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A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIORS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Counterproductive work behaviors are widespread in Indian organizations. This study is an attempt to explore the causes of counterproductive work behaviors among college students. Fifty-four respondents from professional courses in a technological institute in Delhi, India participated in the study. The age of the respondents varied between 20 to 25 years. The respondents were asked to respond to the question, “When would one indulge in counterproductive work behavior? No time limit was imposed. Approximately 30 to 40 minutes were taken by the respondents. These responses were analyzed by the researcher and two more people to identify the themes/factors found necessary for people to engage in counterproductive work behavior. The results showed causes being classified into two broad themes i.e. Personal and organizational level themes. Under personal level six themes were identified i.e. No fear of being caught, no fear of future consequences, weak moral values, financial hardships, high level of anxiety/anger and no fear of insult/humiliation. Under organizational level four themes were identified i.e., job dissatisfaction, weak organizational rules and regulations, peer pressure and no fear of legal action.

Keywords: Counterproductive Work Behavior, Qualitative Study, Causes Of CWB, Indian Organizations.

Abbreviations: CWB: Counterproductive Work Behavior.

Introduction

Counterproductive work behavior has been defined in research as intentional acts that harm or intend to harm organizations and their stakeholders (Fox et al., 2001). For this research we have taken this definition of counterproductive work behavior. People normally do not indulge in such behaviors. They indulge in these behaviors under certain circumstances. One therefore needs to understand “what” these circumstances are. Some of the studies done in the past do highlight the circumstances under which people tend to indulge in these behaviors. Since most of this research has been conducted in the west, it seemed imperative to examine “when” of counterproductive behavior in Indian cultural context. Kanungo and Jaeger (1990) observed that “uncritical transfer of management theories and techniques based on western ideologies and value systems has in many ways contributed in organizational inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the context of developing countries”.

In contrast to western values of autonomy and individual independence collectivism has been identified as a dominant value in the Indian cultural context (Sinha & Sinha, 1990). Individuals in collective cultures identify themselves on the basis of their collectives or social groups. Family, friends, relatives, caste, religion etc. are some of these groups which are important for people? (Singh, 1986; Sinha & Verma, 1987). These determine not only one’s identity but also convey what norms are appropriate and what are not. Sinha (1985) has argued that work is not intrinsically valued in India. He further suggested that there exists an “aaram culture” and referred to work culture in Indian organizations as “soft work culture” where work does not have that primacy in an individual’s life. Thus, it may follow that people from different settings would have different work-related values.

It was planned to examine when people would be inclined to engage in counterproductive work behavior. This study was conducted to provide understanding regarding the circumstances that would make/force people to engage in counterproductive work behaviors. In the next section studies primarily conducted in the west which ascertain the when of counterproductive work behavior are examined.

3.1 Some Research looking at the “when” of Counterproductive Work Behavior

Lau, Au and Ho (2003) conducted a meta- analysis of qualitative research done in the field. They classified the factors into four broad categories: personal, organizational, work and contextual. The first category called the personal factors included those characteristics that are shared among the employees who indulge in counterproductive work behavior (Boye & Jones, 1997). It was found that dissatisfied employees were more likely to indulge in counterproductive work behaviors such as theft, lateness, absenteeism, substance abuse (Mangione & Quinn, 1975; Hingson, Mangione, & Barrett,1981) and sabotage (Ostroff, 1992; Crino,1994). A number of studies have demonstrated that employees perceiving themselves to be underpaid (Greenberg, 1993) tend to



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indulge more in counterproductive work behavior such as theft. Low levels of organizational commitment have also been found to be a cause of theft (Hollinger & Clark, 1983) and absenteeism (Price, 1998). Some researchers reported poor working conditions (Steele & Hubbard, 1985), role ambiguity, work overload, job insecurity (Ferguson, 1974) and powerlessness (Seeman & Anderson, 1983) leading to greater substance abuse. A number of studies have found high levels of perceived stress to be related to the occurrence of different forms of counterproductive work behavior such as violence (Jones,1980), substance abuse (Parker & Broody,1982), unexcused absence (Fitzgibbons & Moch,1980), employee theft (Jones & Boye,1994) and production deviance (Jones & Boye,1994).

Another variable found to be linked to counterproductive work behavior is attitudes and beliefs. Employees having accepting attitude towards violence tend to indulge in theft more often (Jones, 1980). Similarly, employees who are more tolerant about unacceptable social deviances tend to indulge more in counterproductive work behaviors (Scott & McClellan, 1990). Other researchers have identified demographic variables such as tenure, age, sex, family size and economic conditions of the employees to be associated with counterproductive work behavior. Employees with longer tenure were found to be high on absenteeism (Garrison & Munhinsky,1977) and employees with shorter tenure were found to report late more often (Bardsley & Rhodes,1996). Similarly younger employees were found to come late to work as compared to older employees (Bardsley & Rhodes, 1996). Women with larger number of dependents (McKee, Markham & Scott, 1992) were found to report late for work more often and were even found to be high on absenteeism (Brooke et al, 1998). Financial hardship and poor economic conditions forced employees to indulge in negative behaviors such as theft (Merton, 1938) and alcohol abuse (Cahalan, 1970). Few other individual difference variables have been found to predict counterproductive work behavior. Individuals with high levels anxiety and individuals with low self-esteem (Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976) have been found to indulge in substance abuse. Similarly low levels of cognitive development, field dependence and external locus of control (Greenberg, 1998) have been found to be associated with theft. Still some other research mostly focusing on organizational factors have linked group influence (Greenberg & Scott, 1996), supervisor’s role (Gouldner, 1954) and strong organizational policies (Parilla, Hollinger & Clark, 1988) to the occurrence of counterproductive work behavior.

Although the research reviewed so far has identified “when” people indulge in counterproductive work behavior all of these studies have been conducted in the western context. Recent unearthing of a large number of scams in various organizations in India and media reports of prevalence of various forms of counterproductive work behavior in the public domain, it was felt necessary to examine the when of counterproductive work behavior in Indian organizations. Collectivism, ingroup solidarity, scarcity of resources, power distance are some cultural variables that pervade Indian social and cultural context and it was postulated that they may influence occurrence of counterproductive work behavior. The present study was thus designed to examine “when” of counterproductive work behavior.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Sample

Fifty-four respondents from professional courses in a technological institute in Delhi, India participated in the study. The age of the respondents was between 20 to 25 years. These respondents besides being members of a highly professional organization had sufficient field experience as all of them had done at least two internships in industry for about 4 months duration. Thus, they had sufficient exposure and experience of work settings. They are also part of I.I.T. Delhi which is an organization (academic) and these students at the institute have a number of organizational roles and are aware of how organizations function. Therefore, it was thought appropriate to take their responses on what could probably be the reasons of indulgence in counterproductive work behavior.

3.2.2. Procedure

Respondents were contacted by the researcher and were given a form which was like an open-ended unstructured questionnaire. First, we tried to familiarize the respondents with the meaning of the term counterproductive work behavior. The term was explained in detail to the respondents. Examples of the behavior were presented. Respondents were requested to read and ask any clarification or question. This was done because the term counterproductive work behavior is a difficult term to understand for someone not exposed to it. There may also be individual differences in the way in which people understand the term. Hence this detailed explanation to respondents was thought to be necessary. Once respondents said that they had understood the meaning of counterproductive work behavior they were asked to answer the question “When would one indulge in counterproductive work behavior?” The respondents were asked to write their answers. No time limit was imposed. Approximately 30 to 40 minutes were taken by the respondents.

3.2.3. Analysis and Results

These responses were analyzed by the researcher and two more people to identify the themes/factors found necessary for people to engage in counterproductive work behavior. Two vignettes, approximately one paragraph each were analyzed at a time. All



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the data was analyzed and was allotted to the relevant categories. These categories or the emerging themes were derived based on the basic question that was asked from the respondents. Any unit of word throwing light on the cause of counterproductive work behavior was categorized. These themes were then defined in order to be sure of what they meant. Once the other researchers agreed on the definition it was kept consistent across all the analysis.

These themes are reported in Table 1. These themes could be classified as personal level themes and organizational level themes. In Table 3.1 each theme identified is given together with a general explanation as to what respondents meant by it.

Table 3.2 presents the frequency and percentage of each of the themes. Under personal level themes the highest percentage is of no fear of being caught, followed by no fear of future consequences, weak moral values, financial hardships, high level of anger and anxiety and no fear of insult/humiliation. Under organizational level themes the highest percentage is of job dissatisfaction followed by weak organizational rules and regulations, peer pressure and no fear of legal actions.

Table 3.1

The major themes with their explanation from the respondents

| Themes | Explanation |
|--|--|
| Personal level themes | |
| No fear of being caught | - when one knows that the system was lax and if one would not be caught after indulging in any form of negative act, one is more likely to indulge in it. |
| No fear of future consequences | - when one is not afraid about the consequences of his/her actions as one knows one can easily get away; even if one gets exposed no action will be taken. |
| Weak moral values | - when one has not had an “ethical upbringing”, when one is morally weak and can easily give in for small benefits, one is more likely to indulge in such behaviors. |
| Financial hardships | - when one is experiencing poor economic conditions along with financial trouble, one is tempted to indulge in counterproductive work behaviors. |
| High levels of anger/anxiety | - increased levels of anger and anxiety will provoke an individual to react aggressively to situations, and they would tend to indulge in negative behaviors. |
| No fear of insult/humiliation | - when one is not afraid of humiliation and insult experienced on being caught, one is more likely to indulge in counterproductive work behavior. |
| Organizational level themes | |
| Job dissatisfaction | - when one is not satisfied with various aspects of one’s job; when one feels one gives more than what one receives, one is more likely to engage in negative behaviors. |
| Weak organizational rules and regulations | - when one knows that even if one is caught while doing something wrong one can easily get away because of weak or no organizational policies on negative behaviors. |
| Peer pressure | - one is more likely to engage in negative behaviors if everyone around is doing the same; in other words, there is a general acceptance of such behaviors. |
| No fear of legal action | - when one knows that management will not take any legal action even if one indulges in negative behaviors. |

Table 3.2

Major themes with their frequency and percentage.

| Themes | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Personal level themes | | |
| No fear of being caught | 34 | 22.07% |
| No fear of future consequences | 32 | 20.77% |
| Weak moral values | 30 | 19.48% |
| Financial hardships | 28 | 18.18% |
| High levels of anger and anxiety | 20 | 12.98 % |
| No fear of insult/humiliation | 10 | 6.49% |
| Organizational level themes | | |
| Job dissatisfaction | 25 | 41.66% |
| Weak organizational rules and regulations | 15 | 25.00% |
| Peer pressure | 10 | 16.66% |
| No fear of legal actions | 10 | 16.66% |

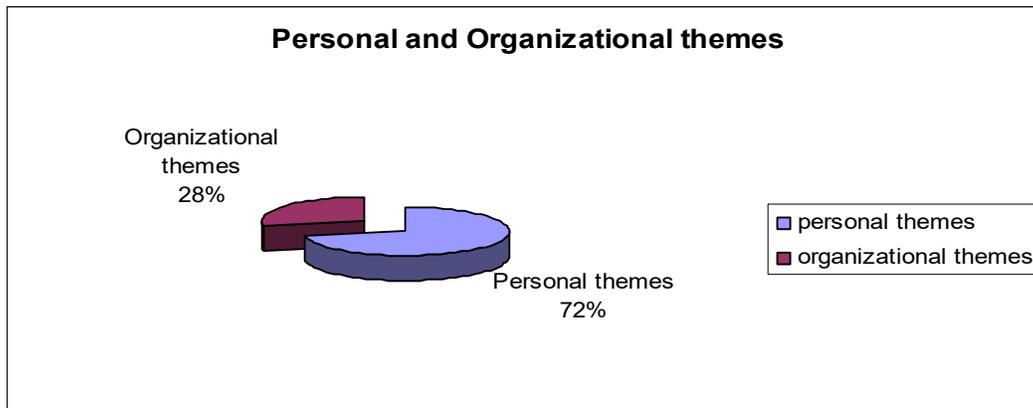


Figure3.1: Showing the percentages of organizational and personal themes.

3.2.4. Discussion

This study examined the “when” of counterproductive work behavior. The results suggest that factors that make/force an individual to indulge in counterproductive work behavior are an amalgamation of both personal and organizational variables. At personal level, factors such as weak moral values, no fear of being caught, no fear of future consequences, financial hardship, high levels of anger and anxiety and no fear of insult/humiliation emerged as important. At organizational level job dissatisfaction, weak organizational rules and regulations, peer pressure and fear of legal action are the emerging themes. Results showed that a higher percentage of personal level themes in comparison to organizational level themes emerged in the study. Both personal and organizational level factors are shaped by cultural values in which an individual is embedded. Childhood tales of right and wrong behavior, one’s upbringing, rules of righteousness, morality are part of cultural values. These values once imbibed in an individual play an important role throughout one’s life.

Personal level factors such as weak moral values indicate the importance of morality issues. Moral values play an important role as they act as watchdog against “wrong” deeds. Moral values imbibed within us since childhood guide us in all our behaviors. They act as codes of conduct in personal and professional life. Weak moral values are an important determinant of counterproductive work behavior as individuals with weak morality will easily slip or give in to negative behaviors.

High levels of anger and anxiety were found to be important factors. In two earlier studies (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Hepworth & Towler,2004) trait anger was found to be an important predictor of workplace aggression. Individuals high on this trait were more likely to have negative appraisals of situations because of their angry temperament (Fox & Spector, 1999) as evidenced by a positive relationship between trait anxiety and workplace aggression. Highly anxious employees responded to work situations with high levels of frustration and job dissatisfaction and these negative emotional experiences then led to counterproductive work behavior.

Other personal level variables such as no fear of being caught, no fear of future consequences and no fear of insult/humiliation are factors that can be linked to one’s past experience and one’s self-image or self-esteem. Past experiences of indulging in any deviant act and facing consequences both at personal level in the form of humiliation, blow to one’s self esteem and at organizational level in the form of legal action, demotion etc are learning’s based on which individuals decide their future actions. Individuals who easily get through with such behaviors are more likely to indulge in them in future as compared to individuals who face action against them. Perceived certainty of punishment is the perception of the likelihood to “commit deviant behaviors and not get caught” (Jensen, Erickson & Gibbs, 1978). Fear of being caught has been seen as employee’s perceived risk of being discovered or caught (Hollinger & Clark, 1983a). When there is a lax system which does not punish people for negative behaviors, they tend to indulge in such behaviors in future also. There is nothing in such systems which may act like a deterrent for such behaviors.

Financial hardship is another theme identified in the study. Past research suggests that financial hardship and poor economic conditions forced employees to indulge in negative behaviors such as theft (Merton, 1938) and alcohol abuse (Cahalan & Room, 1974; Pearlin & Radabaugh, 1976). In India it is an important determinant of counterproductive work behavior. Population pressure, scarcity of recourses, large number of dependents, poor economic conditions, all lead to financial hardships. Financial hardships in turn may force an individual to indulge in counterproductive work behaviors.



At organizational level job dissatisfaction has emerged out as a factor leading to counterproductive work behavior. This is in line with earlier research. The review suggests the linkage of job dissatisfaction to various counterproductive work behaviors such as theft (Mangione & Quinn, 1975), lateness, absenteeism, substance abuse (Hingson, Mangione, & Barrett, 1981) and sabotage (Ostroff, 1992). Another organizational level variable found to play a role in counterproductive work behaviors is weak organizational rules and regulations. Organizations having weak norms and action policies on deviant behaviors will encourage these behaviors. In such organizations employees would not hesitate from indulging in deviant acts for their personal benefits as they can easily get away with it. Contrary to this, organizations having strong norms about such behaviors would discourage them. Organizations rules and regulations are often a consequence of organizational culture. Past research suggests that organizational culture specifically the ethical climate of an organization has been linked to counterproductive work behavior. Boye and Jones (1997) discussed a number of organizational factors that can affect counterproductive work behavior, including the values communicated by organizations, honesty policies, work group norms, security and company responses to counterproductive work behavior. It has been demonstrated that highly ethical cultural environments encourage and facilitate organizational behaviors that are ethical and honest (Fulop & Linstead, 1999).

Peer pressure is another organizational level variable that has emerged from the analysis. This suggests that many a time's individuals indulge in counterproductive work behaviors only because their colleagues are doing so. They want to be a part of the in-group and to remain as part of the group they indulge in wrong behaviors. Employees who had close association with coworkers who stole were more likely to steal. Fear of legal action was another organizational level factor identified. Organizations having strict action policies against deviant behavior tend to discourage such behavior. Fear of legal action will discourage employees from indulging in counterproductive work behavior.

This study highlights the role played by both personal and organizational factors. The role played by personal factors (72%) far exceeds the role played by organizational variables (28%). Personal factors are difficult to control but the management can work to control the organizational factors in order to reduce counterproductive work behavior. Although we have made this distinction between personal and organizational level factors, we do see that there is a thin line between what we have called personal and organizational factors. Both set of factors are in fact related. In later studies we aim to examine some of these factors in order to have a better understanding of the dynamics of counterproductive work behavior.

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