



# Organizational structure, organizational form, and counterproductive work behavior: A competitive test of the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic views



Simon Dischner

Heinrich-Heine-University of Duesseldorf, Universitaetsstr. 1, 40225 Duesseldorf, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

Knowledge about the influence of organizational structure and organizational form on counterproductive work behavior (CWB) has been limited, fragmented, and inconsistent. The contradictory findings from empirical studies were in line with the contradictory predictions of the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy theories. These theories have opposing views regarding the influence of organizational structure elements and forms on CWB. To perform a competitive test of the bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic views, we developed pairs of opposing hypotheses. We examined the relationship between five organizational structure elements and CWB. Our findings showed that participation in decisions and formal standardization are negatively related to CWB, whereas punishment is positively associated with CWB. Specialization and decision autonomy were not related to CWB. We clustered organizational forms based on the degree to which the forms emphasize organizational structure elements. Our results indicated that incidents of CWB are least common in ideal-typical post-bureaucracies and most common in ideal-typical bureaucracies. However, hybrid forms show no significant differences with regard to incidents of CWB. In sum, our study provides evidence that post-bureaucracy theory explains CWB better than bureaucracy theory. However, we argue that the combination of both theories offers a more comprehensive view of this phenomenon than post-bureaucracy theory alone. We implicate that research should extend the integration of structural elements in order to gain a better understanding of CWB.

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## 1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB), which includes behavior such as sabotage, loafing, daydreaming, theft, absenteeism, and vandalism, is a ubiquitous and enduring problem in organizations (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). Despite efforts taken by organizations to try to detect and prevent CWB (Robinson, 2008; Salin, 2008; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, 2011), several studies provided evidence of its widespread occurrence. According to Harris and Ogbonna (2006, p. 543) between 75 and 95 percent of all employees engage in CWB. Such behavior poses a significant threat to organizations (Robinson, 2008). For example, US organizations lose about \$50 billion each year because of white collar crime, i.e., fraud and theft (Coffin, 2003), and about \$3 billion because of employee tardiness (DeLonzor, 2005).

Against this background, organizational research has paid particular attention to the antecedents of CWB (Robinson &

Greenberg, 1998). Several authors have highlighted the importance of considering the context (of which organizational structure is a central component) in which rules are to be followed (e.g., Johns, 2006; Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998), as each situation contains conditions that curb CWB (e.g., sanctions) and/or facilitate it (e.g., discretion). Although Bennett already recommended taking contextual factors into consideration in 1998, CWB research still has several important shortcomings, as will be pointed out below.

Many authors have argued that knowledge about the relationship between organizational structure, organizational form, and CWB is fragmented (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998; Sackett & DeVore, 2001). As the meta-studies by Dalal (2005) and Berry, Ones, and Sackett (2007) have indicated, organizational structure and form have so far played only a minor role in CWB research. Instead, research has focused mainly on organizational justice, employees' attitudes, traits, affects, and demographics as antecedents of CWB (e.g., Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; El Akremi, Vandenberghe, & Camerman, 2010; Ilie,

E-mail address: [simon.discher@hhu.de](mailto:simon.discher@hhu.de) (S. Dischner).

Penney, Ispas, & Iliescu, 2012; Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006). Nevertheless, some studies have considered elements of organizational structure and have analyzed how they are related to CWB. For instance, literature on the relationship between stress and CWB has often considered organizational constraints as an antecedent of stress (e.g., Bowling & Eschleman, 2010; Fox & Spector, 1999; Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Spector & Fox, 2005). These constraints can partly result from an organization's structure (e.g., obstructive formalization). Beside these findings about indirect effects of organizational structure on CWB, other studies have treated organizational structure as a main effect. However, they have often focused only on specific aspects of the organizational context. For instance, some studies have analyzed the relationship of CWB to single organizational structure elements such as autonomy (Bennett, 1998), centralization (Yen & Teng, 2013), or surveillance (Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). Only few studies have considered more than one organizational structure element when analyzing deviant behavior. For example, DeHart-Davis (2007) measured formalization and centralization, Jensen and Raver (2012) included autonomy and surveillance, and Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara (2011) focused on punishment and surveillance. Furthermore, knowledge about CWB in different organizational forms (i.e., the composition of organizational structure elements) has been limited and largely based on anecdotal evidence (Robinson & Greenberg, 1998).

To summarize, research on CWB that has focused on the relationship between organizational context and CWB has tended to be either somewhat indiscriminate or limited to specific aspects of context. Hence, research has not provided a comprehensive view of the relationship between organizational structure, organizational form, and CWB yet. However, research stressed that organizations are functions of a complex interplay of organizational characteristics such as structure elements (e.g., Mintzberg, 1979; Weber, 1958). In this perspective, an organization's structure can be best conceived of as a cluster of coupled structure elements. A more comprehensive view of the relationship between organizational structure, organizational form, and CWB could contribute to a better understanding of the organization's context and its relationship to CWB. By providing a more comprehensive view, this paper sheds light on which organizational structure elements have the strongest association with CWB and in which organizational forms CWB occurs most often.

Previous research has also showed some contradictory empirical results about the direction of influence organizational structure elements have on CWB. For instance, both low and high task specialization can cause boredom and, therefore, CWB (Acee et al., 2010; Fox & Spector, 1999; Kass, Vodanovich, & Callender, 2001). Furthermore, while some studies have suggested a negative relationship between job autonomy and CWB (Bennett, 1998; Bennett & Robinson, 2007), other scholars have argued that job autonomy goes hand-in-hand with employees' counterproductive exploitation of their discretion (Martin, Lopez, Roscigno, & Hodson, 2013; Scott, Colquitt, & Paddock, 2009).

These contradictory findings of empirical studies are in line with the contradictory predictions of organizational theories, especially the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy theories. Both theories form a suitable theoretical framework for our study, as they focus on our central variables. More precisely, organizational structure and form are core elements of bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy theories. Furthermore, both theories focus on rule-following and deviance and assume that organizational structure and form are related to CWB. However, the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy theories not only make opposing predictions about how organizational structure and form should be shaped, but also

about how organizational structure and form influence CWB. We will now outline the opposing predictions of both theories.

On the one hand, Weber's (1958) bureaucracy theory states that the "bureaucratic (. . .) organization guarantees the continuing rule-bound execution of official duties" (Diefenbach & Sillince, 2011, p. 1518), primarily because of the structural features of a bureaucracy. For instance, in bureaucracies, formal control mechanisms limit employee discretion (Grey & Garsten, 2001) and monitor their rule-following behavior (Tyler & Blader, 2005). When employees break rules, sanctions like reprimands and suspensions are imposed (Weber, 1958). Thus, bureaucratic characteristics are likely to curb CWB. On the other hand, Heckscher's (1994) post-bureaucracy theory assumes that rule-following behavior relies on abstract guidelines. Such guidelines are the result of decentralized decision-making processes that are accompanied by high levels of decision autonomy and participation in decisions. Since processes in post-bureaucracies are relatively unstandardized, employees often have to engage in dialog to reach an agreement and find a solution. As a result, solutions are characterized by "consensual legitimacy" (Heckscher, 1994, p. 39), that is, they are perceived as legitimate and are thus likely to be followed. In light of this argumentation, we can assume that post-bureaucratic structural features play a prominent role regarding CWB.

Our study addressed the conflicting bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic views about the organizational structure–CWB relationship and the organizational form–CWB relationship. We drew on the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy theories to develop pairs of opposing hypotheses in order to perform a competitive test of both theories. Following Henderson and Fredrickson (2001), we sought to determine whether (a) one view is a consistent winner, (b) the contradictory influences cancel out one another, or (c) the competing views are complements so that some results support the bureaucratic perspective while others support the post-bureaucratic one. In doing so, we were able to get a more comprehensive view of the association between organizational structure and form and CWB. Further, we cross-fertilized research on organization theory and organizational behavior and contributed to the theoretical foundation of CWB. Our study can thus be seen as a response to Martin et al. (2013), who have criticized research on deviant organizational behavior as theoretically fragmented.

## 2. Bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic views on organizational structure and form

The analysis of organizational forms has a long tradition in organizational research (Greenwood & Miller, 2010; Puranam, Alexy, & Reitzig, 2014). This stream of research suggests that "organizations are best understood as clusters of interconnected structures and practices, rather than as modular or loosely coupled entities whose components can be understood in isolation" (Fiss, 2007, p. 1180). We adopted this view and defined organizational form as a composition of organizational structure elements. This enabled us to analyze both specific organizational structure elements and different organizational forms, thereby gaining a systematic and holistic view of organizations (Delery & Doty, 1996).

The bureaucratic organization is a prominent organizational form. Even though almost a century has passed since Weber published his work on bureaucracy, organizational researchers have shown a resurgent interest in Weber's ideas (e.g., Hodgson, 2004; Martin et al., 2013). This is partly because bureaucratic structuring has remained an inherent part of almost all organizations (Alvesson & Thompson, 2005). Bureaucracy is an efficient and

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