

Employee Sabotage in the Workplace: A Biopsychosocial Model

REFERENCE: Klein, R. L., Leong, G. B., and Silva, J. A., "Employee Sabotage in the Workplace: A Biopsychosocial Model," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, JFSCA, Vol. 41, No. 1, January 1996, pp. 52-55.

ABSTRACT: Recently, there has been an increased interest in workplace violence. However, the psychiatric literature has paid little, if any attention to the specific subject area of workplace property harm or sabotage by employees.

The specific psychology and/or psychopathology of the individual worker may be relevant in the evaluation of sabotage behavior. However, psychosocial factors associated with behavior within organizations and originating in part from the job itself are not likely to be considered in the initial assessment. We therefore introduce concepts from the organizational behavior literature that may facilitate and complement psychiatric evaluation of sabotage in the workplace. These concepts will fill the gap in a biopsychosocial assessment of sabotage in the workplace and provide a nexus for future interdisciplinary studies of workplace property violence.

KEYWORDS: forensic science, psychiatry, forensic psychiatry, property damage, workplace, sabotage, aggression, violence

Many scheduled presentations at the recent national meetings involving forensic psychiatry, such as the 1994 annual meetings of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, have addressed the issue of workplace violence. Similarly, the lay media has become interested in reporting acts of workplace physical injury perpetrated by a current or former employee. However, the psychiatric literature has paid little, if any attention to the related subject area of property harm and in particular, a specific type of property harm, sabotage. We suggest that theories and research from the organizational behavior literature may be of use in understanding the context within which employee sabotage occurs.

Organizational behavior is a field of research found in both schools of management and of psychology. Organizational behavior overlaps with the fields of industrial psychology and social psychology, but its theoretical foundations also draw from other

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This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Seattle, WA, 13-18 February 1995.

Received for publication 29 March 1995; accepted for publication 5 June 1995.

social science disciplines such as anthropology, political science and sociology. Models of employee behavior within organizations have been developed which consider individual, group, organizational, and environmental factors. While employee sabotage has rarely been explicitly considered, we propose that some of the models developed by organizational behavior researchers may be applied to the phenomena of employee sabotage. Indeed, forensic psychiatrists could benefit by considering organizational behavior models in their overall biopsychosocial assessment (1) when consulted about cases of employee sabotage.

This paper specifically concerns employee destruction of organizational products or property. Some authors have more broadly defined sabotage to include other negative employee behaviors such as intentionally limiting productivity, absenteeism, employee theft, or consumption of drugs or alcohol (2) or even "anything you do at work that you're not supposed to do" (3, p.3). Of course, those factors leading to other negative behaviors may sometimes be the same factors which lead to sabotage. However, there are also ways in which the destruction of products or property is unique. For instance, while employee theft may be perceived as similar to sabotage in that it withdraws assets from the employer, it may also be understood as economically rational behavior with direct benefit accruing to the employee/thief. In addition, there is a large existing literature on employee theft (see for example, 4). Absenteeism and variations in productivity have also been extensively studied in the behavioral science literature (see for example, 5,6). The destruction of products or property has previously received scant explicit attention. For the purposes of this paper, sabotage will therefore be more narrowly defined to areas of destruction of products or property.

Accounts of employee sabotage go back to at the least the dawn of the industrial age with the loom-breaking tactics of the early 19th-century Luddites (7). Sabotage was also a tool for mass labor movements in the 20th century (8). As a practical matter, in the current era of increasing global competition and consumer emphasis on product quality, sabotage is a major concern. In addition, when products become more technologically complex, sabotage can be better hidden and may even be more dangerous to customers and/or co-workers. Therefore, the study of sabotage is a topic worthy of further research both for theory-building and for its practical application. However, by its very nature, this destruction may be hidden from and therefore difficult to detect by both workplace managers and academic researchers.

While this paper explores employee sabotage, sabotage can also be performed by those outside the organization, such as Earth First's "tree-spicers" who attempt to halt clear-cutting lumber operations in old growth forests. It can also be the result of an organized effort in times of labor unrest. This paper will concentrate on those

many acts of individual and small group sabotage which cannot be explained by “rational” motives such as political ideology or economic gain.

In formulating a classification model for sabotage, we extrapolate from organizational behavior concepts as a starting point. We developed some of our theoretical organizational behavior conceptualizations by reviewing published accounts of acts of sabotage, primarily Sprouse’s compendium of one hundred thirty-three first person accounts of employee sabotage (3). Sprouse collected the cases by using a snowball method of sampling subjects (9), in which initial interview subjects led to contacts with further subjects. When gathering data on such a sensitive topic, methodology is somewhat limited and the snowball method is commonly used (9).

A Need for a Biopsychosocial Model for Workplace Sabotage

We posit that there are several reasons for employee sabotage. Sabotage results from a combination of individual psychiatric and psychological factors as well as from the organizational environment.

Hostility, anger, revenge, impulsivity, narcissism, paranoia, psychopathy are among the many psychiatric and psychological factors that initially may be considered when evaluating sabotage in the work place. Perhaps even major mental disorders and personality disorders operate in individuals who commit sabotage. Moreover, the role of non-occupational stressors may contribute to workplace sabotage. However, such a perspective in evaluating workplace sabotage can be incomplete and organizational behavior concepts dealing with the job itself merit consideration.

Several organizational behavior theories and models appear to lend understanding to the phenomena of employee sabotage. In particular, the organizational behavior concepts of job design, workplace equity, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and social information processing illuminate organizational attributes which may lead to employee sabotage. We briefly introduce these concepts, then use them to fill the gaps so a truly biopsychosocial assessment may be made of workplace sabotage.

Contributions from Organizational Behavior Concepts

Job Design

The predominant theory on job design is the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model (JCM) (10). The JCM assumes that there are five core job dimensions: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. The dimensions of skill variety and autonomy appear particularly relevant to the commission of employee sabotage.

Skill Variety

Accounts of employee efforts to make jobs more interesting, or at least bearable, go back at least to Roy’s “Bananatime” (11). However, Roy’s article reveals employee behavior which, while not officially sanctioned, did not harm quality or quantity of goods produced. Instead, the employees made an otherwise unbearable job more tolerable by providing teasing interactions at set times. These broke up the day into smaller chunks of time and provided short term rewards for employees, such as the daily “bananatime.” A more recent account, of work on an auto assembly line (12), also provides numerous accounts of individual and group activities

to make jobs less boring and provide diversion, but these also did not intentionally decrease the quality or quantity of goods produced (although it is hard to believe that the reported amounts of alcohol and drugs ingested had zero effects on the product).

In contrast, many of those who commit sabotage have reported destruction of property and reduced production in order to entertain themselves because the job was “boring” that is, insufficient in skill variety (3).

There is a meager literature of humor in organizations (13,14), but little mention of when employee efforts to entertain themselves become sabotage. This literature on humor in the workplace concentrates on joke-telling, with only brief mention of horse-play or other employee attempts to amuse themselves. The job design model helps to explain workplace humor which may destroy company products or equipment. These employee attempts to amuse can be construed as employee efforts to redesign jobs which have low skill variety. Employees will then not necessarily passively accept the low skill variety of their jobs as designed by others.

Task Autonomy

Several reports of employee sabotage could be explained as a response to perceived lack of task autonomy (3). Saboteurs reported that superiors who supervised too closely and did not allow autonomy were particularly irksome. These employees were not given the freedom to plan and carry out their jobs in what they felt was the best manner both for themselves and for their companies. When denied this autonomy, they struck out with acts of sabotage. Again, reports of sabotage reveal that employees may not necessarily accept their jobs as designed by others. Instead, when confronted with low task autonomy, they can do more than reacting with low productivity, turnover or absenteeism. They can act by changing the job design themselves. At times these acts will take the form of sabotage.

The JCM considers the employee as merely a passive recipient of the job design effort. A review of reports of employee sabotage shows that employees may themselves redesign jobs perceived as low in skill variety or autonomy, and that these redesign efforts may hold negative consequences for the organization. Such employee-initiated changes in job design may come in the form of sabotage.

Equity

Several saboteurs cite inequity as a rationale for their actions (3). Briefly, equity theory involves the calculation by the employee of their ratio of inputs to outputs, and the comparison of this ratio with that of referent others (6). Equity theory posits that employees attempt to keep the ratio between themselves and others in equilibrium. Employees who, for instance, perceive that their contributions to the organization are under-rewarded compared to that of others might then reduce their productivity. Organizational rewards considered by the employee may include positive reinforcement, status and perquisites as well as monetary compensation. Employee sabotage may also be added to the model as a possible means by which employees could achieve equilibrium between their rewards from and contributions to the organization and the treatment of the referent others. However, there are examples of employee sabotage where employees are making different comparisons of contribution to reward (see for example, 3). At times it appears that an employee will commit sabotage because he or she perceives that other employees, or even customers, are not getting sufficient input in exchange for output.

Inequities used as rationale for reported sabotage include those where the organization or supervisor is seen as inequitable in rewards to customers, to other employees or to the saboteur. This is a much wider definition of equity than the ratio of work to effort as compared to employees in similar positions. Stealing, absenteeism and other forms of reducing productivity would have the same effect as does sabotage in reducing the organization's rewards when these are perceived to be out of balance with those of employees or customers.

This type of sabotage may be termed "unprincipled organizational dissent." Principled organizational dissent covers behaviors such as whistle-blowing, where employees attempt to affect or at least make known organizational activities which they deem are harmful to super-organizational interests (15). Sabotage is "unprincipled" in that it may not stop the organization's disliked activities, but instead harms the organization in retribution for perceived unjust acts.

Organizational Commitment

An employee's attitude toward the employer should affect the propensity to commit sabotage. "Organizational commitment" is the attitude of the individual toward the organization, and includes loyalty to the organization, involvement with the organization and identification with the organization (16). Organizational commitment has been found to be negatively associated with turnover and absenteeism (5). It may be suggested that the same association may exist between organizational commitment and this other negative behavior, that of employee sabotage.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction (or conversely, job dissatisfaction) is a major area of research in organizational behavior. One of the ways used to characterize responses to job dissatisfaction is that of "exit, voice or loyalty" (17). These factors were originally developed in the field of political science to understand responses to dissatisfaction with political institutions.

Robinson, in one of the few empirical studies which considers employee sabotage, asked two hundred thirteen subjects to what extent they had performed various behaviors including "damaging property belonging to their employer" in response to job dissatisfaction (18). Robinson's analysis expanded Hirschman's model by revealing a four-factor structure of "retreat, voice, silence and destruction." Robinson's findings then are supportive of the hypothesis that employee sabotage may be a response to job dissatisfaction.

In addition to the factor structure, Robinson had another finding relevant to this paper. Of the independent variables Robinson considered, only co-workers' destructive behavior was predictive of employee sabotage. This suggests that employee sabotage may be at times a social rather than an individual act.

Social Information Processing

Salancik and Pfeffer suggested a social information processing model of organizational behavior (19). They suggested for instance that organizational leadership, the organizational context, and employees' jobs are all socially constructed. This viewpoint suggests that job characteristics are neither objectively good nor bad, satisfying or unsatisfying, but are only perceived as such. These

perceptions are socially constructed. Robinson's findings that co-worker behavior is predictive of employee sabotage supports the social information processing model of organizational behavior.

Other Factors Related to Sabotage

The factors from the organizational behavior literature cited above are not comprehensive. Aspects specific to the organization, the industry and the broader environment may also increase the likelihood of acts of employee sabotage. For instance, the interaction between employees and supervisors may be problematic. A history of antipathy between labor and management within an industry should also serve to increase employee sabotage. However, fear of being caught, and then losing the job should decrease employee sabotage. Availability of alternative employment then might moderate the relationship between sabotage and organizational or supervisory relations. Aspects of the broader economy such as job creation and the general level of prosperity should then affect the frequency of acts of employee sabotage.

Achieving a Complete Biopsychosocial Approach

This paper hypothesizes relationships between aspects of the organizational context and employee sabotage. In doing so we expand the organizational behavior literature to add destructive behavior by employees to the repertoire of possible employee responses. Further research is necessary to establish exactly what configuration of the organizational factors described is most or least generative of sabotage behaviors.

Employers, with the assistance of experts in individual psychopathology, may hope to eliminate potential saboteurs from their employ. This may be a difficult if not impossible task. An examination of the organizational behavior literature, as well as a collection of first-person accounts by workplace saboteurs, suggests that some of these psychological propensities for sabotage are made manifest in the presence of organizational stressors such as poor job design and/or inequitable allocation of organizational rewards.

We have introduced organization behavior concepts that may be helpful in the evaluation of workplace sabotage. A thorough evaluation of workplace sabotage needs the expertise of both the mental health professional skilled in the evaluation of individual psychopathology and the consultant knowledgeable in organizational behavior. A team approach to this problem of workplace property violence may be optimal to attain a satisfactory biopsychosocial evaluation and subsequently prevent or reduce sabotage in the workplace.

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