

NOTE

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE DEVIANCE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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There are two streams of research on deviance in the management literature, one on its positive effects and one on its negative effects. Although the underlying behavior is the same—a departure from norms—these two research streams remain separate. Here I review the literature, develop an integrative typology of deviance, and call for further advancements with respect to identifying reference groups and establishing normative standards.

In the management literature, two streams of research on deviant behavior exist, but these streams are not integrated. One stream casts deviant behavior in a negative light, emphasizing employee rule breaking that leads to organizational harm. This literature tends to focus on the negative forms of employee deviance, which include such undesirable employee acts as stealing office supplies or embezzling company funds (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Raelin, 1984; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). In contrast, the second stream of literature emphasizes the positive forms of deviant behavior for organizations. This research highlights beneficial deviant behavior, such as dissent, tempered radicalism, whistle-blowing, functional disobedience, and exercising voice (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001; Graham, 1986; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Near & Miceli, 1987; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). Thus, the management literature suggests that employee deviance can be associated with desirable as well as undesirable behavior.

Examples of employee deviance, which I define here as behavioral departures from norms of a reference group, illustrate how one person's behavior has the potential to cause disastrous consequences for not only organizations but also entire industries and society. The world

witnessed how the actions of Nick Leeson, a rogue trader, caused the collapse of one of England's oldest financial institutions, Barings Bank, and shook the entire financial industry (Miller, 1995). Leeson deviated from his firm's rules by taking unauthorized risks and hiding his losses in a phony customer account. His hidden losses were more than the bank could absorb, and it soon failed.

But just as the behavior of one individual can destroy a firm, the behavior of another may save it. A whistle-blower may come forward just prior to certain organizational failure or societal disaster. For example, a pharmaceutical researcher may express concerns about the dangerous side effects of a new drug before it is sold to the public, thereby avoiding serious consequences for the organization and society. Individuals who deviate from norms of silence by voicing concerns may not only rescue an organization from failure but also save human lives.

The lack of a unifying conceptualization of deviance in organizations leaves a divide in the management literature. This divide can be interpreted as an assumption, on the part of management researchers, that the behavior required to overcome social norms in order to do something positive is distinctly different from the behavior required to overcome social norms in order to do something negative. Yet the behaviors share a fundamental similarity: both require a departure from norms whereby employees must resist social pressure to conform.

Further similarities appear in the theories and recommendations prescribed by proponents of

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the two views of deviance. For example, autonomy plays a role in both views. In explaining principled organizational dissent, a view that casts deviance in a positive light, Graham (1986) explains how individual as well as job autonomy encourages employee efforts to protest and/or change the organizational status quo. In the literature on negative forms of deviance, Vaughan (1990) asserts that autonomy at the organizational level played a crucial role in the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster. She contends that NASA's autonomy interfered with the regulators' abilities to oversee, examine, and properly govern issues of safety. Thus, theoretical support exists for the relation between autonomy and both positive and negative forms of deviance.

I argue that these streams of research need to be united in order to ensure that conceptual frameworks, theory, and managerial recommendations are useful and comprehensive. I propose three conceptual advancements: (1) specificity of reference groups, (2) more integrative studies that address a broader concept of deviant behaviors, and (3) an explicit statement of the normative foundations for judging behavior (e.g., firm performance, laws, global standards) with an understanding that some standards ignore the context in which reference groups operate. The first step is to find a common language for deviance so that past research can be integrated. This involves understanding what deviance is and how to categorize it. In the next section I review the sociological approaches to defining deviance.

SOCIOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Two approaches to defining deviance exist in the sociological literature. Social labeling theorists claim that deviant behavior is the product of social construction and requires no behavioral component (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Thus, if a group labels an individual a deviant, the individual is considered a deviant, despite the lack of evidence that the person's behavior departs from a norm.

The labeling approach encompasses both positive and negative views of deviance. For instance, Becker (1963) conceived of labels that suggested a deviant individual was a detriment to society (e.g., criminals) or a benefit to society (e.g., moral entrepreneurs). Becker's conceptual-

ization of positive and negative deviance, however, falls short in helping researchers who believe that deviance is tied to specific behaviors. A social labeling theorist would not be interested in finding ways to promote or discourage certain behaviors in order to affect levels of deviance, because deviance is not necessarily associated with specific behaviors. This theorist would suggest that deviance is a product of perception rather than behavior (Goffman, 1963).

Other sociologists associate the term *deviance* with specific behaviors that reflect dysfunctional aspects of society. According to Merton (1949), deviance arises because of a divide between society's goals and feasible means for achieving those goals. This divide causes several forms of deviant behavior, including behaviors that display a rejection of unachievable societal goals or resorting to unacceptable means for achieving society's goals (e.g., stealing money). Merton addresses the possibility of positive deviance (Merton, 1995), but his theory has generally been associated with more negative forms of deviance, such as workplace crime (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Raelin, 1984; Robinson & Bennett, 1995).

Both sociological approaches to defining deviance are compelling, and my conceptualization of deviance borrows from each. The behavioral approach to deviance focuses on actions that may have important implications for organizational and social welfare, but it does so without explicitly endorsing a set of normative standards for judging behavior as destructive or constructive. The labeling approach to deviance emphasizes the relative component of deviance and suggests that labels such as *deviance*, *constructive*, and *destructive* are a reflection of the groups and normative standards used to judge the behavior. I define deviance using a behavioral approach that emphasizes the importance of reference groups and normative standards as the basis for "labeling" deviant behavior. In the next section I address the term *deviance*, and in the section that follows I address how I label deviance as *constructive* or *destructive*.

DEVIANCE

Scholars from both sociological traditions define deviance using comparisons. Ultimately, the question "Deviant compared to what?" must be answered in order to assign the label *devi-*

ant. In order to conduct such behavioral comparisons, researchers must summarize the behavior in some way. Norms serve this function: they summarize the behavior of the reference group.

Many interpretations of norms exist, and they include such notions as biological regularity (e.g., being "normal" versus "abnormal"), statistical regularity, and behavioral regularity (Wachbroit, 1994). Within behavioral regularity, researchers discuss (1) perceptions of regular behavior, (2) regularity in actual behavior, and (3) expected or desired regularity in behavior (Asch, 1952; Axelrod, 1986; Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985, 1991; Hackman, 1992; McGrath, 1984; Sherif, 1936).

Management researchers tend to focus on behavioral regularity but vary in their focus and degree of specificity (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985, 1991; Hackman, 1992). For instance, Bettenhausen and Murnighan define norms as "regular behavior patterns that are relatively stable and expected by a group's members" (1991: 21). Their norms may include both "regular" and "expected" behavior, whereas other researchers look for more fine-grained distinctions. For example, a group may expect behaviors (e.g., promptness) that are different from those that are regularly exhibited (e.g., being tardy). Some researchers find that distinguishing between the actual and expected behaviors allows for more specified analyses (Axelrod, 1986).

I categorize actual or regularly exhibited behaviors as *informal norms* (e.g., work routines) and expected behaviors as *formal norms* (e.g., rules, procedures, codes of conduct). Any of the behavioral approaches to norms align with my conceptualization of deviance so long as the researcher is explicit about the type of norm used and the social group associated with the norm, which I hereafter refer to as the *reference group*.

We can best grasp the importance of reference groups to understanding norms, and eventually employee deviance, when we consider multiple group memberships. At any one moment, an employee needs to act with regard to the behaviors endorsed by multiple groups. Within an organization, we can imagine individuals who conform to their workgroup norms, only to deviate from the organization's rules or regulations. For example, a financial trader who harasses another trader deviates from the norms of the financial

exchange, but may conform to the informal norms of his trading crowd. This example describes how deviance at one social level (e.g., organizational deviance) may also constitute conformity at another social level (e.g., trader norms in a specific crowd). Brief and colleagues (2001) describe how an entire corporation may endorse informal norms that depart from the law.

Focusing attention on the norms in question facilitates the specification of reference groups, which may also advance research on deviance, because the connections between streams of research will be more visible. For instance, organizational theorists who study firm departures from industry norms may find new connections between their work and that of researchers who study workgroup departures from organizational norms. By being explicit about the targeted norms and reference group, one can more easily identify similarities across levels of analysis.

Being explicit about reference groups also facilitates identification of conflicts between norms of multiple reference groups, which are like the conflict between the behaviors associated with multiple roles. Whether they are confronted with conflicting norms or conflicting roles, employees still face competing sets of social influence and expectations. Therefore, my conceptualization of norms and deviance aligns well with past research on role theory, norms, and conflict (Bem, 1977; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Just as the conflict between roles raises questions about appropriate behavior, the conflict between the norms of reference groups raises similar concerns. In other words, are some norms problematic? And, in such cases, would we consider deviance constructive? In the next section I discuss ways of judging deviance.

CONSTRUCTIVE OR DESTRUCTIVE?

Thus far, I have defined deviance as a departure from norms. But merely identifying a departure does not reveal anything about the value or merit of the behavior. For instance, a departure from workplace harassment norms is not the same thing as a departure from work dress norms. In order to determine if the deviance is constructive or destructive, the deviant behavior must be compared to some measure or standard of what *should* or *ought* to happen. In this section I review a sample of positive and negative

characterizations of deviance in the management literature and then consider potential standards for judging deviant behavior.

In management research there are examples of both positively and negatively characterized deviant behavior. These constructs include an implicit or explicit reference to norms and an implicit or explicit judgment of the behavior. Table 1 displays a selection of negative characterizations of deviance in the management literature. My criteria for including behaviors in the table are (1) the behaviors break or depart from some reference group norms, and (2) the authors implicitly or explicitly consider the behaviors socially or organizationally harmful. While some of the behaviors may be both socially and organizationally harmful, I focus on the implicit or explicit boundaries presented by the authors.

Table 2 provides a sample of some current positive characterizations of deviance in the management literature. My criteria for including behaviors in the table are (1) the behaviors break or depart from reference group norms, and (2) the authors implicitly or explicitly consider the behaviors socially or organizationally beneficial.

Although the approaches in Tables 1 and 2 present normative standards for judging deviant behavior, they vary greatly. Some researchers judge behavior according to the interests of other employees, group performance, organizational performance, societal values, legal standards, and rights. Each of these approaches reflects an application of normative theories (e.g., utilitarianism, rights, social contracts, duties). In the next section I consider multiple approaches to applying standards to judge deviance and suggest the use of global standards as a unifying yet pluralistic conceptual approach for judging deviant behavior.

Standards for Judging Deviance

Some might argue that the mere departure from a norm itself indicates the destructiveness of the behavior, because individuals should abide by the norms of a reference group. This line of reasoning suggests that the norms of the reference group are moral simply because most of the reference group members behave in ways consistent with the norms. But such logic results in moral relativism, whereby the reference group dictates morality independent of all other

outside groups. Thus, if an individual departs from norms supporting workplace harassment, the individual has acted destructively by merely deviating from reference group norms. Such an approach to labeling deviance represents one of many possible ways to determine the constructiveness or destructiveness of deviance. This approach, however, does not address the context in which the reference group operates.

A second way of categorizing deviance involves comparing departures from reference group norms to the norms of another group. Thus, the norms of the outside group serve as the standard for determining the value of the departures from reference group norms. For instance, if an individual departs from a work-group norm that supports workplace harassment (reference group norm) but the individual's behavior conforms to U.S. law (outside group norm), then the deviance is regarded as positive. Many management researchers use the organization's performance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995) or a specific country's laws (Near & Miceli, 1995) as the outside group norms for categorizing and labeling deviant acts.

For instance, Robinson and Bennett define employee deviance as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (1995: 557). These authors state that an employee action that violates organizational orders, such as disobeying orders to dump toxic waste into a river, constitutes deviance. There are shortcomings to this conception of deviance, because it does not account for the societal dangers of employee compliance (i.e., polluting rivers). While the organizational and societal interests may overlap, some variation usually exists.

In research on corporate illegal behavior and in some whistle-blowing studies, scholars judge deviance using legal standards (Baucus & Baucus, 1997; Baucus & Near, 1991; Dozier & Miceli, 1985; Miceli & Near, 1984; Near & Miceli, 1987, 1995). By defining whistle-blowing and corporate illegal behavior with regard to legal standards, the researchers provide a reference point for judging the behavior. It is difficult, however, to extend this approach to international business, where country legal standards may conflict.

The organizational and legal approaches present theoretical shortcomings because they

TABLE 1
Sample of Negative Characterizations of Deviance in the Management Literature

Label for Deviance	Authors	Informal or Formal Norm of Reference Group	Nature of Deviance	Authors' Suggested or Implicit Harm
Political deviance	Robinson & Bennett (1995)	Treating other employees fairly	Treating other employees in a way that puts them at a disadvantage	Harms other employees
Personal aggression	O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew (1996); Robinson & Bennett (1995); Raelin (1984)	Respect for other employees' physical safety	Threat of harm to other employees	Harms other employees
Illegal corporate behavior	Baucus & Baucus (1997); Baucus & Near (1991)	Laws	Breaking the laws	Harms society
Production deviance	Hollinger & Clark (1982); Robinson & Bennett (1995)	Normal functioning of production or operations	Sabotage	Harms organizational performance
Property deviance	Hollinger & Clark (1982); Robinson & Bennett (1995)	Respect or care of employer's property	Sabotage	Harms organizational assets and performance; violates property rights
Lying	Grover (1993, 1997)	Delivery of correct information; honesty	Delivery of incorrect information; dishonesty	Potentially harmful to the recipient of the lie and the organization
Noncompliant behavior	Puffer (1987)	Rules and norms regarding appropriate work-role behavior	Behavior that breaks rules or norms	Negative organizational implications
Theft	Greenberg (1990)	A right to ownership of property	Taking something you do not own	Violates property rights and thereby harms the organization and society
Misbehavior	Vardi & Wiener (1996)	Shared organizational or societal norms regarding proper conduct	Defying or violating shared organizational or societal norms regarding conduct	Harms organization or society

TABLE 2
Sample of Positive Characterizations of Deviance in the Management Literature

Label for Deviance	Authors	Informal or Formal Norm of Reference Group	Nature of Deviance	Authors' Suggested or Implicit Benefit
Tempered radicalism Counterrole behavior	Meyerson & Scully (1995) Staw & Boettger (1990)	Organizational status quo Work-role behavior	Behavior that challenges the status quo Behave in a way that opposes prescribed work-role behavior	Change benefits the organization Organization functions more effectively
Whistle-blowing	Near & Miceli (1995)	Silence regarding illegal organizational activity	Disclosure of illegal, immoral, or illegitimate practices	Hinders illegal activity; society and organization benefit
Principled organizational dissent	Graham (1986)	Organizational values	Protest or change the organizational status quo	Organization considers a broader set of principles or values
Exercising voice	Van Dyne & LePine (1998)	Group or organizational acceptance of status quo	Voicing opinions	Group or organization benefits from divergent opinions
Prosocial behavior	O'Reilly & Chatman (1986); Puffer (1987)	Required work behaviors	Behave outside or beyond required behaviors	Organization or other employees benefit from prosocial behavior
Organizational citizenship behavior	Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch (1994)	Required work behaviors	Behave outside or beyond required behaviors	Organization and members benefit from citizenship
Functional or creative disobedience	Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich (2001); Darley (1995)	Orders	Disobey morally questionable orders	Hinders illegal activity; society and organization benefit

lack inclusiveness. Legal approaches overlook the complexity of classifying behavior in multinational firms facing multiple legal systems. Organizational approaches may avoid issues that arise from relying on law, but do not properly represent the concerns and interests of the greater society.

Some management researchers incorporate societal values into their conceptualization of deviance. For instance, Vardi and Wiener define organizational misbehavior as "any intentional action by members of organizations that defies and violates (a) shared organizational norms and expectations and/or (b) core societal values, mores and standards of proper conduct" (1996: 153). Their approach accommodates a broad set of normative standards, but the authors, unfortunately, do not clearly state which of society's values will be used to determine misbehavior or how societal values are known or detected (e.g., government documents, law, the media).

Hypernorms

To avoid the problems inherent in using organizational and legal standards for judging deviance, I suggest the use of global standards such as hypernorms. Hypernorms are globally held beliefs and values (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994, 1999). Unlike "universals," where one person or a single group states what people worldwide should believe, hypernorms are based on the concept of a social contract and attempt to capture people's values or beliefs worldwide. Hypernorms may not reflect actual behavior in these countries, because they are based on shared values or beliefs regarding what individuals want or need and not necessarily what people have or experience in their everyday lives.

Typically, these metanorms involve basic beliefs and values associated with human survival (Braithwaite & Law, 1985; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994, 1999; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987; Sherif, 1936). For example, Sherif (1936) describes cross-cultural norms regarding such basic human necessities as food, shelter, and security. Donaldson and Dunfee (1994, 1999), who first introduced the term *hypernorms*, explain that these global norms encompass basic principles (e.g., nourishment, freedom, physical security) needed for the development and survival of essential background institutions in so-

cieties (for a full review see Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999). In essence, these metanorms provide a global standard for evaluating behavior that extends beyond organizational and country-specific boundaries. The appeal of using hypernorms as a standard for judging workplace deviance lies in their inclusiveness and ease of empirical application.

Hypernorms are inclusive because they incorporate the values and beliefs belonging to multiple cultures as well as multiple ethical theories. They encompass globally held beliefs, which may involve endorsing or forbidding specific behaviors (e.g., do not physically harm others) or more complicated principles and entitlements (e.g., the right to freedom). Thus, hypernorms are pluralistic because they capture multiple normative approaches to ethical theory (rights, justice, utilitarianism, duties, virtue).

The ease of hypernorm application lies in the well-developed approach to empirical inquiry offered by Donaldson and Dunfee (1999). To identify hypernorms, these researchers suggest looking for standards supported by global organizations such as the United Nations, International Chamber of Commerce, or the International Labour Organization. When the specific behaviors associated with a particular industry are not addressed by these organizations, researchers may look to international industry standards (e.g., accounting, manufacturing). By evaluating behaviors with respect to both global norms (hypernorms) and a set of behavioral norms (reference group norms), we see four categories emerge.

Behavior that falls outside both sets of norms (reference group and hypernorms) is *destructive deviance*. For example, if the reference group is a business organization, then such behavior may include embezzlement. Behavior that falls within reference group norms but deviates from hypernorms is *destructive conformity*. In a business organization this behavior may include following orders to sell an unsafe product. Behavior that falls within both sets of norms is *constructive conformity*, and most organizational behavior falls into this category. Behavior that deviates from the reference group norms but conforms to hypernorms is *constructive deviance*. In a business organization this behavior includes certain types of whistle-blowing.

This categorization easily fits into a typology (Figure 1). As the typology displays, constructive

when a divide exists between the organization's norms and hypernorms.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Using this typology to study behaviors requires explicitly choosing and stating both reference groups and normative standards, and this may lead to a new understanding of current constructs, as well as theoretical connections between streams of research. For example, my concept of prosocial behaviors, as described in Table 2, would broaden if one used a different standard to judge the behavior. If a researcher chose to use a set of accounting managers as the reference group and international accounting standards as the normative standard, a broader conceptualization of prosocial behaviors might emerge; some behaviors that were regarded as constructive using firm performance as the normative standard might now be categorized as destructive using international accounting standards. For example, behaviors such as "destroying requisite documents" would constitute prosocial behavior if the act benefited the organization and was not specified by a job description (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Yet the behavior might also violate international accounting standards for archiving and therefore would be classified as a destructive form of prosocial behavior.

If researchers who study prosocial behavior framed their future work using this typology, they would need to explicitly choose and state both reference groups and normative standards. This exercise alone may cause some new thought on the importance of a researcher's role in framing studies and how such framing affects both the definitions of deviance and the judgments of constructiveness and destructiveness. In this example the term *prosocial behavior* is called into question, because this broader conceptualization includes destructive behaviors.

This typology is also useful because it brings together unaffiliated streams of research, which may inform each other, lead to new theoretical developments, and increase explanatory power of current models. According to the typology, a destructive form of prosocial behavior (destroying requisite documents) may fall into the same quadrant as conceptualizations of property deviance, as described in Table 1 (Hollinger & Clark, 1982; Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Research-

ers specializing in prosocial behavior may find the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on property deviance informative. For example, Hollinger and Clarke (1982), in a study across three industries, found that the informal social control of coworkers explained property deviance better than the formal control of managers. They attribute this difference to the perceived severity of the informal sanctions that individuals risk when they depart from norms. Likewise, those who exhibit prosocial behavior by destroying requisite documents may be influenced by the severity of informal sanctions of coworkers. Thus, future theory and empirical tests on prosocial behavior may be extended to include the effects of coworkers' informal sanctions, which would allow prosocial behavior research to grow and build on a stream of research that may have been overlooked.

By thinking about constructs with respect to the typology, one can broaden conceptualizations of current constructs and more easily identify new connections between streams of research. This typology will lead to new meta-theory for deviance that includes both constructive and destructive behaviors occurring at multiple levels of analysis (individuals, groups, organizations).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I recommend three conceptual advancements in deviance research: (1) specificity of reference groups in deviance research, (2) more integrative studies that address a broader concept of deviant behaviors, and (3) an explicit statement of the normative foundations for judging behavior (e.g., organizational performance, laws, global standards) with an understanding that some standards may ignore the societal values and laws where the reference group operates. A handful of management researchers are leading the way on this front: Miceli and Near (1997) advance their extensive research on whistle-blowing, which is typically characterized positively, to include antisocial forms of whistle-blowing; Grover (1993, 1997) considers ways in which workplace lying can be beneficial to society; and Brief and colleagues (2001) consider ways in which disobedience is functional. The typology presented in this paper should aid in the further development of theoretical and empirical research by allowing re-

searchers to understand how their work relates to a larger set of research that could offer new theory as well as greater conceptual breadth.

How is one type of deviance related to another type? This is an empirical question that can be answered once researchers begin communicating and conducting research with a common language and an explicit set of parameters. This paper contributes to future research by addressing similarities between deviance constructs and providing a typology and logic around defining deviance that facilitate the identification of connections between theories and empirical studies. In practice, managers will benefit from an integrated approach to deviance, because they will gain a better understanding of the relationship between deviant behaviors in the workplace. It is crucial for managers to know how situational factors, such as employee autonomy, bring about not only constructive deviance but destructive forms of deviance as well.

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