

Job Insecurity and Workplace Deviance

The Role of Moral Disengagement and Hostile Attribution Style

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Abstract

Job insecurity (JI) has been linked to various employee outcomes such as well-being, job satisfaction and turnover. However, little is known about why and how employees respond to the experience of job insecurity by actively engaging in behaviors that damage their coworkers and organizations. In this study, we address this gap by examining the relationship between JI and employee counterproductive behavior. Drawing on Bandura's (1991; 1999)theory of moral disengagement, we propose that experiencing JI increases counterproductive work behavior by increasing the likelihood the individuals will morally disengage from their organizations. We also theorize that individual's hostile attribution style will influence the extent to which they disengage and hence their level of deviance. The results of a survey study conducted in a large company in China over three time periodssupport a mediated moderation model in which JI and hostile attribution style interact to affect moral disengagement, and moral disengagement mediates the interactive effects of JI and hostile attribution style on organizational and interpersonal deviant behaviors.

Keywords:Job insecurity, workplace deviance, moral disengagement, hostile attribution style

Prior research suggests job insecurity (JI) – defined as the perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation (Greenhalgh& Rosenblatt, 1984, p. 438) has a significant negative impact on jobperformance. Employees who do not feel secure about their jobs are more likely to direct their energies towards worrying about their job situation than towards excelling at their assigned tasks, and their job performance suffers as a result. Although JI has been linked to task performance and OCB (Ashford et al., 1989; Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002), we know little about how JI impacts employee counterproductive behaviors such as workplace deviance.

Our study explores the relationship between employees' perceived JI and their subsequent deviant behavior in the workplace. We also examine the psychological pathways through which the experience of JI produces deviant behavior. Specifically,

we draw on moral disengagement theory (Bandura, 1991; 1999) to explain how the experience of job insecurity tends to disengage the self-regulatory systems that typically operate to discourage aberrant workplace behavior. Finally, we propose that the extent to which JI produces moral disengagement, and hence, deviant behavior is contingent upon an individual cognitive difference, the hostile attribution bias.

Job insecurity, moral disengagement and workplace deviance

To date, evidence has demonstrated that harmful, unethical, and destructive workplace behaviors occur at alarming rates and cost organizations billions of dollars every year (Stewart et al., 2009). Research suggests that stressful working conditions may contribute to such behaviors (Chen & Spector, 1992; Spector et al., 2006). Job insecurity as one of the most significant stressors encountered by employees could lead to considerable stress, frustration, and anxiety (Brockner et al., 1994; Jacobson, 1987). As such, job-insecure employees may engage in more deviant behaviors than those who have job security (Lim, 1966; Probst, 2002; Probst et al., 2007). The experience of job insecurity should cause individuals to be more likely to morally disengage from their organizations. When individuals are unsure of their employment status they experience a variety of negative personal consequences such as greater stress, reduced physical and mental health, and somatic difficulties (Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 1989; Sverke, Hellgren & Naswall, 2002). These individuals will blame their organizations for their tenuous job security and view immoral conduct directed at the organization as a justifiable defensive reaction (Bandura, 1999). Similarly, because job insecurity causes individuals to withdraw from their jobs and organizations, they will not view the mistreatment of other members of the organization as being as reprehensible as they would if they were fully identified (Bandura, 1996). The above discussions imply that moral justification, one form of moral disengagement would be likely to be resulted from job insecurity experience.

We further expect the moral disengagement of job-insecure individuals to increase deviant behavior of these individuals. Individuals self-regulate by monitoring their conduct, judging it in relation to their moral standards, and engaging in self-condemnation when their behavior violates these standards (Bandura, 1986). This self-regulatory process typically discourages deviant behaviors which are harmful to others in the organization and hence violate most individual's internalized moral standards. Individuals who morally disengage from their organizations, however, are shielded from the negative psychological consequences of conducting deviant behaviors. Morally disengaged individuals tend to engage in deviant behaviors because they distance themselves from their coworkers and blame their organization for the consequences of their job insecurity (Bandura, 1999). We hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1: Job insecurity is positively related to interpersonal and organizational deviance.

Hypothesis 2: Moral disengagement mediates the relationships of job insecurity with interpersonal and organizational deviance.

Hostile attribution style

We further propose that the effect of JI on deviant behavior via moral disengagement is moderated by an individual cognitive variable—hostile attribution style. We have argued that JI increases moral disengagement – and therefore, deviant behavior – when employees attribute the stress and tension they are experiencing as a result of their JI to actions taken by their organizations. However, it is likely that some individuals are more likely to make these detrimental attributions than others.

More specifically, we expect JI will be particularly likely to lead to moral disengagement when the individual has a hostile attribution style.

Nasby, Hayden, and dePaulo (1980) coined the term “hostile attributional bias” to describe the tendency of aggressive youth to attribute hostile intent to others. According to Adams and John (1997), hostile attribution bias is an extra-punitive mentality where individuals tend to project blame onto others. As Anderson, Krull, and Weiner (1996) have illustrated, even otherwise nonaggressive individuals feel justified to react aggressively if they believe another acted with aggressive intent. Studies have shown that some individuals are prone to interpreting others’ behavior as hostile, even when it is not (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). These types of hostile attributions have been found to motivate revenge (e.g., Anderson, Deuser, & DeNeve, 1995) and relate positively to workplace aggression (Douglas & Martinko, 2001).

JI is a situation in which employees experience a high level of uncertainty and powerlessness feelings. When employees make hostile attribution, they blame others (their organizations, managers or others) for the situation. As a result, they will be more likely to morally disengage from their organizations.

Hypothesis 3: Hostile attribution style moderates the relationship between job insecurity and moral disengagement such that the positive relationship is stronger for individuals who are high in hostile attribution than for those who are low in hostile attribution.

Hypothesis 4: Moral disengagement mediates the interactive effects of job insecurity and hostile attribution style on interpersonal and organizational deviance.

Method

Sample and Procedures

This study was conducted in a large machinery company in Xiamen city of Fujian Province of China. In order to reduce common method variance, we collected data in three waves, one month apart for each wave. In total, 341 complete questionnaires were returned, resulting in a response rate of 86.8%. The final sample of this study thus consisted of 341 employees with a response rate is 70% across all three waves. Of the 341 employees, 64.2% were male. The average age was 32.99 years ($SD = 6.28$), and the average tenure in the organization was 6.00 years ($SD = 3.91$). In terms of their education, 16.70% held high school degree or below, 46.60% held associate degree, 30.50% held bachelor degree, and 6.20% held postgraduate degree.

Measures

The survey instrument was administrated in Chinese. Since all the measures used in the study were originally developed in English, to ensure the equivalency of the meaning, we followed the commonly used back-translation procedure to translate the measures into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). Unless noted, all scales were measured using 1, “strongly disagree”, to 5, “strongly agree” response format.

Job insecurity. We used Lee et al.’s (2008) scale to measure job insecurity. Cronbach’s alpha was .87 for the importance of job feature, .89 for the likelihood of losing job feature, .90 for the importance of negative changes in total job, .91 for the

likelihood of negative changes in total job, and .79 for perceived powerlessness to resist threat.

Hostile attribution style. A six-item scale developed by Adams and John (1997) was used to measure hostile attribution style. Cronbach's alpha was .80.

Moral disengagement. We adapted the 4-item moral justification subscale of Bandura et al.'s (1996) moral disengagement scale to measure the degree of moral disengagement in our sample. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .88.

Workplace deviance. A nineteen-item scale developed by Bennett and Robinson (2000) was used to measure interpersonal and organizational deviance. Responses ranged from 1, "never", to 5, "daily." Cronbach's alpha was .84 for interpersonal deviance and .87 for organizational deviance.

Control variables. This study controlled for employee age, gender, organizational tenure, and education. Age and organizational tenure were self-reported in years. Gender was dummy-coded, with male coded as "0" and female coded as "1". Education was coded as "1" for employees held high school degree or below, "2" for employees held associate degree, "3" for employees held bachelor degree, and "4" for employees held postgraduate degree.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

We conducted hierarchical multiple regression analysis to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. This approach involves entering the variables into the regression analysis in three steps: the control variables (step 1) were entered first, followed by the independent variable (job insecurity, step 2), and the mediator (moral disengagement, step 3). As shown in Table 1, job insecurity was positively related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .19, p \leq .01$, Model 6) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .22, p \leq .01$, Model 12), supporting Hypothesis 1.

In addition, the results in Table 1 indicated that (1) job insecurity was positively related to moral disengagement ($\beta = .35, p \leq .01$); (2) job insecurity was positively related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .19, p \leq .01$, Model 6) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .22, p \leq .01$, Model 12); (3) moral disengagement was positively related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .39, p \leq .01$, Model 7) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .42, p \leq .01$, Model 13); and (4) the relationships of job insecurity with interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .06, n.s.$, Model 10) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .09, n.s.$, Model 16) became non-significant when moral disengagement was present. According to the mediation criterions proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), moral disengagement mediated the relationships of job insecurity with interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance. Thus, Hypothesis 2 received support.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that hostile attribution bias strengthens the positive relationship between job insecurity and moral disengagement. As shown in Table 2, the interaction between job insecurity and hostile attribution style was positively related to moral disengagement ($\beta = .24, p \leq .01$). Following Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the interaction by computing slopes one standard deviation above and below the mean of the moderating variable. The relationship between job insecurity and moral disengagement was more positive when hostile attribution style is high ($r = .59, p \leq .01$), but was not significant when hostile attribution style is low ($r = .10, n.s.$).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that intensifying effect of hostile attribution bias on the relationship between job insecurity and moral disengagement will be transmitted to organizational and interpersonal deviance. As shown in Table 1, the job insecurity \times hostile attribution style interaction was significantly related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .17, p \leq .01$, Model 9) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .16, p \leq 0.01$, Model 15). After entering the mediator (moral disengagement) and controlling for the interaction of moral disengagement and hostile attribution style and other predictors, job insecurity \times hostile attribution style interaction no longer significantly related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .10, n.s.$, Model 10) or organizational deviance ($\beta = .10, n.s.$, Model 16), while moral disengagement was still positively related to interpersonal deviance ($\beta = .34, p \leq .01$, Model 10) and organizational deviance ($\beta = .36, p \leq .01$, Model 16). To interpret these effects, we plotted the interaction effects of job insecurity and hostile attribution style on interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance. The pattern of results is consistent with our hypotheses; that is, job insecurity was more positively related to interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance when hostile attribution was high ($r = .36, p \leq .01$ for interpersonal deviance; $r = .38, p \leq .01$ for organizational deviance) rather than low ($r = .02, n.s.$ for interpersonal deviance; $r = .06, n.s.$ for organizational deviance). These results support Hypothesis 4.

To examine the mediating and moderating effects together, we conducted moderated path analysis (Edwards & Lambert, 2007), bootstrapping 1000 samples to compute bias-corrected confidence intervals. An indirect effect is considered to be significant if the 95% confidence interval excludes zero (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). As shown in Table 2, the indirect effects of job insecurity on interpersonal deviance ($r = .11, p \leq .01$) and organizational deviance ($r = .09, p \leq .01$) via moral disengagement were significant when hostile attribution was high, but non-significant when hostile attribution was low. Overall, the differences in the indirect effects of job insecurity were significant for interpersonal deviance ($\Delta r = .13, p \leq .01$) and organizational deviance ($\Delta r = .21, p \leq .01$). Hence, Hypothesis 4 was supported. Moreover, the results in Table 2 revealed significant first-stage moderating effect (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Specifically, the effect of job insecurity on moral disengagement varied significantly across different levels of hostile attribution bias ($\Delta r = .68, p \leq .01$), providing further support for Hypothesis 3. Furthermore, hostile attribution bias strengthened the direct effect of job insecurity on interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance ($\Delta r = .16, p \leq .01$), providing further support for Hypothesis 4. Finally, hostile attribution style did not moderate the effect of moral disengagement on interpersonal deviance ($\Delta r = -.08, n.s.$) or organizational deviance ($\Delta r = -.11, n.s.$). Therefore, overall, the results of moderated path analysis provided support for first-stage moderation (Hypothesis 3), moderated direct effects, and moderated indirect effects via moral disengagement (Hypothesis 4).

Discussion

Our study examines the effect of employees' perceived job insecurity on workplace deviance. Findings from a sample of 341 Chinese workers support all of our hypothesized effects. Specifically, we demonstrate that job-insecure employees tend to engage in workplace deviance and this effect is through the psychological process of moral disengagement. Moreover, individuals' hostile attribution style moderates the job insecurity and moral disengagement relationship. Our conceptual model and findings contribute to the literature in at least three ways.

First, this study contributes to the job insecurity literature by examining an important performance outcome that has not been examined yet, namely workplace deviance. Although the effect of job insecurity on various attitudinal, behavioral and employee wellbeing outcomes has been documented in the literature, the lack of research on employee deviant behaviors is a gap that hinders our understanding about the performance implications of job insecurity.

More importantly, we contribute to both the job insecurity and deviant behavior literature by proposing and testing a psychological mechanism that explains the job insecurity effect, namely moral disengagement based on the social cognitive theory. The proposed moral disengagement mechanism enables us to see the psychological process through which job insecurity influences employee behaviors. This theoretical development opens a new perspective to study job insecurity and workplace deviance and other counterproductive work behaviors. Furthermore, from the perspective of moral disengagement theory, we identified an individual difference variable that moderates the effects of job insecurity and counterproductive behavior, namely hostile attribution style.

Finally, our research context is in China, a setting that deserves more research attention. In particular, the Chinese economy has undergone significant reforms during the past two decades, shifting away from the “iron rice bowl” policy of lifetime employment to a market-oriented economy. These economic reforms have had a significant impact on the employment security of Chinese workers. Researchers argued that collectivists react more negatively to the threat of job loss than individualists do due to their greater emphasis on group ties, greater need for affiliation, and higher value placed upon security (Probst & Lawler, 2006). The results we found confirmed that job insecurity is a ubiquitous phenomenon in China. Similarly, our findings on workplace deviance show that it is prevalent in Chinese organizations, which deserves more research attention.

In conclusion, in order to minimize the negative impact of perceived job insecurity on employee behaviors, organizations should initiate practices that improve communication about the crises or changes facing the organization and its employees and pay attention to the degree of moral disengagement of the employees.

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Table 1. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	χ^2	Df	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Nine-factor model	483.82	288	.95	.96	.045
Eight-factor model -1: Importance of job feature and likelihood of losing job feature combined	917.92	296	.85	.88	.079
Eight-factor model -2: Importance of negative changes in total job and likelihood of negative changes in total job combined	1256.89	296	.77	.80	.098
Eight-factor model -3: Hostile attribution bias and Moral disengagement combined	1087.07	296	.81	.84	.089
Eight-factor model -4: Moral disengagement and interpersonal deviance combined	836.68	296	.87	.89	.073
Eight-factor model -5: Moral disengagement and organizational deviance combined	901.74	296	.86	.88	.078
Eight-factor model -6: Interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance combined	659.72	296	.91	.93	.060
One-factor model	4029.96	324	.20	.26	.183

Notes: $N = 341$; ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$.

TLI is the Tucker-Lewis index; CFI the comparative fit index; and RMSEA the root-mean-square error of approximation

TABLE 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	32.99	6.28					
2. Gender	.36	.48	.08				
3. Organizational tenure	6.00	3.91	.69**	-.02			
4. Education	2.26	.81	.03	-.11*	.08		
5. Job insecurity	360.30	159.71	-.10	.02	-.03	-.05	
6. Hostile attribution bias	2.50	.60	-.13*	.00	-.11*	-.04	.06
7. Moral disengagement	2.89	.89	-.07	.06	-.07	-.02	.35**
8. Interpersonal deviance	2.28	.58	-.02	.02	-.10	.02	.18**
9. Organizational deviance	2.33	.52	-.04	.04	-.07	-.06	.22**
Variables	Mean	SD	6	7	8	9	
6. Hostile attribution bias	2.50	.60	(.80)				
7. Moral disengagement	2.89	.89	.15**	(.88)			
8. Interpersonal deviance	2.28	.58	.15**	.40**	(.84)		
9. Organizational deviance	2.33	.52	.15**	.43**	.58**	(.87)	

Notes: $N = 341$; ** $p \leq .01$; * $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed).

Gender: "0" - Male; "1" - Female; Education: "1" – high school or below; "2" – junior colleague; "3" – bachelor degree; "4" – postgraduate degree; Bracketed values on the diagonal are the Cronbach's alpha value of each scale.

TABLE 3 Results of Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	Moral disengagement					Interpersonal deviance					Organizational deviance					
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	M10	M11	M12	M13	M14	M15	M16
Independent variable																
Job insecurity	.35**	.34**	.30**			.19**		.18**	.15**	.06		.22**		.21**	.18**	.09
Moderator																
Hostile attribution bias		.13*	.14*					.14**	.16**	.11*				.13*	.15**	.09
Interaction																
Job insecurity × Hostile attribution bias									.17**	.10				.16**	.10	
Mediator																
Moral disengagement				.24**				.39**			.34**			.42**		.36**
Controlled interaction																
Moral disengagement × Hostile attribution bias																-.02
ΔR^2	.01	.12	.02	.06	.02	.04	.15	.02	.03	.09	.01	.05	.18	.02	.03	.11
ΔF	.83	46.19**	5.95**	23.24**	1.28	12.35**	61.75**	7.09*	10.33**	18.52**	.80	17.03**	72.19**	6.32*	9.42**	43.01**

TABLE 4 Results of the Moderated Path Analysis

Moderator variable	Job insecurity (X) → Moral disengagement (M) → Interpersonal aggression (Y1)				
	Stage		Effect		
	First P_{MX}	Second P_{YIM}	Direct effects (P_{YIX})	Indirect Effects ($P_{YIM} P_{MX}$)	Total effects ($P_{YIX} + P_{YIM} P_{MX}$)
Simple paths for low hostile attribution bias	-.08	.26**	-.06	-.02	-.08
Simple paths for high hostile attribution bias	.60**	.18**	.12	.11**	.23**
Differences	.68**	-.08	.18	.13**	.31**
Job insecurity (X) → Moral disengagement (M) → Organizational deviance (Y2)					
Simple paths for low hostile attribution bias	-.08	.27**	-.04	-.02	-.06
Simple paths for high hostile attribution bias	.60**	.16**	.12	.09**	.21**
Differences	.68**	-.11	.16	.11**	.27**

Notes: $N = 341$; ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed). P_{MX} : path from job insecurity to moral disengagement; P_{YIM} : path from moral disengagement to interpersonal deviance; P_{Y2M} : path from moral disengagement to organizational deviance; P_{YIX} : path from job insecurity to interpersonal deviance; P_{Y2X} : path from job insecurity to organizational deviance. Low hostile attribution bias refers to one standard deviation below the mean of hostile attribution bias; high hostile attribution bias refers to one standard deviation above the mean of hostile attribution bias. Tests of differences for the indirect and total effect were based on bias-corrected confidence intervals derived from bootstrap estimates.