The dark side of experiencing job autonomy: Unethical behavior

Jackson G. Lu\textsuperscript{a,⁎}, Joel Brockner\textsuperscript{b}, Yoav Vardi\textsuperscript{b}, Ely Weitz\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Columbia Business School, Columbia University, NY, United States
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Labor Studies, Tel Aviv University, Israel

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords: Job autonomy, Unethical behavior, Job satisfaction, Creativity, Morality, Double-edged

A B S T R A C T

To date, job autonomy has been conceptualized as a job characteristic that elicits positive outcomes. In contrast, the present studies unveiled a potential dark side of experiencing job autonomy: unethical behavior. Using field surveys on Israeli employees, Studies 1 and 2 found that experienced job autonomy not only positively predicted job satisfaction (thus replicating past research), but also positively predicted unethical behavior. Using experimental designs, Studies 3a and 3b drew on actual job autonomy policies from real-world corporations to prime American employees to experience different levels of job autonomy. Compared to participants in the low-autonomy or autonomy-unrelated control conditions, participants in the high-autonomy condition were more likely to behave unethically because they felt less constrained by rules. Moreover, the relationship between experienced job autonomy and unethical behavior was moderated by the importance that participants assigned to having job autonomy, such that the experience of high job autonomy was less likely to elicit unethical behavior from participants for whom having job autonomy was more important. In addition to replicating all of these findings, Study 4 revealed that the experience of high job autonomy simultaneously increased unethical behavior and creativity, further demonstrating job autonomy to be a double-edged sword. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Casual dress code, personalized workstations, flexible work hours, freedom to work from home, unlimited vacation time… (Gargiulo, 2011; Harrison, 2014). Contemporary organizations are increasingly implementing policies of job autonomy to enhance employees’ work motivation, performance, job satisfaction, and creativity (Hoskins, 2014). As an example of this trend, a large-scale survey by the Confederation of British Industry showed that whereas 13% of British employers offered teleworking in 2006, this number rose to 59% in 2011 (Ryan, 2013). Similarly, the percentage of Japanese companies that adopted teleworking increased from 11.4% in 2014 to 16.2% in 2015 (Ministry of International Affairs and Communications, 2016, p. 19).

1. The bright side of experiencing job autonomy

Job autonomy refers to the extent to which individuals have discretion over when, where, and how to do their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). According to the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980), job autonomy is a core job characteristic that can lead to the psychological state of experienced responsibility, which in turn can elicit favorable work attitudes and behaviors (for a review, see Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). For instance, a field experiment by Deci, Connell, and Ryan (1989) found that machine technicians were more satisfied with their jobs and more trusting of top management when they were granted more autonomy. Similarly, investment bankers who experienced greater job autonomy had higher work engagement, greater well-being, and superior performance ratings (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). What is more, job autonomy has been shown to enhance workplace creativity, which is critical to the success of individuals and organizations (e.g., Amabile & Gryskiewicz, 1987; Greenberg, 1992; Liu, Chen, & Yao, 2011).

2. The dark side of experiencing job autonomy

The vast majority of theory and empirical research inspired by the Job Characteristics Model has presumed job autonomy to be a form of work enrichment (Deci et al., 2017; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Vansteenkiste, Sierens, Soenens, Luyckx, & Lens, 2009). Thus, past work has focused on its positive consequences, rather than on its potential negative effects. This omission is puzzling given that the rampancy of workplace misconduct in recent decades has been partly attributed to high levels of job autonomy. For example, an important antecedent of the global financial crisis was individual financiers’ excessive discretion in mortgage lending. As pointed out by the Nobel Laureate of...
Economics, Paul Krugman (2009), “in the decade leading up to the current crisis politicians in both parties bought into the notion that New Deal-era restrictions on bankers were nothing but pointless red tape.” As a consequence of relaxed rules and regulations, bankers had the autonomy to dole out loans in their own ways to “subprime” borrowers who were unable to repay them, thereby inciting a chain reaction that almost caused the world’s economy to collapse (The Economist, 2013).

Despite the trend of offering more job autonomy to employees, Yahoo’s CEO Marissa Mayer decided to end its work-from-home policy in 2013, because Yahoo’s virtual private network (VPN) data suggested that employees who worked from home were not working as much (Carlson, 2013). As Yahoo employees themselves pointed out, “many workers were milking the company” (Hindman, 2013).

Although the notion that job autonomy may increase unethical behavior is plausible, little empirical research has examined this possibility. Accordingly, the present studies were designed to evaluate whether, why, and when the experience of job autonomy may elicit unethical behavior. In so doing, we speak to matters of theoretical and practical importance. At a theoretical level, if the experience of job autonomy were shown to engender unethical behavior, it could lead to a more expanded view of the construct of job autonomy (Vardi & Weitz, 1980). More specifically, the possibility that the experience of job autonomy may also induce unethical behavior would lead to a more nuanced and balanced way of understanding job autonomy, that is, as a double-edged sword. At a practical level, if the experience of job autonomy were shown to increase unethical behavior, it may give pause to organizations that follow the trend of providing employees with greater job autonomy. At the very least, organizations would need to consider how to offer job autonomy in a way that maximizes its benefits (e.g., job satisfaction, creativity) and minimizes its unintended costs (i.e., unethical behavior).

3. Theory and hypothesis development

The present research aims to extend self-determination theory (SDT) by positing that experiencing a high level of job autonomy may increase unethical behavior. According to SDT, the need for autonomy is conceptualized as the “universal urge to be causal agents, to experience volition, to act in accord with their integrated sense of self (i.e., with their interests and values)” (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, when individuals experience job autonomy, they will experience agency and volition. Importantly, the experience of agency and volition not only can engender positive attitudes and behaviors (Deci et al., 2017; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980), but also may induce individuals to feel unconstrained to act in accord with “their interests” (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004, p. 25)—even in the form of self-serving unethical behaviors (Lu, Zhang, Rucker, & Galinsky, in press; Shalvi, Gino, Barkan, & Ayal, 2015), such as lying about work hours, slacking off, and abusing organizational resources to benefit oneself. For example, when a research assistant is paid to work on a literature review task at home, he or she not only may feel satisfied by having the autonomy to work at home, but also may feel psychologically unconstrained to slack off (e.g., watch YouTube videos) during paid work hours. Indeed, recent research has shown that feeling unconstrained by rules is positively associated with people’s tendency to behave unethically (Gino & Wiltermuth, 2014). Hence, we propose that experiencing a high level of job autonomy can increase unethical behavior by inducing people to feel unconstrained by rules.}

3.1. Theoretical considerations

3.1.1. Distinguishing job autonomy from feeling unconstrained by rules

Although the experience of job autonomy and feeling unconstrained by rules are related, they are conceptually distinct. According to the tenets of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980), perceived characteristics of the job give rise to certain psychological states, which in turn influence people’s work attitudes and behaviors. Thus, in the language of the Job Characteristics Model, whereas job autonomy is a job characteristic, feeling unconstrained by rules is a psychological state that may be elicited by the experience of job autonomy.

3.1.2. Distinguishing job autonomy from organizational surveillance

The experience of job autonomy and the sense of organizational surveillance are not simply the opposite ends of the same continuum; they are conceptually distinct constructs. Whereas job autonomy refers to the extent to which employees have discretion over their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980), organizational surveillance refers to the extent to which employees are watched and monitored by the organization (Sewell & Barker, 2006). A high level of job autonomy does not necessarily mean a low level of organizational surveillance. Whereas certain job autonomy policies entail less organizational surveillance and thus provide more opportunities for unethical behavior (e.g., permitting employees to work at home could enable slackers to reduce their work hours), other job autonomy policies do not. For example, allowing employees to wear whatever they want or to personalize their desks does not provide any direct opportunities for unethical behavior via low surveillance. However, the experience of high job autonomy in these instances can still induce a sense of being unconstrained by rules and thereby lead to an increase in unethical behavior.

3.1.3. The experience of job autonomy as an enabler (rather than a motivator) of unethical behavior

In keeping with the distinction between ability and motivation (Vroom, 1964), we view the experience of job autonomy more as an enabler than as a motivator of unethical behavior. We propose that the experience of job autonomy makes individuals feel unconstrained by rules, which frees them up to behave unethically. We are not suggesting that the experience of job autonomy necessarily motivates people to behave unethically, in the sense of making them want to behave unethically. Indeed, people who experience high job autonomy may be less apt to behave unethically when there are motivational forces against them doing so, a point that we will return to in the General Discussion section.

3.2. A moderator of the link between experienced job autonomy and unethical behavior: The importance of having job autonomy

It is not only theoretically important to understand why the experience of high job autonomy elicits unethical behavior, but also why this is more versus less likely to be the case. Accordingly, the present research evaluates the moderating influence of the importance that individuals assign to having job autonomy. Identifying moderating influences is also practically important because it may provide insight into how organizations can maximize the positive effects of experienced job autonomy while minimizing its negative effects.

We propose that the experience of high job autonomy is less conducive to unethical behavior when individuals assign greater importance to having job autonomy. When employees do not value job autonomy, they may be more likely to exploit it in unethical ways when it is available (e.g., playing computer games at work). In contrast, when employees value job autonomy, they may be more likely to put it to good use when it is experienced (e.g., leading a creative initiative) as opposed to abuse it by behaving unethetically. Indeed, abusing high autonomy may threaten its very continuation, which would be more bothersome to individuals who value job autonomy.

Another basis for this prediction is theory and research showing that when there is a fit between what people value and what they experience, it leads them to “just feel right,” including right in a moral sense. For example, Camacho, Higgins, and Luger (2003) had people read a persuasive appeal that was presented in a way that either fit or did not
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات