

Ethical leadership was proved to be related with followers’ ethical conducts (organizational citizenship behavior) and unethical conducts (workplace deviance) (Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Trevino, 2006). Burton (2005) has shown that the organizational climate is influenced by the leaders’ attitudes in organizations. Brown et al. (2005) defines ethical leadership as an example of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships. It reflects that ethical leader should have the traits like honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, collective motivation, altruism and justice (see Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Trevin’o 2006). Besides, moral manager was expected to influence their followers’ attitudes and behavior through their ethical leadership behavior (Trevin’o and Brown 2004). Leader membership exchange theory discusses the quality of the social interactions between supervisor and employee. On the one side, leaders have the leadership power to influence more employees to imitate their behaviors; on the other side, the direct interactions and relations between supervisor and employees also make this contagion faster. Therefore we theorize that through these social interactions and ethical leadership, some of the deviant work behaviors may be acquired or passed faster and more on from managers to the employees.

P3: Manager’s deviant work behavior will spread faster and greater on employees than coworker’s deviant work behavior.

Organizational Ethical Climate

Organizational climate is one of the organizational factors that have been demonstrated to have a significant impact on employee’s behaviors (Tumipseed, 1988). Ethical climate of an organization was proved to be significantly affecting the ethical behavior of the employees (Victor and Cullen, 1987). The ethical climate was regarded as the shared perceptions of what behavior is ethically correct and how ethical issues should be handled in the organization. In the extant literature, many scholars have theoretically and empirically investigated the effect of ethical climate on employees’ work attitudes and behavior. They also found that ethical leadership was an effective predictor of employee’s job satisfaction, organization commitment, moral identity, voice behavior, and organizational citizenship behavior (see Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Trevin’o 2006). Mayer et al. (2009) found that individual perceptions of ethical leadership could greatly reduce their organizational deviance and increase their citizenship behaviors. Walumbwa and Schaubroeck (2009) stated that ethical leadership could enhance the followers’ voice behavior.

Arthur (2011) found evidence that interpersonal deviant behaviors within organizations were inter-related under the influence of ethical climate which was varied significantly between organizations. If the acts of workplace deviance are commonplace, an organizational incivility climate will come into being. Incivility climate is expected to emerge when organizational members share and expose their deviance behaviors either directly as targets or indirectly as witnesses, through social learning processes (O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, and Glew, 1996) or social interactions between co-workers (Pearson and Porarth, 2005). Based on the significantly role that ethical climate plays on the ethical behavior of the employees, we consider the ethical climate to be an appropriate mediator for assessing the contagion of deviant workplace behaviors, because organizational members interpret their deviant workplace behaviors based on their perceptions of organizational norms and climate of “appropriate” behaviors. Therefore, we have the following proposition:
P4: Organizational ethical climate mediates the contagion of deviant workplace behaviors. Contagion of different types of deviant work behaviors

As mentioned in the literature review, according to Robinson and Bennett (1995), typology of workplace deviance, could be distinguished into two dimensions, namely interpersonal versus organizational and minor versus serious. The first dimension has the axis ranges from deviance directed towards individuals to deviance directed towards the organization. The second dimension of typology shows the severity of workplace deviance ranging from minor to serious. We assume that different types of deviant work behaviors may differ in their effect of violating the organizational ethical climate, therefore, may spread differently to employee’s deviant work behaviors. Following this logic, we have the proposition in below:

P5: Types of deviant work behaviors moderate the effects of organizational ethical climate on employee’s deviant work behavior.

When employee observes their manager or coworker’s deviant work behaviors, they may imitate only part of them. They most likely will imitate the minor deviant work behaviors more and faster from their manager or coworker than the serious one. Bolin and Heatherly (2001) proved that dissatisfaction of the employee’s may results in a higher incidence of minor offenses, but does not necessarily lead to severe offence. Mazni and Rosiah (2011) concluded that workplace deviance is more prevalent among the support staff, because the employees with lower status are more prone to exhibit minor deviant behavior as they can use their free time to fight back to whoever would have wronged them. Minor deviant work behaviors will not cause huge damage like serious deviant work behaviors do. Therefore, employees tend to imitate more minor deviant work behaviors to release their emotion in a relative small consequence.

In addition, minor deviant work behaviors were also believed to be spread faster. When employees catch the serious deviant work behaviors from their manager or coworkers, they may not easily follow those behaviors. Based on the difference of positions, incomes and personalities, employees will feel afraid to take the same risk as their manager or coworker do. However, when it turns to the minor deviant work behaviors, they feel less risk and pressure to follow. Employees will be more willing to do the equal minor deviant work behaviors like their coworker’s to avoid the feeling of unfairness. Thus, we believe that:

P5a: Minor deviant work behaviors spread faster and greater than serious deviant work behaviors.

Under the dimension of destructive deviance, there are two types of work place deviance which are interpersonal and organizational deviance. Organizational deviance is the deviant behaviors happen between the individual and the organization that involves behaviors such as theft, sabotage, lateness, or putting little effort into work, etc. On the other hand, interpersonal deviance is the deviant behavior occurs between individuals in the workplace and involves behaviors such as: belittling others, playing pranks on others, acting rudely, arguing, and physical aggression, etc. Both organizationally and interpersonally targeted deviant work behaviors would have a significantly negative influence on overall business unit performance (Patrick and Kibeom, 2004)

However, organizational deviant work behaviors are believed to spread more than interpersonal ones. One reason is that if employee wants to cover their deviant work behaviors, organizational deviant work behaviors will be more easily to be covered. If they conduct the deviant work
behaviors towards others in the organization, their behaviors will easily be exposed. Then they may have higher risk to be punished. The other reason is the deviant work behaviors targeting at organizations will not have interpersonal relationship problems as interpersonal deviant work behaviors. Although employees theft, sabotage, being late, or putting little effort in their works, they are not hurting other’s benefits. Interpersonal deviance is more to do with the gossip and assign blame of the peer workers. Things will become tough if they violate other employees. It is not only the damage of products, but also the destroy of their social relations which could not easily be fixed.

Besides, we assume that organizational deviant work behaviors will also spread faster than interpersonal deviant work behaviors. These may be seen as minor but still they are unhealthy to the organization. Interpersonal deviant work behaviors were proved to be linked with personality (Giacalone & Knouse, 1990; Lee, Ashton, & Shin, in press) Agreeableness had a direct relationship with interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors (Michael, Remus, & Erin, 2006). Therefore, interpersonal deviant work behaviors will not be widely passed to others due to its close relationship with each employee’s personalities. In the same time, interpersonal deviant work behaviors usually based on the conflict between two or several employees. The employees who are not involved with those personal conflicts show less willing to participate in those work deviance. But organizational deviant work behaviors which target at the whole organization may influence more employees to get involved. Following this idea, we propose the following:

P5b: Organizational deviant work behaviors spread faster and greater than interpersonal deviant work behaviors.

Based on the propositions above, we have our research model below:

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Due to the huge damage caused by deviant work behaviors on organization and employees, the reason why those behaviors occurring more and more prevalent becomes a necessary to explore. There are many reasons that explain why employees behave deviant at the workplace.
The prime reason could be that employees would feel wronged as they believe that their expectations would have been breached, hence there will be a need for retaliation.

To our knowledge, this is the first investigation to demonstrate that manager and coworker’s deviant work behaviors could also be one reason of other employee’s deviant work behaviors. This study could have implications for both research and practice. One important implication of this research is that we provide some suggestions that may help to reduce the incidence of workplace deviance. First, managers need to understand the source of workplace deviance in order to avoid a chaotic work environment and considerable financial impact. Our article argues that manager and coworker’s deviant work behaviors may lead to employee’s workplace deviance. Therefore, it is important for managers to manage their own behaviors first and observe other employee’s deviant work behaviors, in order to find the correct reason for the contagion.

Second, ethical organizational climate which is engendered by trusting relationships between managements and employees will in turn foster the contagion of workplace deviance. Due to the increasing importance attached to corporate social responsibilities and business ethics, leaders are more than ever required to behave ethically (Tu & Lu, 2011). Therefore, to keep an ethical organizational climate is essential for reducing the occurrence of deviant work behaviors.

Third, based on the analysis of different effect of different deviant work behaviors, minor and organizational deviant work behaviors were proved to be spread faster and greater than other types of deviant work behaviors. Thus, managers should specially pay attention to those kinds of deviant work behaviors though they are not expected as serious behaviors. However, if the frequency of minor deviant work behaviors is very high and prevalent, it could cause even larger lost for the organizations than the serious ones.

As with any study, ours was not without limitations including non-empirical testing and unknown generalizability, etc. The thoughts of our article provide important opportunities for future research. Even though a lot of methods that were proved by studies that are well suited to reducing the likelihood of deviant work behaviors through developing interpersonal skills, reducing conflict, and improving diversity awareness (Reio & Ghosh, 2009), more research is needed to guide precisely how to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

The spreading of deviant work behaviors within organizations is becoming more of interest to both practice and academics and the necessity to study the underlying processes that drive such behavior is of great importance. This paper contributes to the field of deviant work behaviors by proposing that manager or employee’s workplace deviances which destroy the organizational ethical climate and norms will have great influences on other employee’s deviant work behaviors. Most importantly, based on the analysis of different types of deviant work behaviors, we believe that minor and organizational deviant work behaviors were proposed to be spread faster and greater than other types of deviant work behaviors. This indicates an important direction in which solutions need to be sought as well as further research is needed.
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