

Misbehavior and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Organizations

Ed. by Abraham Sagie, Shmuel Stashevsky, and Meni Koslowsky. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; 274 pp.

Reviewed by Mauritz D. Blonder

Workplace conflict of one sort or another is inevitable and universal. Some people may clash with co-workers; others may become upset by the behavior of their supervisors or subordinates. There are also occasions when people will disagree with organizational policies, strategies, or governance. Whatever the basis for their frustrations, in most instances individuals react in conventional, socially acceptable ways. *Misbehavior and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Organizations*, edited by Abraham Sagie, Shmuel Stashevsky and Meni Koslowsky, focuses on the more problematic and destructive responses to conflict and dissatisfaction in the workplace. These unconventional and illegitimate reactions, including violence and other deviant behaviors that inflict physical or psychological harm, can cause long-term and even irreparable damage to organizations and their employees. The book, a compilation of selected papers from the seventh biennial meeting of the International Society for the Study of Work and Organizational Values (ISSWOV) held in Jerusalem, Israel in June of 2000, aptly portrays the depth and breadth of research on this compelling workplace problem.¹ The 13 essays in *Misbehavior and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Organizations* carefully examine the scope, predictors, repercussions, and organizational responses to violence, aggression, and other forms of undesirable activities and attitudes at the personal, interpersonal, group, and institutional levels in the workplace. Some of the contributions are descriptive in nature and build impressively on the existing literature to arrive at intuitively appealing insights. Others are empirical in design and base their findings on field surveys. Collectively, the selections constitute a meaningful contribution by refining the present literature on this important management issue.

In the opening chapter of the book, the three co-editors lay out the general landscape for the remaining essays. They note the propitious timing of the Jerusalem conference the year before the Enron scandal broke, spotlighting the depth of corporate greed and egotism and spurring the public's fascination with workplace misbehavior. They likewise consider the corrupt behavior of the white-collar criminals at WorldCom and Adelphia. Underscoring the scope of dysfunctional organizational behavior, the authors also discuss the perpetrators of horrific acts of physical violence, including the transit employee in Ottawa, Canada, who entered the bus depot one afternoon and started firing at the 150 employees deployed around the floor, in short order killing four co-workers, seriously wounding two others and finally killing himself; the student in Arkansas who killed his supervisor and took his own life after learning he had been dropped from his graduate program; and the technician in Wakefield, Massachusetts, who, feeling betrayed by the IRS for garnishing his wages, vented his wrath against the government by mowing down seven co-workers.

In Chapter 2, Dupre and Baring define and categorize the gamut of acts that researchers have identified as types of organizational misbehavior and offer some guidance for interpreting available statistics on the prevalence of violence and aggression in the workplace. They also consider plausible antecedents (both dispositional and situational) and consequences of dysfunctional organizational behavior. Their informative essay provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical and practical aspects of workplace aggression. Dupre and Baring

¹ An Internet search reveals that systematic research on this topic began only 15 years ago. Within the last five years or so, relevant studies and web sites have increased dramatically not only in sheer quantity, but also in terms of focus, depth, and sophistication.

lament the definitional imprecision regarding organizational misbehavior, which they view as a major impediment to conceptual development within this field of inquiry. The most common classification system differentiates between *occupational* violence and *organizational* aggression. The former term is applied to acts carried out by organizational outsiders including customers, patients and random bystanders. The latter typically refers to activities perpetrated by current or previous employees.

Researchers also distinguish between *physical* violence/aggression against people, property and information (e.g., homicide, rape, bullying, theft, or the destruction or deletion of proprietary data) and *psychological* violence/aggression that uses power to intimidate and humiliate others in order to inflict emotional harm on them. Psychological violence can, in turn, be *overt or covert*. Overt psychological aggression includes direct threats, bullying, uninvited sexual contacts, cursing, shouting, and picking on others in front of their peers. Covert psychological aggression involves subtler, more deceptive and indirect forms of *passive-aggressive* behavior, such as spreading rumors, misusing e-mail privileges, forgetting appointments, not returning phone calls, blaming co-workers, and withholding effort. Other distinctions in workplace aggression drawn in this chapter pertain to the severity, magnitude, and cost of the offense, as well as to the *volition* of the behavior. We learn, for example, that although all aggressive activities are intentional in nature, only some are deliberately planned to acquire status, money, or perks at the expense of rivals. Other activities are spontaneous and purely emotional reactions to perceived and/or actual slights and provocations.

Chapter 3 examines sexual harassment as a particular form of workplace aggression. Authors Bowes-Sperry, Tata, and Luther differentiate between sexual and gender harassment as overt and covert forms of aggression. They also discuss three theories that offer very different explanations for the prevalence of sexual and gender harassment in the workplace. Although their contribution contains no definitive answers to the conundrum of sexual harassment in the workplace, their thorough and thought-provoking analysis offers valuable insights to scholars, educators, and practitioners.

The remaining essays in Part I analyze the manifestations and consequences of social loafing, job burnout, the abuse of e-mail privileges, and covering up mistakes and work-rule violations on employee attitudes and organizational productivity. Finally, as a counterpoint to the traditional contention that organizations should discourage (if not eliminate) misbehavior, Galperin's essay reminds us that unauthorized and unorthodox attitudes and behavior at times facilitate organizational growth and effectiveness. Whistleblowing, for instance, is an act of *constructive deviance* that can stimulate organizational change and innovation.

The co-editors state that the purpose of the more technical essays in Part II is to establish statistically reliable links between organizational misbehavior and a host of predictors at the individual, job, group, organizational, and professional levels. In pursuit of that end, the contributors offer theoretical models, original empirical studies and extensive reviews of the literature (meta-analyses). In light of their considerable efforts, it is somewhat disappointing that their findings are largely inconclusive. Most of the evidence fails to support the intuitively appealing assumption that individuals with certain attribute are more predisposed than others to misbehave at work. It is worth noting, however, that Ones and Viswesvaran's meta-analysis indicated very strong intercorrelations between components of organizational misbehavior. They reported that "individuals who exhibit tardiness, absenteeism, and misuse of time at work are those who are also more likely to steal from their employees, use drug and alcohol, do poor-quality work, and engage in unsafe behaviours" (p. 220). Of course, whether or not there is an individual basis for workplace misbehavior has important managerial implications regarding the utility – or futility – of trying to identify those inclined to misbehave.

Because of the inherent methodological difficulties in conducting research on this sensitive topic, I question the generalizability of any one set of studies and caution against relying too heavily on the contributors' conclusions to diagnose and resolve problems at work. Instead, the findings should be viewed as guidelines for handling individual cases. *Misbehavior and Dysfunctional Attitudes in Organizations* may leave the reader with at least as many questions as answers about the complex, serious, and enduring problem of workplace

aggression. Nonetheless, this comprehensive collection of well-written essays serves up an abundance of theoretical and practical food for thought.

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