

Is it 'who I am', 'what I can get away with', or 'what you've done to me'?

A Multi-theory Examination of Employee Misconduct

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ABSTRACT. Research on detrimental workplace behaviors has increased recently, predominantly focusing on justice issues. Research from the integrity testing literature, which is grounded in trait theory, has not received as much attention in the management literature. Trait theory, agency theory, and psychological contracts theory each have different predictions about employee performance that is harmful to the organization. While on the surface they appear contradictory, this paper describes how each can be integrated to increase our understanding of detrimental workplace behaviors.

KEY WORDS: agency theory, deviance, honesty, psychological contracts, trait theory

In the past few years, the research on detrimental workplace behaviors has risen dramatically in the management literature (e.g., Elangovan and Shapiro, 1998; Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998; Scott, 2003). Research topics have ranged from predicting the effect of attitudinal variables on theft (Jones and Boye, 1994) to whether employees perceive lying to be a negative behavior or not (Saxe, 1991).

Research on deviant behaviors has fallen into two categories in the management literature. The first involves the principal-agent theory stream of research, which focuses on how to control employee

counter-productive behavior (Eisenhardt, 1989). The second is based in the justice stream of research, which has been concerned with defining what workplace deviance is as well as beginning to identify the reasons why employees engage in deviant behavior (Bennett and Robinson, 2000).

Although it appears to be a new trend, this subject has been covered extensively under the topic of integrity testing in the Industrial/Organizational Psychology literature. Integrity tests have been used for years as a selection device that is relatively inexpensive and not time intensive (Hornsby et al., 1992). While not definitive, there is evidence of the validity of several widely used tests (Jones et al., 1991).

This paper is an attempt to bridge the gap between competing theoretical frameworks explaining the performance of detrimental behaviors in the workplace. Specifically, I will examine trait theory, agency theory, and psychological contracting theory and explain how each makes different predictions about the performance of detrimental behaviors. I then integrate these theories to broaden our understanding of how personality and situational factors combine to influence deviant behaviors.

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Employee misconduct

The interest in studying employee misconduct (also called detrimental behaviors, anti-social behaviors, counter-productive behaviors, deviant behaviors, dishonesty, and sub-role behaviors) has grown dramatically in the last few years. Examples of these behaviors range from workplace homicide to

spending an extra 5 min on break. Regardless of the term used by the researcher, the focus has been on behaviors that are detrimental or harmful, and therefore need to be curtailed. While some research has included negative behaviors directed at individuals in addition to organizations (e.g., sexual harassment, Robinson and Bennett, 1997), the focus of this paper is on actions taken by employees that are detrimental to the organization. In addition, in keeping with most research in this area, my focus is on what managers would consider detrimental, rather than on employee perceptions (Lewicki et al., 1997).

There are two conclusions that can be drawn from recent research. First, personality differences and other explanatory variables can help predict who will engage in these types of behaviors, (e.g., intra-personal conflict predicting lying at work, Grover, 1993). As will be seen in the next section, research on integrity testing has shown that it is possible to predict, albeit imprecisely, who will perform harmful behaviors in the workplace. Second, perceived unfairness in the workplace is a major determinant of performing "bad" behaviors (Lewicki et al., 1997; Tucker, 1989, 1993).

A comparison of three theories

The performance of detrimental behaviors is a problem in many organizations. There are numerous theories that attempt to explain human motivation and behavior at work. Three of the most influential theories that help explain the performance of detri-

mental behaviors are trait theory, agency theory and psychological contracts theory. A summary of the conflicting predictions of these three theories can be found in Table I.

Trait theory

Traits represent individual characteristics, which are either inherited or acquired, and refer to tendencies to act or react in certain ways (Drever, 1964). Key to this definition is the fact that having a particular trait does not guarantee predictable performance, but an individual possessing a certain trait will be more disposed to react to a given situation in a certain way (McKenna, 1994). Trait theorists view traits as broad, general guides that lend consistency to behavior. While trait theory has been criticized for ignoring situational factors, there is evidence that traits are relatively stable and predictable.

Trait theory predicts that characteristics of individuals influence their behavior. This is the basis of the justification for using integrity testing in the workplace. Integrity testing¹ has been used successfully in businesses to identify general tendencies toward unethical behavior (Murphy, 1993). Tests vary in terms of whether they measure particular constructs like theft proneness (Ash, 1991), or on a general test meant to identify people likely to engage in different types of dishonest behavior (Murphy, 1993).

The use of these tests presumes that traits are relatively stable over time, and that a trait or traits related to deviant behavior can be identified reliably

TABLE I
Competing predictions about detrimental behaviors in the workplace

Predictions	Trait	Agency	Psychological contract
Performance of detrimental behaviors will be related to integrity test score	Yes	No	No
Performance of detrimental behaviors will be related to level of monitorability and/or control mechanisms, regardless of integrity test score	No	Yes	No
Performance of detrimental behaviors will be related to psychological contract violation, regardless of integrity test score and monitorability	No	No	Yes
Theory predictions	Stable Not situational	Stable situational	Not Stable situational

in order to screen out potentially unsuitable job applicants. As a selection device, there is quite a bit of evidence supporting the validity of integrity tests (e.g., Collins and Schmidt, 1993; Jones et al., 1991; Ones et al., 1993; Sackett et al., 1989). Test publishers state that their integrity tests measure one or more different personality traits, which Ones et al. (1993) argue are similar enough to be considered measures of “conscientiousness”, reflecting traits such as dependability, carefulness and responsibility. They argue that this trait is a strong predictor of job performance. In addition, Collins and Schmidt (1993) found support for a similar trait “social conscientiousness” in helping to predict differences between white-collar offenders and non-offenders.

Trait research has been criticized for flawed research designs as well as ignoring situational variables (Davis-Blake and Pfeffer, 1986). Research involving integrity testing has satisfied one of Davis-Blake and Pfeffer’s challenges to dispositional research, namely that the trait (measured with integrity test score, usually during the hiring process) is distinct from the behavior, which is some measure of detrimental behavior performed by the employee at a later time. However, as Davis-Blake and Pfeffer argue, trait theory does ignore the context or situation. Agency theory also makes predictions about the performance of detrimental behaviors at work, by taking the situation into account. Agency theory is both related to and distinct from trait theory in its predictions.

Agency theory

Agency theory has been used in accounting, marketing, economics and finance as well as the organizational behavior literature (Eisenhardt, 1989). Employees are “agents” and the employer is the “principal”; the principal wants to obtain maximal performance from his/her “agent”, whereas the agent wishes to put in minimal effort (shirk). This theory assumes that agents will behave opportunistically if given the chance, i.e., employees will always shirk or misrepresent their capabilities if they can get away with it (Rousseau and McLean Parks, 1993).

This theory is rooted in the economic assumptions of self-interested behavior and utility maximization. While not acknowledged by agency theorists

or economists in general, these assumptions are basically *trait*² assumptions, whereby everyone is expected to have self-interested traits. Instead of individual differences in traits, as is suggested by trait theory, agency theory presumes the same trait for every worker – opportunism. The first implication of this theory is that everyone is naturally inclined to perform detrimental behaviors at work.

The second implication of this theory involves the influence of the principal on the agent’s behavior. Unlike trait theory, agency theory incorporates the influence of the situation on employees’ behavior. Specifically, principals can reduce shirking if they install proper monitoring or controlling devices. Examples include the use of contingent compensation contracts (pay for performance), managers performing monitoring functions, as well as new forms of electronic monitoring.

If the tenets of this theory hold, then an employee’s integrity test score should be irrelevant. Instead, the performance of harmful behaviors is dependent on the level of monitoring in the organization. While agency theory assumes the same trait (dishonesty) among all workers, it does have the added benefit of taking the situation into account. However, the research on psychological contracts focuses entirely on the situation, rather than individual characteristics. Psychological contract theory shows that employees may resort to harmful behaviors if they feel that they work in an unjust environment.

Psychological contract theory

A psychological contract is the idiosyncratic set of reciprocal expectations held by employees concerning their obligations (i.e., what they will do for the employer) and their entitlements (i.e., what they expect to receive in return) (McLean Parks et al., 1998). The concept of psychological contracts is rooted in social exchange theory. Schein (1980) initially introduced the term, but Rousseau (1989) was responsible for rekindling interest in this topic among organizational researchers.

The psychological contract has been conceptualized as a continuum ranging from extremely transactional contracts to extremely relational contracts (Rousseau and McLean Parks, 1993). Trans-

actional contracts are more likely to be short-term, with narrow scope and a focus on *quid pro quo* transactions. Relational contracts, on the other hand, are more likely to contain a socio-emotional element to them, a trust in the other's intentions, and are more likely to be long-term with diffuse obligations.

The number of papers on psychological contracts has grown significantly since Rousseau's 1989 article. Researchers have examined the process through which psychological contracts are formed and changed (e.g., McLean Parks and Schmedemann, 1994; Rousseau, 1990, 1995); the content of psychological contracts (Robinson et al., 1994); the outcomes (Robinson and Morrison, 1995); while still other researchers have focused on the violation of the psychological contract and its implications (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Robinson, 1996; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994).

Of particular interest in predicting the performance of detrimental behaviors in the workplace is the area of violated psychological contracts. Employees may feel that their psychological contract has been violated for any number of reasons, but it has been closely linked to perceptions of justice or fair treatment in the workplace (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). McLean Parks and Kidder (1994) argued that violations of an employee's psychological contract will lead that employee to decrease extra-role behaviors and increase sub-role behaviors in response. Unlike agency theory, which assumes no trust in the relationship, research on psychological contracts focuses on the trust developed between employees and employers. Even normally honest and ethical employees may resort to harmful behaviors if they feel that they work in an unjust environment and that their trust has been violated (Tucker, 1989, 1993). Employees with relational contracts are more likely to suffer emotionally from a violated contract than those with transactional contracts, as the latter are less trusting and more vigilant in policing the fulfillment of the contract by the employer (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

Most theorizing about psychological contracts has ignored individual difference variables. In a sense, the psychological contract as it is currently conceptualized ignores the effects of personality on people's perceptions of obligations and entitlements in the workplace. If we were to apply this theory to

the area of harmful behaviors, traits would not be the determining factor, but rather the situation would have the main influence.

The predictions of each of the three theories are summarized in Table I. Taking the theories to the extreme suggests three different predictions about the performance of detrimental behaviors. The trait approach suggests that people have relatively stable tendencies towards harmful behaviors, which differ by person, making it possible to select applicants based on integrity test scores, and does not consider the situation. The agency approach assumes that people have stable tendencies towards dishonest behaviors that are equal across the population, and that the actual performance of detrimental behaviors depends on the situation, i.e., the monitoring structure set up by the employer. Finally, the psychological contract approach does not focus on individual characteristics like the first two theories. It does, however, focus entirely on the situation. Unlike agency theory, the psychological contract approach assumes a positive trusting relationship, which if violated, will then lead to dishonest behavior.

It is quite probable and intuitively appealing that both traits and the situation are important. The symmetry in Table I is a little too convenient, as it will support any research findings (with the exception of insignificant coefficients) just from the way it is structured. Further, trait theory, agency theory and psychological contracts theory together present a paradox to researchers examining the performance of detrimental behaviors in the workplace. Specifically, giving employees an integrity test can be construed as a form of monitoring, which may lead to a lack of trust between an employee and their organization, potentially causing employees to take a more self-interested approach to their job, thus leading to the performance of harmful behaviors. Further, the introduction of control mechanisms and monitoring may in itself cause a violation of an employee's contract, as it implies that the employer does not trust the employee (Rousseau and McLean Parks, 1993).

Theory integration

The first step in integrating these three theories involves combining their predictions. Given that the

research on integrity tests shows that a disposition can, albeit imperfectly, predict performance of detrimental behaviors, I will take that as the starting point of the integration.

Agency theory suggests, however, that it is necessary to take into account the situation, in particular the level of monitoring of an employee's behavior. This suggests that:

Proposition 1: *The correlation between integrity test score and performance of deviant behaviors will be moderated by level of monitoring/control mechanisms.*

Specifically, the presence of monitoring should reduce deviant behaviors, ideally reducing it to the point that the employees' test score is insignificant.

If we then consider the implications of psychological contract theory, it is important to determine whether or not an employee has a relational or transactional psychological contract. If the employee has a relational psychological contract, she/he is more likely to feel loyalty and commitment to the organization, and come to identify with organizational norms against deviant behaviors. This suggests that:

Proposition 2: *The correlation between integrity test score and performance of deviant behaviors will be moderated by type of psychological contract.*

Therefore, there may be no correlation between test score and performance of deviant behaviors if an employee has formed a relational psychological contract with her/his employer.

On the other hand, if an employee perceives that the organization has violated his/her psychological contract, even a normally honest person may perform detrimental behaviors as an act of defiance or retribution. This suggests that:

Proposition 3: *The correlation between integrity test score and performance of deviant behaviors will be moderated by employees' perception of (non)fulfillment of their psychological contract.*

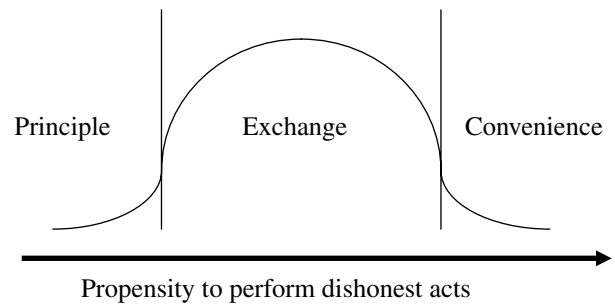


Figure 1. Hypothetical population distribution.

Specifically, individuals scoring high on the integrity test may still perform deviant acts, again reducing the relationship between the test score and deviant performance to an insignificant level.

While these propositions are a beginning, it is possible to go further in integrating these three seemingly disparate theories. Assuming that it is possible to rate individuals on a scale measuring propensity to perform detrimental behaviors at work, it is possible to envision a population distribution (see Figure 1). The shape of the distribution is purely hypothetical and for exposition purposes only. On the left end of the distribution are those individuals who would never engage in dishonest acts, which they refrain from doing on *principle*.

On the right end of the distribution are those individuals who are purely self-interested, as is predicted by agency theory, who will always engage in deviant acts if it is in their best interest to do so and they can get away with it, thus *convenient*. In the middle of the distribution are those people who are somewhat likely to perform harmful acts, especially if the situation is conducive thereto. Social exchange theory, from which psychological contracts theory is derived, states that relationships are based on *exchange*, and that the rules of exchange vary based on the circumstances. The relationship can be self-serving, balanced, or other-serving. For instance, if they have a transactional psychological contract, employees may engage in minor deviant acts (Robinson and Bennett, 1997), as their exchange relationship with their employer is self-interested and not based on loyalty and commitment. If, on the other hand, they have a relational psychological contract which they feel has been violated, they may

engage in major deviant acts (McLean Parks and Kidder, 1994).

Although it is unclear what the actual distribution looks like, it is likely that the majority of people fall into the middle range. Research on peer reporting of unethical behavior found that people who reported theft when there were no adverse consequences to the workgroup were viewed as ethical but also were disliked (Trevino and Victor, 1992). Social exchange theory helps explain their findings. If you view behavior in terms of social exchange, then doing something that has no payoff or adverse consequences to the group does not fit into the framework of social exchange, and thus the label "ethical" becomes a pejorative term. Given the influence of social norms based on exchange, it is likely that the numbers of highly principled people, as well as the numbers of purely self-interested people on the other end of the distribution, would be small.

Both ends of the distribution appear to be diametrically opposed, the principled end including those who base behavior on the highest principles, versus those at the other extreme who focus only on personal gain and self-interest. These views of human nature form the basis for the arguments in the management literature, for instance, between those espousing a stewardship view versus an agency theory view of behavior (Davis et al., 1997). However, they share a common attribute, which is an *unconditional* view of human behavior. Ethicists who argue for a set of principles which all people should follow (such as Kohlberg's sixth stage of moral development: Trevino, 1986), have the same desire as that of agency theorists and economists in general (who assume that everyone is acting based on self-interest). That desire is for the ability to predict an individual's behavior. If everyone followed the same set of rules (either a code of ethics OR self-interest), it would be cognitively easier to predict behavior.

On the other hand, the *conditional* view of human behavior, such as the social exchange view, is more cognitively complex. It is more difficult to predict a person's behavior if it is determined by the context and situational factors. I want to stress that the conditional view is different from moral relativity. Relativity states that no code of conduct is any better than another, so for instance, it is impossible to judge the treatment of prisoners in China as they have a different view in that country.

The moral relativity rule is also unconditional, in that everyone has a set of rules to follow, but that each person's/culture's rules are different. The conditional view, on the other hand, means that no one set of rules is appropriate at all times. Rather, the situation helps determine the appropriate response. For instance, lying would be unethical for principled individuals and always acceptable for those on the convenience end of the distribution. For those individuals located in the middle exchange area of the distribution, however, lying may be acceptable if it benefits the organization, and/or doesn't harm a co-worker.

By combining these different views of behavior with one important situational variable, the type of psychological contract that the employee has with the employer, it is possible to integrate trait theory, agency theory and psychological contract theory (see Figure 2). Quadrant 1 represents people that only look out for themselves, regardless of how the employer treats them. With their self-serving disposition, they will view their relationship with their employer in transactional terms only. They are likely to perform major deviant acts, as long as they can get away with it. This type of individual is one that organizations will want to screen out during the hiring process with the use of integrity tests.

Quadrant 2 represents those who follow a set of principles, regardless of the situation. They are likely to view their obligations to their employer in relational terms, believing that it is the right thing to do. These individuals are also the most likely to be whistleblowers, which some researchers have classified as a deviant act in that it may damage the organization (Robinson and Bennett, 1997). Despite increasing concerns about corporate corruption and

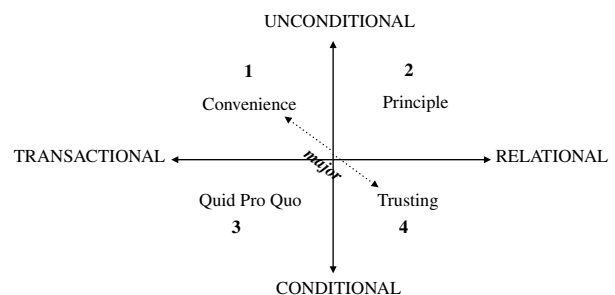


Figure 2. Typology of deviant behaviors.

unethical behaviors, employers in the U.S. can and still do fire whistleblowers legally for insubordination (although recent legislation, such as the Sarbanes–Oxley Act, are encouraging signs that this will be less prevalent in the future). Organizations may choose to screen out individuals scoring too high on an integrity scale. Ironically, many integrity tests will flag individuals who report always being honest and never doing anything wrong, as the test makers assume that they are lying.

Quadrants 3 and 4 include those people who view their relationship with their employer in exchange terms. In Quadrant 3 are those employees involved in a perceived transactional contract with their employer. They are likely to rationalize minor deviant acts as they feel little loyalty to the company; however, they are less likely to perform major deviant acts as they are less likely to experience contract violation (as opposed to breach).

Quadrant 4 represents those individuals involved in a perceived relational contract with their employer. They are less likely to perform minor deviant acts as they identify with the organization; however, if they perceive their psychological contract to be violated, they more likely to perform major deviant acts because of the emotional element (Morrison and Robinson, 1997).

It is unlikely that managers need worry about individuals located in quadrant 2, unless they fear whistleblowing. When deciding how to design jobs, organizations that seek flexibility may choose to foster a transactional contract with some of their employees. In this case, it is up to the manager to monitor those located in quadrant 3 to avoid common minor deviant acts. The individuals in quadrant 1 are obviously of potential harm to the organization and thus should be screened out during the hiring process. Finally, for those individuals with whom the organization fosters a relational contract, it is important for managers to maintain this relationship and ensure perceptions of fairness in order to reap the benefits of employee loyalty and commitment.

Discussion

This paper has presented a theoretical framework for analyzing the performance of detrimental behaviors

in the workplace. While trait theory helps understand the use and usefulness of integrity testing in the workplace as a selection device, both agency theory and the research on psychological contracts shows that the ability of integrity tests to predict subsequent harmful behavior may also be dependent on the situation.

Implications for research

Researchers have predominantly focused on only one of the three theories discussed in this article. Future research should attempt to differentiate between whether it is purely traits that drive the performance of detrimental behaviors (either everyone is automatically dishonest à la agency theory or there is some general stable trait that can help differentiate employees prone to harmful behaviors from those who are not), or whether situational factors can also affect behavior.

While these three theories encompass a variety of perspectives on the performance of detrimental behaviors, future research should also include other possible explanations. For instance, the performance of these behaviors could be related to social influence and peer pressure (Greenberg, 1997), which represents an additional situational factor. For instance, Trevino and Victor (1992) found that whistleblowers were less liked by work group members if there were no perceived negative consequences of the reported behavior.

It is also possible that individuals may be located in different quadrants depending on the situation. Research on group dynamics has shown that people have different attitudes towards in-group members as opposed to out-group members (Opotow, 1996). Therefore, a unionized employee may hold a relational relationship with his or her union (quadrant 4), while holding a strict agency relationship with management (quadrant 1), if she/he views labor-management relations in inherently confrontational terms.

Implications for practice

An employee's perception of fairness in the workplace is an important concern for managers. If

it is true that the situation overrides personality traits, integrity tests may be less effective than assumed. It is clear from a review of the literature that integrity tests are used and believed effective; it remains the job of managers to manage the perception of fairness in the workplace to keep normally honest workers from performing dishonest behaviors. In addition, managers must understand and deal with the paradox created with the use of monitoring and integrity testing. That is to say, the use of these devices may create transactional self-serving psychological contracts among employees by signaling a lack of trust.

Limitations

It is important to note that this model is likely to be limited in applicability, specifically to the U.S. This country's preoccupation with fairness is grounded in the ideals of meritocracy, democracy, and individualism. In a dictatorship, for instance, fairness is less salient for people who do not automatically view fair treatment as a right (James, 1993). Similarly, in collectivistic cultures, there is less emphasis on individual outcomes (Kirkman and Shapiro, 1997), although research has demonstrated that the in-group/out-group distinctions mentioned above can be especially prevalent in collectivistic cultures.

Conclusion

The intent of this paper was to integrate the seemingly contradictory predictions of trait theory, agency theory and psychological contract theory, in order to increase our understanding of the performance of detrimental behaviors at work. By examining the relative influence of individual differences versus the situation, we may gain a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the performance of harmful behaviors. Managers who assume that integrity tests screen out any potentially harmful behaviors from the workplace need to pay attention to the perceptions of fairness in the workplace, as even normally honest employees may alter their behavior in the face of perceived injustices.

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Notes

¹ Becker (1998) has criticized the use of the term integrity in the integrity testing literature. He argues that integrity is a specific construct that is not necessarily captured by the tests currently in use. It is not the contention of this paper to focus on the exact meaning of integrity, per se. Whether the underlying trait is integrity or honesty or conscientiousness is irrelevant to this argument, the assumption of the theory that these tests can predict subsequent performance of detrimental behaviors remains the same.

² It could also be argued that agency theory goes even farther, i.e., that these behaviors are a part of human nature, while traits are usually expected to vary between people.

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