

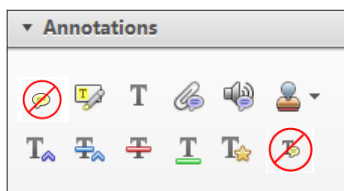
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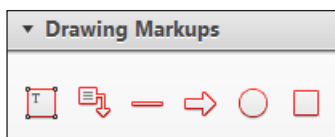
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The exhausted short-timer: Leveraging autonomy to engage in production deviance

human relations

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Abstract

The article explores the conditions under which autonomy may lead to production deviance (unsanctioned, non-task-focused behavior) rather than acting as a motivational job characteristic. In a study of 260 manual laborers, we applied Conservation of Resources Theory to propose an interaction among autonomy, emotional exhaustion, and employment opportunity in predicting production deviance. We suggest that employees who experience emotional exhaustion may leverage autonomy to engage in production deviance in efforts to conserve and protect remaining energy reserves, particularly when they feel they can secure “better” opportunities than their current job. Results of hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses revealed that workers reporting high levels of autonomy, emotional exhaustion, and employment opportunity also manifested the highest levels of production deviance.

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Keywords

burnout, Conservation of Resources Theory, emotional exhaustion, employment opportunity index, time theft

Introduction

Workplace deviance, often referred to as counterproductive work behavior (CWB), consists of non-task-focused behavior that is not sanctioned by the organization at the time it is performed (Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Spector et al., 2006). The harmful effects of this behavior may take many forms, including lost property, profits, or time (Spector and Fox, 2005). Costs of production deviance are substantial, with estimates in the billions annually for the United States alone (Diefendorff and Mehta, 2007; Greenberg, 1997; Vardi and Weitz, 2004). Lost time from individual employees adds up quickly; for example, a \$15-per-hour employee wasting one hour per day costs a company \$4680 annually (33 lost days: LeDuc and Field, 2010). As the number of distractions online and on mobile devices has skyrocketed in recent years, managers and management scholars have shown an increasing interest in this topic.

Production deviance is one form of CWB, first described by Hollinger and Clark (1983) as more prevalent than property theft (the previously dominant *consideration* of organizations). Robinson and Bennett (1995) described production deviance as minor misbehavior, not allowed by the organization but directed at it, including wasting company time or resources by working slowly or incorrectly, or by failing to work during work hours (e.g. arriving late or taking long breaks). Using this definition of unsanctioned employee behavior, we include two categories of CWB proposed by Spector et al. (2006) – production deviance (the failure to perform job tasks correctly) and withdrawal (the failure to devote work hours primarily to work tasks).

In contrast to other forms of deviance, production deviance may be the least detectable and most performed type of deviance because it is often passive (vs. *active*) and targets the organization in general, rather than specific employees. Also, unlike other forms of deviance, production deviance does not typically occur because of aggressive or hostile motives (Folger et al., 2013). For example, whereas interpersonal deviance (e.g. abuse or spreading rumors) is an active manifestation of resentment toward a coworker, production deviance is passive withdrawal from expected work behaviors. Furthermore, unlike more serious, overt forms of deviance (e.g. theft of workplace supplies or money), production deviance involves a covert, sometimes even unconscious waste of company time and resources (e.g. daydreaming or surfing the internet). Although other forms of deviance may also have non-hostile motives in some situations, the typical drivers for any type of production deviance are thought to be self-interest, laziness, and/or perceptions of inequity (Harvey et al., 2014). Recent work on constructive deviance (e.g. questioning norms to improve the organization: Galperin, 2012) and deviance-as-coping (e.g. disengaging to protect one's own well-being: Krischer et al., 2010) suggest that other motives may also affect the likelihood of production deviance.

Thus, we continue to explore non-hostile motives for production deviance in efforts to provide insight to scholars and managers on those behaviors that are most closely tied

to performance (vs those that are interpersonally-oriented, like gossiping). We also focus on production deviance as a form of deviance in which more employees are likely to engage, compared with other more severe and detectable behaviors (e.g. making threats or stealing money from the organization). Finally, production deviance presents an interesting quandary of short-term vs long-term benefits to the organization and employee, even as it appears to harm the organization in the short term.

Aiming to make a unique contribution to the field, we apply Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to propose a three-way interaction predicting production deviance. We propose that employees who have considerable autonomy will engage in production deviance if they perceive a threat to their valued resources (i.e. energy), particularly when they believe they can find a more desirable job. To support this, we examine the occurrence of production deviance as autonomy increases, as jointly moderated by emotional exhaustion (i.e. a general lack of emotional energy) and employment opportunity (i.e. perceptions of “better” jobs elsewhere). We test this model in a sample of blue-collar workers in physically demanding jobs, involving light repair work on roads and other municipal infrastructure.

We believe that our study contributes to extant theory in a number of ways. First, this study may lend insight to the effect of resource depletion (emotional exhaustion), in conjunction with alternative job opportunities, on a specific type of blue collar worker. In taking this approach, we build on a recent trend to position deviance as potentially constructive for the employee or other stakeholders, even when it is unsanctioned by the organization (e.g. Galperin, 2012; Krischer et al., 2010). Using COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we suggest that emotional exhaustion may act as a trigger to engage in production deviance (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Namely, individuals who enjoy freedom to work as they deem appropriate (autonomy) may employ production deviance as a coping strategy to preserve energy, particularly when they have other job opportunities (thus making their current job dispensable).

As a second contribution, we contribute to COR Theory by exploring the effect of resource depletion on an outcome that directly affects the organizational bottom line – production deviance. This builds on the efforts of Wright and Cropanzano (1998) to explore organizationally-relevant outcomes of exhaustion. Specifically, emotional exhaustion has tangible effects that extend to the organization and its social fabric. By engaging in production deviance, employees may try to protect their own well-being, but may also inadvertently harm the organization and other employees in the short term when they do so. We aim to shed light on when these processes might occur.

We also contribute to research on autonomy and, more broadly, the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1975), by exploring a potentially negative organizational effect of this job enrichment factor. Although production deviance may act as a benefit for the employees, organizations may experience lost time and resources. Thus, we aim to contribute to work on autonomy by exploring when it does *not* act as a motivator of good performance, but rather as a motivator of non-performance (i.e. production deviance: Deci and Ryan, 1987).

Finally, the current study builds on a body of work examining the role of employment perceptions in non-turnover work processes. Perceptions of the desirability and availability of alternative jobs have been studied for years (e.g. March and Simon, 1958), but

these are typically explored in conjunction with turnover intentions and behavior. Scholars often pose future research questions about the behavior and long-term well-being of people who stay – what do these people experience and how do they perform? Thus, we explore what production deviance behaviors might be performed in light of alternative employment opportunity perceptions.

Autonomy as opportunity

Autonomy is one of the core job design factors in Hackman and Oldham's (1975) Job Characteristics Model. It reflects the amount of discretion ~~and power~~ employees can exercise in doing their work, including decision-making and determining how and in what order tasks occur (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Freeney and Fellenz, 2013; Fried, 1991; Fried and Ferris, 1986; Kim et al., 1996). Autonomy is typically discussed as a desirable work characteristic because it ~~leads to fulfillment of~~ innate needs to be the initiator of one's own behavior (Deci and Ryan, 1987) and increased ownership of one's work (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). As a result of the positive psychological states it induces, individuals are likely to experience increased motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1987) and satisfaction (Price and Mueller, 1981, 1986) when they experience autonomy.

However, individuals with more discretion in their work may also have increased opportunity to engage in deviance, particularly less visible forms like production deviance (Martin et al., 2010). In general, any employee with high levels of autonomy may be able to complete work tasks at his/her own desired pace and to his/her own standards, which may or may not meet the expectations of the organization. For example, an employee who drives to multiple work sites throughout the day with minimal supervision can take longer routes or run personal errands in between jobs, blaming delays on traffic or vehicle issues. Further complicating matters, employees with such freedom may not view these types of behaviors as deviant, despite the fact that they waste company resources (Folger et al., 2013).

Even with plenty of opportunity to do so, autonomous employees are not generally thought to engage in deviance. This begs the question of the conditions under which autonomy results in detrimental behaviors. In line with extant theory on deviance, we propose that autonomy is likely to result in such behaviors when an employee has motives for deviating from professional expectations and norms (Fox et al., 2001).

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion may be one such motivational catalyst for production deviance (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Emotional exhaustion is a feeling of overextension and being generally worn down by one's work (Maslach and Leiter, 2008; Maslach et al., 1996). It reflects a lack of energy – energy that otherwise might have been directed toward successfully navigating one's work environment (e.g. achieving goals, pursuing professional and personal development activities, or addressing stressors, Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). COR Theory predicts that emotional exhaustion is likely when work conditions chronically consume or withhold valued resources, such as time, functioning equipment, and support (Hobfoll, 1989). These conditions motivate individuals to

conserve remaining resources, or redirect those resources toward more fruitful endeavors (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

As such, production deviance is a likely outcome of emotional exhaustion. Several theoretical models of CWB propose that strong negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, play a mediating role between perceived negative events and CWB because these emotions act as a catalyst for deviant behavior (Chen and Spector, 1992; Fox et al., 2001; Martinko et al., 2002; Penney and Spector, 2005; Spector and Fox, 2005). However, most empirical studies have explored these emotions as hostile motives, rather than instrumental motives (for exceptions see Bies et al., 1997; Folger and Skarlicki, 2005). Recently, Krischer et al. (2010) found support for the notion that production deviance may actually act as a coping mechanism by allowing employees to step away from a stressful, unjust situation to replenish valued resources. Thus, ~~even as~~ deviant behaviors are undesirable from the perspective of the organization, they may benefit the employee when acting as a coping mechanism. This results in a dilemma for managers, who must consider what behavior is expected by the organization vs what is needed by the employee (Folger et al., 2013).

Krischer et al. (2010) proposed a primarily conscious, hostile process (i.e. retaliation in the face of injustice), but, in line with Ferguson et al. (2012), we propose that individuals may simply strive to protect their remaining valued resources (e.g. time, energy, attention) when experiencing emotional exhaustion in their jobs. Ferguson et al. found that work–family conflict can lead to withdrawal from effort invested in work, and we explore whether similar instrumental processes may occur for exhaustion. That is, when they experience exhaustion, employees may be motivated to protect remaining resources by spending work time on other activities, by working more slowly or in a different way than expected, or by failing to work at all. These processes may be exacerbated even further when emotionally exhausted employees feel that they can find a job that does not threaten their resources as much as ~~does~~ their current job.

Alternative employment opportunity

Alternative employment opportunity consists of perceptions that: (a) the current job is less desirable than others, and/or (b) a new improved job can easily be found (March and Simon, 1958). Perceptions of high “employment opportunity,” as we refer to it henceforth, following Price and Mueller’s (1981) use of the term, may position employees to consciously or unconsciously withdraw from the organization. Such employees may actively engage in retaliation behaviors toward the organization or simply withhold their work effort, compared to those with less employment opportunity. These processes may occur because employees feel their job is not too valuable to lose, in light of other needs in their life (Ferguson et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2010).

Despite this possibility, however, not everyone who perceives high employment opportunity commits deviance. Indeed, many high performers have more desirable job opportunities, but they have earned that distinction by staying engaged in their work and exceeding performance expectations (Becker, 1993; Folger et al., 2013). Thus, we position perceived employment opportunity as an exacerbating factor, which moderates the autonomy–deviance relationship in conjunction with emotional exhaustion. Below, we

describe four variations of the autonomy–production deviance relationship reflecting low and high levels of exhaustion and employment opportunity.

Proposed joint effects

High-exhaustion, high-employment opportunity

First, employees who experience high levels of emotional exhaustion and also have strong perceptions that other, better jobs are easily attainable may be the most likely to engage in production deviance as autonomy allows. Specifically, exhausted employees are the most likely to engage in production deviance to conserve and protect remaining resources, such as energy, attention, and time (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Thus, as they are given the freedom to do so, they are likely to withdraw their work efforts in favor of their own well-being. This possibility is likely exacerbated if they also perceive they could easily get another more desirable job, particularly one that would not threaten their valued resources as much as ~~does~~ their current job. Thus, we predict that the high-exhaustion, high-employment opportunity combination is the most likely to engage in production deviance as autonomy increases.

Consider the example of an exhausted construction worker, who feels he does not have the support he needs to maintain good well-being in his current job. Perhaps he also feels he could easily work for a friend or family member's organization, with more social support and less stress. This worker may delay in arriving on job sites or work slowly to complete work tasks, allowing him to protect remaining energy reserves. Meantime, he may not worry about the possibility of job loss or punishment when he perceives he would be treated better elsewhere. Therefore, we expected the strongest positive autonomy–production deviance relationship among individuals who experience high emotional exhaustion and perceive high employment opportunity.

High–low or low–high

Employees who have *either* high levels of exhaustion *or* employment opportunity, but not both, may be likely to engage in moderate levels of production deviance as autonomy allows. For instance, a worker who experiences high levels of emotional exhaustion may be unable to give each repair job appropriate effort, instead scaling back to preserve remaining energy and reduce stress, even if alternative jobs are not readily available. Alternatively, a construction worker who is not exhausted but perceives better job opportunities elsewhere is unlikely to care as much about punishments for subpar work and may even see it as a way out of the current, less-desirable job. Thus, we expected a weaker, positive autonomy–production deviance relationship among workers with these combinations.

Low–low

Employees who experience low levels of emotional exhaustion and who do not perceive that other, better jobs are readily available may be the least likely to engage in production

deviance. Not only do they have little need to conserve resources through production deviance (Halbesleben et al., 2014), but they may also not wish to risk their current job when better options are not readily available. This represents the most ideal working situation of the four conditions, particularly as autonomy increases. Thus, autonomy likely serves its usual role as an enriching, motivating job characteristic that pushes employees to use their freedom for the good of their own job, coworkers, and the organization (Deci and Ryan, 1987; Hackman and Oldham, 1975). We expected a negative autonomy–production deviance relationship among employees experiencing low exhaustion and low employment opportunity.

Hypothesis: Emotional exhaustion and employment opportunity jointly moderate the autonomy–production deviance relationship, such that the relationship is strong negative among workers with low exhaustion and low employment opportunity, but positive among workers with all other combinations. The relationship is strongest positive among workers reporting high exhaustion and employment opportunity.

Method

Participants and procedures

Participants were manual laborers working in an organization in the southern United States that provided light repair and construction services to roads and other municipal infrastructure. They worked in a wide range of jobs with varying degrees of supervision, including landscape specialists, pothole repair, or highway guardrail repair. These individuals traveled to different locations in the municipality and often worked in extreme temperatures and hazardous conditions to complete repairs.

We invited approximately 417 employees to participate in a voluntary, anonymous paper-and-pencil survey during pre-shift meetings. The meetings took place in the early morning hours in seven different locations across the metro area. At each location, workers met in a large room with many long tables, in which employees were accustomed to adjourning before every shift to get ‘marching orders’ and updates for the day. One or two supervisors introduced the research team and the purpose of the study, and then left the room so the research team could give instructions and hand out paper copies of the surveys. The anonymous nature of the survey was emphasized, as well as the eventual purpose and benefit, which was to provide 360-degree feedback for the supervisors in the organization. The research team circulated the room and answered questions as necessary. Employees took from 30 to 60 minutes to complete the survey (which included other constructs for other studies and specific feedback topics for the organization and its supervisory team).

In total, 260 employees reporting to 39 different supervisors completed the survey, representing a 62 percent response rate. Each employee formally reported to one supervisor, but all supervisors also held a more general responsibility to inform and support all individual contributors in their broader division. At the organization’s request, and to minimize social desirability in responding, demographics were not collected. Based on our knowledge of the organization and our observations during the pre-shift meetings,

the workers were predominantly male and did not have post-secondary education. African-American and Hispanic were the most represented ethnicities.

Measurement

Job autonomy. We adapted three items from Breugh's (1985) autonomy scale to focus on the specific work setting of the participants. Using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (none) to 5 (very much), items addressed three dimensions: method, criteria, and scheduling autonomy. Items were: (a) "How much authority do you have in establishing procedures for how your work is done?;" (b) "How much authority do you have in determining your work priorities?;" and (c) "How much authority do you have in determining which job tasks you are to perform?;" The CFA of this just-identified model revealed the following standardized factor loadings for items 1, 2, and 3, respectively: $\beta = .78, .95, \text{ and } .64$ ($p < .01$).

Emotional exhaustion. We used the 5-item (e.g. "I feel emotionally drained from my work") emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS: Maslach et al., 1996). This measure has been widely used and has shown factorial validity across many occupational groups (Bakker et al., 2002; Langballe et al., 2006). Participants answered on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = "Never" to 5 = "Every Day").

Employment opportunity. We used four items from the desirability and ease of movement subscales of the Employment Opportunity Index (EOI: Griffeth et al., 2005). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree"). The items were: (a) "Given my qualifications and experience, getting a new job would not be very hard at all;" (b) "Most of the jobs I could get would be an improvement over my present circumstances;" (c) "If I looked for a job, I would probably wind up with a better job than the one I have now;" and (d) "By and large, the jobs I could get if I left here are superior to the job I have now." High scores indicate high employment opportunity.

Production deviance. We used six items to measure production deviance. Four items were from Bennett and Robinson's (2000) organizational deviance scale: (a) "I have neglected to follow my field supervisors instructions;" (b) "I have intentionally worked slower than I could have worked;" (c) "I have taken an additional or longer break than I was allowed to take;" and (d) "I have put little effort into my work." Based on focus group meetings and the deviance literature, we also included two additional items: (e) "I have refused to perform a task when asked because it was not part of my job;" and (f) "I have pretended not to know how to do something in order to avoid additional work." Participants were presented with a 5-point response scale, indicating how often they performed each behavior (1 = "Never" to 5 = "Every day"). High scores reflect high levels of production deviance. The measurement model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2 = 27.78$ ($df = 9$), $p < .001$; CFI = .94; TLI = .91; SRMR = .04).

Analyses

Participants in this study worked within workgroups that reported to a specific supervisor. For this reason, we calculated intraclass correlations, ICC(1), to determine whether

the clustering of employees had an influence on our results (Bliese, 2000). The intraclass correlation coefficient for the dependent variable (production deviance) in this study was low, $ICC(1) = .04$, leading us to believe that between-group variance was small and group membership did not account for much of the variance. However, we conducted our analysis using both Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression and multilevel mixed effects modeling (Proc MIXED in SAS). As expected, based on the low $ICC(1)$ value, the results were identical across techniques. Therefore, for the sake of parsimony, we only report the results of the OLS regression analyses.

We also calculated $ICC(1)$ values for each independent variable, which provides further information on the effect of group membership on each construct in the model. For autonomy, $ICC(1) = .05$, for emotional exhaustion, $ICC(1) = .10$, and for employment opportunity, $ICC(1) = .08$. Each of these suggested that some variance was dependent on workgroup membership, but not enough to warrant multilevel modeling (Bliese, 2000). We grand-mean-centered all variables before creating interaction terms.

Because all constructs were self-reported by employees, we took measures to reduce concern about common method variance (CMV) affecting our results. Recent work has verified that the likelihood of finding significant interactions is attenuated by CMV (Lai et al., 2013; Siemsen et al., 2010). However, we still felt compelled to follow best practices in the field to further reduce concern for any effect of CMV on the results (Podsakoff et al., 2012; Williams et al., 1989). Podsakoff et al. (2012) recommended that scholars use CFA to model an unmeasured latent factor ("method") with all self-reported items loading on it. Then average variance is calculated with those items loading on "method," compared with those items loading on their respective constructs. In our study, the average variance explained by the method factor was 15 percent, which was below the 25 percent average that Williams et al. (1989) reported for published studies and below the 29 percent average variance explained by the hypothesized constructs. This, coupled with the fact that we ensured anonymity to reduce socially desirable responses, suggests that CMV was not a concern.

Results

In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and intercorrelations. As shown there, autonomy ($r = .23, p < .05$), employment opportunity ($r = .12, p < .05$), and emotional exhaustion ($r = .15, p < .05$) were positively related to production deviance. These bivariate correlations were rather low, but we emphasize that their joint effects on production deviance were the focus of this study.

Table 2 presents the results of the moderated hierarchical regression analyses. At Step 1, we included the main effects of all predictors in the model (Adjusted $R^2 = .05, p < .01$). At Step 2, we added the two-way cross-product terms (Adjusted $R^2 = .12, p < .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .07, p < .01$). At Step 3, we added the three-way cross-product term. As shown in Table 2 and consistent with our hypothesis, the autonomy \times emotional exhaustion \times employment opportunity cross-product term added significant variance in predicting production deviance (Adjusted $R^2 = .14, p < .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .02, p < .01$). This effect size (ΔR^2) is at the high end of the range for moderator effects in non-experimental studies (Champoux and Peters, 1987; Chaplin, 1991).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliability estimates, and inter-correlations.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Production deviance	2.31	0.86	(.80)			
2. Autonomy	2.50	1.09	.15*	(.70)		
3. Employment opportunity	3.11	0.96	.12*	.01	(.85)	
4. Exhaustion	2.96	1.03	.15*	-.07	.11	(.83)

Note. $N = 260$; reliability estimates (α) are reported in parentheses along the diagonal.

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

We present in Figure 1 a graphical representation of the three-way interaction. As shown there, the relationship between autonomy and production deviance was robustly positive among workers reporting high levels of both emotional exhaustion and employment opportunity. As shown in Table 3, only the slope representing workers reporting high levels of both emotional exhaustion and employment opportunities – Slope 1 in Figure 1 – was significantly different from zero ($t = 3.48, p < .01$). Furthermore, the difference in production deviance levels between workers reporting low vs high levels of autonomy was 72.9% of a standard deviation. As shown in Table 4, Slope 1 was significantly different from Slopes 2, 3, and 4. No other slopes were significantly different from each other. These results partially supported our hypothesis.

Discussion

We applied COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) to explore three joint predictors of production deviance – autonomy, emotional exhaustion, and employment opportunity. As predicted, the blue-collar workers in our sample were most likely to engage in production deviance as autonomy allowed if they also experienced high exhaustion and perceived better available job opportunities. Unexpectedly, no other combination revealed significant autonomy–production deviance relationships.

Theoretical implications

Autonomy was weakly related to production deviance (see Table 2), suggesting that, indeed, autonomy includes the discretion to engage in any behavior an employee wishes. Employees with the opportunity to do so may use their discretion to mentally “check out” more often than those who are more closely supervised. However, this relationship is further illuminated by the three-way interaction; in the full model, autonomy only had a positive relationship with production deviance in one boundary condition – high exhaustion and high employment opportunity. These findings reveal a harmful organizational side effect for this otherwise beneficial job characteristic. When autonomy was low, no significant difference emerged in the level of production deviance. Therefore, even individuals who are exhausted or are considering alternative employment opportunities may not engage in production deviance when they have minimal autonomy. Levels of production deviance were significantly different when autonomy was high, such that

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses.

Model	Independent variable	<i>b</i>	Standard error	β	<i>t</i>
1	Autonomy	.12**	.05	.14	2.36
	Employment opportunity	.09	.05	.10	1.70
	Emotional exhaustion	.13	.048	.16	2.69
2	Autonomy (A)	.13*	.05	.15	2.54
	Employment opportunity (B)	.09	.05	.11	1.77
	Emotional exhaustion (C)	.10*	.05	.13	2.18
	$A \times B$	.03	.05	.05	.73
	$A \times C$	.11**	.04	.16	2.64
3	$B \times C$	.17**	.05	.21	3.53
	Autonomy (A)	.11*	.05	.13	2.27
	Employment opportunity (B)	.12*	.05	.13	2.19
	Emotional exhaustion (C)	.07	.05	.09	1.56
	$A \times B$	.05	.05	.06	.97
	$A \times C$	.11**	.04	.156	2.61
	$B \times C$	.17**	.05	.21	3.67
	$A \times B \times C$	.11**	.04	.17	2.78

Note. ***p* < .01, **p* < .05

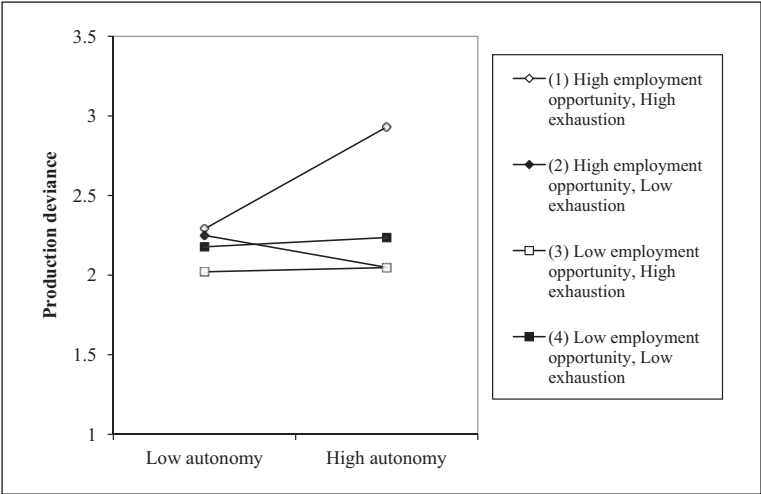


Figure 1. Three-way interaction predicting production deviance
Note. All moderator values are depicted at +/-1 standard deviation

these individuals engaged in significantly more production deviance than any other combination of exhaustion and employment opportunity. As extant theory suggests (Hackman and Oldham, 1975), autonomy may indeed serve as a positive benefit for organizations, but with certain conditions.

Table 3. Simple slopes.

Slope	Gradient	t-value	Percent change in criterion ^a
1	.33	3.48**	72.9
2	-.09	-1.25	22.3
3	.04	.46	8.9
4	.02	.82	4.3

Note. Slope numbers correspond to group numbers in Figure 1

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. ^a Percent change in standard deviation of criterion from low (-1SD) to high (+1SD) values of autonomy

Table 4. Slope difference tests.

Pair of slopes	t-value for slope difference
(1) and (2)	3.83**
(1) and (3)	2.43**
(1) and (4)	2.89**
(2) and (3)	-1.03
(2) and (4)	-1.10
(3) and (4)	0.184

Note. Slope numbers correspond to group numbers in Figure 1

** $p < .01$

This research also builds on recent research examining the instrumental motives of CWB. In line with Krischer et al. (2010) and Ferguson et al. (2012), we proposed that people who are emotionally exhausted or otherwise overburdened may engage in production deviance as a form of coping. Our results offer some direction about the veracity of this prediction. First, when exhaustion was high but employment opportunity was low, individuals did not engage in increased production deviance even as opportunity arose (i.e. high autonomy). This suggests that simply feeling exhausted and even having the opportunity to engage in production deviance does not mean people will take the risk to cope in that way. Our results suggest, instead, that people may also need to know they have job alternatives; perhaps this is in case they are reprimanded for doing so (employment opportunity). This diverts from the traditional negative emotion precursor and contributes to a domain of research ripe with potential as it combines work on employee well-being and coping with potentially negative outcomes for organizations (CWB and withdrawal), albeit with positive instrumental effects for the well-being of individuals.

Another contribution of this work involves our context. We studied a population that is not often studied in the literature. It is not easy to access because it is largely comprised of workers who do not have a computer or internet on the job. And they may even be undervalued in terms of leader concern about their well-being. Still, they represent a sector of the job market that is growing quickly, especially given recent emphasis on US infrastructure improvement and job creation initiatives (The White House, 2013). This means that better understanding of how to protect and equip this workforce even in

difficult working conditions may become even more important – for good return on investment of national funds, but also for better management of American workers. To that end, we sought to inform theory on the conditions under which production deviance in this unique context might occur. By exploring specific instigators of this less detectable form of CWB in a unique but important setting, the results may extend traditional scholarship to better understand and predict the likelihood of this behavior.

Practical implications

Although one might conclude, based on our results, that autonomy should only be given to those who have few alternative opportunities and are not exhausted, we offer a few more realistic suggestions for managers. Namely, our findings suggest the need for managerial intervention strategies to provide job resources for individuals with high autonomy, emotional exhaustion, and employment opportunity. Although autonomy is often considered a valued resource from the perspective of the employee, and low autonomy is associated with higher levels of stress or dissatisfaction (Freeney and Fellenz, 2013), organizations may need to offer other resources that draw employees into the workforce even as they enjoy more freedom. Some examples are opportunities for training and professional development, personal days off, clear paths for promotion and advancement, health and wellness events, and one-on-one coaching or mentoring. These may help employees cope with stress in productive ways that do not constitute withdrawal, and simultaneously improve their perceptions of the desirability of their current job and organization, compared to their alternatives. Allowing employees to participate in goal-setting and setting performance standards and timelines may be another way to leverage autonomy to benefit performance directly.

Our results also suggest that managers may want to monitor and address potential issues with perceptions of “the grass is greener” and overall employee exhaustion, particularly among highly autonomous employees. If stress is high, managers may wish to follow recommendations by Krischer et al. (2010) in sanctioning certain forms of deviance, including additional breaks between tasks. Research on breaks suggests that when people do something they enjoy during a break, they may be more productive and replenished, whether that includes physical activity or browsing the internet for décor ideas (e.g. Coker, 2014; Henning et al., 1997). Thus, employers may seek to instill a productive break culture that includes some interaction with coworkers and some solo time to capture those benefits and reduce the prevalence of less beneficial forms of production deviance. Anecdotally, when employees in our sample attended a biannual luncheon for their unit, we noticed more positive attitudes and conversations occurring than at the pre-shift meetings. Simple strategies like these may allow individuals to step away from the job and replenish their resources, while also embedding employees within the organization through facilitated social bonding with coworkers.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study’s primary strength was its test of an insightful model of production deviance in a specific field setting; therefore, it represents real-world conditions of at least one

organization and its employees. Although specific field settings may limit generalizability in terms of study conclusions, they do provide value and insight into real workplace conditions. Readers may also have concerns about limited variability in the actual autonomy granted our sample of workers, but we did observe real differences in the degree of close supervision across the various jobs. Additionally, although the specific field setting of this study required some adaptation of measures to achieve face validity for the sample, the statistics suggest that the scales performed well. Thus, our findings are likely helpful for similar blue collar, hourly workers in other organizations. Among unskilled and semi-skilled workers who face similar working conditions with similar jobs (little training or education required) and minimal opportunities to advance, these factors may also function similarly. We call for similar research to compare results across other types of jobs with varying levels of autonomy and supervision, and even other forms of deviance.

This study may also be limited because it was cross-sectional; we cannot conclude that autonomy, exhaustion, or employment opportunity cause production deviance. However, literature describing the emotion-stressor model supports the idea that emotional exhaustion is an antecedent to this type of behavior (Spector and Fox, 2002). Furthermore, research on employee withdrawal supports the idea that the employment opportunity (i.e. perceiving better opportunities might be sought elsewhere) may lead to production deviance as a form of withdrawal from the current job (Griffeth et al., 2005). We suggest future research that studies these factors, along with other individual and situational contingencies of the propensity to engage in deviance.

A third limitation of this study was our exclusive reliance on self-report data. However, recent work has shown that CMV is not an issue with significant interaction effects (Lai et al., 2013; Siemsen et al., 2010) and our empirical tests confirmed that CMV was not a concern. Furthermore, we took great care to ensure that socially desirable responding was minimized by using anonymous surveys without demographics or other identifying information. Also, we emphasized the importance of honesty in responses, as the results would be used by upper management to improve the quality of supervision. As such, the surveys were taken in a room without supervisors present.

Finally, our study sample had some language and educational limitations, which may have limited understanding of some survey questions. To mitigate these risks, the study team ensured that the survey was as short and simple as possible. Furthermore, research team members were present to answer questions, and an entire hour was provided so that employees could take their time to comprehend each question.

In addition to addressing the above limitations, our results suggest several additional future research ideas. Most salient is the need to further test the notion that production deviance may have differential long-term and short-term effects, and it may affect employees and organizations differently. In the short-term, production deviance may act as a coping mechanism for employees. Krischer et al. (2010) found that production deviance and withdrawal helped to buffer the detrimental effects of injustice on emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, Ferguson et al. (2012) theorized that deviance acted as a coping mechanism in the face of work-family conflict. Our results build on these studies and, along with Halbesleben et al. (2014), highlight the need for more exploration of deviance as motivated by the need to protect resources and cope with stress.

Despite these short-term benefits for the employee, production deviance may have a complicated overall effect on the organization. In the short term, it likely harms the organization and other employees in it, owing to decreased production by employees. In the long term, however, perhaps organizations do actually benefit from production deviance when used as coping. Future research should explore the long-term effects – perhaps they include lower turnover, higher well-being of employees, and other positive attitudes and behaviors on the part of employees who benefited from the ability to withdraw through production deviance for a period of time.

More generally, this work complements existing anger and hostility models of CWB with those that focus on instrumental motives. For instance, Harvey et al. (2014) found that abusive supervision was associated with increased organizationally-focused deviance; this could be a result of coping or revenge. Banks et al. (2012) found that exhausted employees who experienced decreased organizational commitment were more likely to engage in CWB, suggesting one additional mechanism. Martin et al.'s (2010) model and COR theory provide good foundations upon which to build in exploring the role of instrumental motives and other underlying mechanisms in deviance models.

On a related note, research exploring the work characteristics that turn deviant behaviors into resources for weary employees would be valuable. Building on Meier and Spector (2013), which found reciprocal effects of stressors and CWB in an 8-month longitudinal study, researchers should explore how to stop the cycle. In other words, what interventions or work factors might help over-burdened employees cope in more productive ways? We offered some ideas above in terms of practical implications, but these should be tested.

The demonstration of production deviance as a resource for emotionally exhausted employees also begs the question of what impact this behavior has on productivity and other social processes among employees. Researchers often mention the possible detrimental effects of dissatisfied or exhausted employees who remain in the organization. Especially for those employees in hazardous, stressful work environments, production deviance might be an initial warning sign of more serious outcomes, such as safety incidents, lagging productivity, or serious disharmony among employees. Management scholars and managers alike should consider the implications of exhausted workers – even contrasting those who have autonomy vs those who do not. Those who have autonomy may take matters into their own hands by withdrawing through production deviance, but what behaviors do the exhausted workers without autonomy perform? Perhaps they are the ones who are most at risk for engaging in safety infractions and other performance detriments.

In conjunction with these ideas, future scholars might examine other potential negative implications of autonomy for organizations, such as other forms of CWB, decreased performance, or withdrawal. Some might argue that CWB does not matter as long as it does not show up in performance. But norms of deviance can develop among employees who are exhausted or otherwise frustrated with their jobs. Research on emotional contagion suggests that negative emotional states can easily spread throughout a workgroup (e.g. Mauno et al., 2014), which can harm the climate of the organization even when individual performance is not affected. CWB can also affect the social fabric of the organization, including coworker camaraderie and support networks. This line of research may merge

the literatures on withdrawal, coping, and CWB in a way that sheds light on unanswered questions in all three domains. A greater understanding of the factors that influence withdrawal and CWB will provide organizations with invaluable information that can be used to develop strategies to reduce these undesirable behaviors.

Finally, exploring autonomy among employees with a “short-timer” mentality may shed light on potential negative effects for both individuals and organizations. In doing so, researchers might also identify possible buffers to the negative effects of autonomy in conjunction with other negative employee states. Understanding of these areas may position organizations to leverage autonomy to its full potential in performance and job enhancement, while avoiding its possible negative effects. These efforts may also aid in the expansion of theory on autonomy as we uncover the mechanisms underlying its potential detrimental effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we explored the notion that autonomy might have a dark side for organizations, while perhaps benefiting the employee. This is in contrast to extant literature that is primarily focused on the positive motivational capabilities of autonomy. We invite the reader to consider autonomy not only as a job enrichment characteristic but also as a potential problem for the organization. Anecdotal evidence suggests that balancing both sides of autonomy has been a management challenge for years. We found that when autonomy was combined with high exhaustion and alternative job opportunities, workers reported higher levels of production deviance; COR Theory suggests a resource conservation motive underlying this model. Scholars and managers alike may be wise to explore additional factors that may lead to beneficial vs detrimental effects of autonomy for the organization and individual employees.

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