Deviant Workplace Behavior: An Examination of the Justification Process

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Abstract: Deviant workplace activities and the ability of employees to justify these behaviors have drawn increased interest following recent corporate scandals and other highly publicized amoral activities. However, much is still unknown about the factors that enable individuals to justify organizationally undesirable actions. This study set out to further our understanding of justification by developing and testing a detailed cognitive model of the justification process. We examined how explanations for negative outcomes and perceptions of supervisor fairness are related to the justification of deviant behaviors, and the behavioral intentions and affective reactions associated with justification. We tested these relationships using a sample of 339 participants. Our findings indicated that both just outcome explanations and perceptions of supervisor fairness are related to justification, and that justification is related to deviant behavioral intentions and certain positive affective reactions (e.g., satisfaction, guilt).

Keywords: Ethics, Justification, Workplace Deviance, Supervisor Fairness

INTRODUCTION

Although deviant behavior has received increased attention in recent years, it is a problem that dates back to the far reaches of human history. These organizationally undesirable activities range in severity from petty theft among employees to the large-scale ethical collapses that have bankrupted enormous corporations. As modern corporations become increasingly powerful entities in the global economy, the social and economic costs associated with employee malfeasance continue to rise. Taken together, deviant behaviors are reported to cost businesses in the United States as much as $400 billion each year. As such, an abundance of laws and policies exist in most countries and organizations to dissuade deviant behavior.

Past research, however, indicates that laws and rules alone are often insufficient to deter such behavior (see Wempe & Donaldson, 2004 for a discussion). A growing body of research suggests that individuals are often able to justify deviant workplace behaviors despite the existence of clear ethical guidelines. Some of this research suggests that individual cognitive processes such as selective perception, causal perceptions, and affective reactions, among others, can facilitate the justification of behaviors such as theft, vandalism, and other unscrupulous activities.

The present study seeks to investigate the role of negative outcome explanations, perceptions of justice, and affective reactions in the justification of organizationally undesirable behaviors. Our study extends beyond existing research on these behaviors by developing a detailed cognitive model in which perceptions of supervisor fairness and individual affect are predicted to influence the justification process. We argue that the resulting model (see Figure 1: Insert Figure 1 about here) helps to clarify the thought processes used by deviant individuals and has implications for techniques that can be used to deter illicit behavior.

The Justification of Deviant Behavior: Justification appears to pose a unique problem for organizations because it can provoke organizationally undesirable behaviors, such as theft or vandalism even when policies are in place to prevent such behaviors. Theoretical accounts and empirical data have documented the ability of employees to justify undesirable behavior in certain situations in response to two related types of perceptions, inequitable treatment and injustice.
**Fig. 1:** A cognition-affect model of justification

**Perceptions of Inequitable Treatment:** Research on equity theory suggests that individuals are often able to justify deviant behavior in response to inequitable treatment. For instance, Adams[17] and Kemper[14] concluded that employees are frequently able to justify “reciprocal deviance” in the form of withheld effort if they feel they are underpaid or overworked by their employer. Kemper explained that such behaviors can help employees temper the negative feelings that result from the perceived mistreatment and can also be used to help restore employees’ perceptions of equity.

Further, studies by Greenberg[11] and Greenberg and Scott[16] indicated that employees are often able to justify stealing from their employers if they feel they are underpaid. Mars[11,12] reported similar findings among employees who felt that their underpayment was a result of their employers’ greed, suggesting that the source of justification in these cases is a desire for equity restoration.

**Perceptions of Injustice:** More recent research also suggests that perceptions of injustice can influence the justification of deviant behavior[18,19,20,21]. Empirical studies by Ambrose et al.[18], Jones and Skarlicki[20], and Trevino and Weaver[21] indicate that perceived injustice is a strong predictor of sabotage (i.e., damaging or disruptive behaviors) and other harmful behaviors by employees.

Similarly, Jones and Skarlicki[20] found that incongruencies between perceptions and expectations of interactional justice (the degree that individuals impacted by decisions are treated with dignity and respect) prompted retaliatory behaviors. Perceived deficiencies in distributive justice (i.e., the perceived fairness of the distribution of organizational rewards), on the other hand, were found to predict equity-enhancing deviant behaviors. These findings suggest that the theft behaviors observed by Greenberg[11] and Mars[11,12] might have been driven by perceptions of distributive injustice whereas the retaliatory vandalism observed by Fisher and Baron[11] and DeMore et al.[6] may have been provoked by perceptions of interactional injustice.

In a related finding, Skarlicki and Folger[22] concluded that the relationship between perceptions of distributive injustice and the performance of retaliatory behaviors is influenced by both procedural justice (i.e., the perceived fairness of the procedures used to determine rewards) and interactional justice. Their findings suggest that low levels of all three forms of justice may interact to facilitate the justification of deviant behavior. Thus, it appears that perceived injustice in workplace outcomes is crucial to the justification process.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Unjust explanations for workplace outcomes are positively related to feelings of justification.

**Supervisor Fairness as a Mediator between Outcomes and Justification:** Additionally, it seems logical that undesirable workplace outcomes might also influence perceptions of supervisor fairness. Specifically, we argue that inequitable/unfair workplace outcomes might bias employees’ perceptions such that direct supervisors are frequently blamed for unjust outcomes, even when this blame is unwarranted. This argument is based on past research in the realm of social justice and causal perceptions. As noted by Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, and Dronkert[23], individuals that experience an undesirable workplace outcome are frequently motivated to determine the cause of the outcome. Social justice research indicates that desirable behavioral responses to such outcomes are likely if this causal search results in perceptions of a just and fair decision-making process[23,24]. Van den Bos et al.[23] and a proliferation of research on the attribution process also indicate that the causal search process following a negative outcome is likely to be biased[25,26,27].
Furthermore, as noted in past research on leader-
member relationships, immediate supervisors are often
an employee’s primary link to an organization’s culture
and top leadership[23]. We argue that this fact, external
attribution biases demonstrated by many individuals[23,26,29,30],
increases the likelihood that employees will blame their supervisors when they
experience outcomes they believe to be unfair. As Van
den Bos et al.[23] noted, this blame-seeking can often
lead to perceptions of injustice targeting the supervisor and is common when the supervisor is a purveyor of
bad news[31].

Hypothesis 1b: Unjust explanations for workplace outcomes are negatively related to perceptions of supervisor fairness.

Because perceptions of injustice have been linked to the justification of deviant behavior, we expect that perceived supervisor unfairness will facilitate the justification process. Based on findings from the studies by Fisher and Baron[9], Greenberg[3,8], Jones and Skarlicki[29], and Mars[11,12] described above, we predict that perceptions of unfair treatment by the supervisor will provoke a desire for retaliatory deviance.

Hypothesis 1c: Perceptions of supervisor unfairness will mediate the relationship between unjust explanations for workplace outcomes and feelings of justification.

Justification, Affective Response, and Behavior: The final stage of the model shown in Figure 1 indicates the relationships between the justification of deviant behavior, the actual likelihood of performing that behavior, and the affective results individuals expect to experience as a result. It is expected that the ability to justify a deviant response to an unjust outcome increases the likelihood of individuals actually carrying out the response. That is, the more justifiable a behavior seems to an individual, the easier it may be for that individual to overlook the arguably unethical nature of the behavior. The essence of this argument is that, through the justification process, individuals can convince themselves that clearly illicit behaviors, such as theft, are reasonable and “forgivable” given their specific circumstances. Additionally, they may view these actions as a means of restoring equity, as indicated by Greenberg and Scott[9], Mars[11,12], and others.

Hypothesis 2: Perceptions of justifiability will be positively related to deviant behavioral intentions:
Affect and the Justification of Deviant Behavior: Many studies implicitly or explicitly invoke the role of individual emotions in the justification process. For instance Kemper[14] argued that individuals’ deviant
behavioral responses to perceived unfairness are often carried out with the intention of improving their emotional states. Specifically, Kemper argued that retaliatory behaviors help to reduce the anger individuals experience after encountering perceived injustice or inequity. Further, Tripp, Bies, and Aquino[15] also noted that unethical revenge behaviors (e.g., an airline worker deliberately misrout ing an insulting customer’s luggage) can be therapeutic in improving the emotions of perceived victims of injustice.

In particular, we expect that individuals will derive a degree of satisfaction from behaviors that rectify perceived imbalances in personal equity or that fulfill desires for revenge. For instance, if individuals feel that their supervisor unfairly passed them over for a raise, they may experience feelings of satisfaction from stealing from their supervisor or sabotaging them in some way. Similarly, we expect individuals to experience positive emotions when they feel justified and then engage in deviant behaviors.

Hypothesis 3: Perceptions of Justifiability Will Be Positively Related to Pleasant Affective: reactions (feeling satisfied, content, and happy) after engaging in deviant behavior.

Conversely, it is also suggested that negative emotions such as guilt can result from performing deviant activities when individuals cannot fully justify them. This argument partially stems from Tripp and Bies[15] findings, which indicated that individuals may feel guilty if innocent “bystanders” are negatively affected by retaliatory behaviors. These findings suggest that when individuals behave in organizationally undesirable ways that are primarily self-serving and cause harm to others, guilt will frequently arise unless the behavior is justifiable. Based upon this line of reasoning, we expect that individuals who feel justified in acting in a deviant manner experience little or no guilt afterwards.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Hypothesis 4: Perceptions of Justifiability Will Be Negatively Related to Feelings of Guilt after Engaging in Deviant Behaviors:

Method:
Sample: The participants in this study included 339 undergraduate business students enrolled in upper level (juniors and seniors) management courses at a large university in the southeastern United States. Our sample was 49% male and 51% female. The average age of the participants was 21, with a range from 18 to 42. The racial composition of our subjects was 74% Caucasian, 12% African-American,
7% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 4% other. Of our sample, 55% were currently employed, with the average number of hours worked being 21 per week.

Procedure and Measures: The scenario-based design of our study followed a number of other ethics research efforts[32]. Subjects in this study were given one of two versions of a three-page scenario survey. Page 1 contained the first vignette, followed with a continuation of the vignette on page 2, and then demographic information on the final page. We adapted a vignette from Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler[33], similar to the scenario used by Schweitzer and Gibson[34]. In this scenario, the reason for not receiving a raise (a negative outcome) was manipulated. In the justice condition, the reason for the outcomes was that the company was passing along economic costs, whereas in the other scenario the explanation was unjust as the company took advantage of their market power.

On Page 1 of the survey all participants read the same background information about the company they worked for, the fact that they had worked long hours on the job, and even volunteered for a number of important and demanding business trips. The vignette then reads that the subject meets with his or her supervisor, and is informed that he or she did not receive a raise because (Version 1) the company had trouble collecting money from its clients or (Version 2) the company is in an area of high unemployment and did not give raises this year, as there is an abundance of qualified workers in the area. Before turning to the second page, we asked participants to evaluate this scenario and answer the question “How would you rate your supervisor in terms of fairness? (1 = very unfair, 5 = very fair).” We used this response to measure perceptions of supervisor fairness.

In the second part of the vignette, the individuals were presented with an ethical dilemma involving a bonus for reaching a goal. The aim of this continued vignette was to assess how the reasons for the disappointing news (no raise) in the first section would influence subsequent ethical decision making. The continued vignette stated that later the same day the subject had to complete his or her final time sheet of the quarter. The company is said to pay a quarterly bonus of $1,000 for employees who bill at least 500 hours per quarter. The subject only has 450 billable hours, but would have been over 500 if he or she had not gone to advanced training that was strongly encouraged by management. Thus, the question is whether to add a few hours and reach the 500 hour goal. The subject is told that the chances of getting caught are very small and that the consequences if caught are minimal.

After reading the second vignette, we asked individuals a number of questions. First, to measure justification we asked individuals how justifiable they thought it would be to enter inflated working hours on their time sheet (1 = not at all justifiable, 5 = very justifiable). We then asked how likely it was that they would enter the higher hours (1 = not at all likely, 5 = extremely likely) to assess deviant behavioral intentions. Finally, we asked individuals to imagine how they would feel after entering a higher number on the time sheet (i.e., engaging in deviant behavior). We assessed the emotions of being satisfied, content, happy, and guilty (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are provided in Table 1 (insert Table 1 about here). In general, the data were not surprising and the associations between variables were as expected. Hypothesis 1a stated that unjust explanations would be positively related to the justification of deviant behaviors. The results of this analysis were that participants in the unjust explanation condition rated significantly higher (p < .05) in justifiability of deviant behaviors than did participants in the just explanation condition, (just explanation: mean = 2.63, S.D. = 1.4 versus unjust explanation: mean = 2.99, S. D. = 1.4). These results provide support for Hypothesis 1a. Unjust explanations for negative workplace outcomes were also significantly (p < .01) and negatively related to perceptions of supervisor fairness, as those in the just explanation rated their supervisors as more fair than did subjects in the unjust explanation (just explanation: mean = 2.80, S.D. = 1.0 versus unjust explanation: mean = 2.14, S. D. = 1.0). These results provide support for Hypothesis 1b.

Hypothesis 1c predicted that supervisor fairness would mediate the unjust explanation-justification association. To test for mediation, we used Baron and Kenny’s[35] three-step regression procedure. Our regression analyses to test for mediation are provided in Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c. As can be seen in Table 2a (insert Table 2a about here), unjust explanations were significantly and negatively related (β = -.309, p<.01, R²=8%) to supervisor fairness, thus providing support for Step 1. Step 2 was also supported as in Table 2b (insert Table 2b about here) unjust explanations were significantly and positively related (β = .130, p<.05, R²=4%) to justification. Thus, we proceeded to Step 3 and these results are provided in Table 2c (insert Table 2c about here). As shown in the table, supervisor fairness remained significantly related to justification, but explanation for the negative outcome was no longer a significant
predictor. Taken together, these results provide evidence of the fully mediating impact of supervisor fairness on the unjust explanations-justification association, thus providing support for Hypothesis 1c. Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were tested by examining the correlation matrix in Table 1. The significant and positive correlation between justification and deviant behavioral intentions (r = .568, p < .01, R²=32%) provides support for Hypothesis 2. The correlations between justification and the three pleasant affective reactions of being satisfied (r = .613, p < .01, R²=37%), happy (r = .571, p < .01, R²=32%), and content (r = .477, p < .01, R²=28%) were also positive and significantly related. These results provide support for Hypothesis 3. Finally, the correlation between justification and feelings of guilt (r = -.447, p < .01, R²=20%) was negative and significant, thus providing support for Hypothesis 4.

Discussion: Our findings showed that both just outcome explanations and supervisor fairness were negatively related to justification. Further, the effects of the just outcome explanations were fully mediated by perceptions of supervisor fairness. These findings are consistent with equity theory[17], which states that individuals will experience discomfort when they believe their outcomes are not in line with their inputs.

However, it appears that supervisors and the perceived fairness of these supervisors play a strong role in this outcome explanation-justification relationship. Our findings indicate that a more accurate depiction of the cognitive model involves the perceived justice of outcome explanations being related to supervisor fairness, which is in turn related to justification. This is not surprising as our scenario involved the supervisor delivering the “bad news,” given that there is considerable evidence that supervisors are often chosen as exemplars for the good or bad aspects of their organizations[11].

Table 1:<sup>ab</sup>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<td>1.40</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2. Explanation for Work Outcome</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>.501</td>
<td>.130</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Supervisor Fairness</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>-.309</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Unethical Behavioral Intentions</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>.568</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>-.136</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Satisfied Feeling</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.613</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>-.089</td>
<td>.646</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Content Feeling</td>
<td>2.41</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>.183</td>
<td>-.160</td>
<td>.639</td>
<td>.725</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Happy Feeling</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.477</td>
<td>.115</td>
<td>-.193</td>
<td>.544</td>
<td>.635</td>
<td>.650</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Guilt Feeling</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>-.447</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.142</td>
<td>-.553</td>
<td>-.509</td>
<td>-.571</td>
<td>-.529</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations
<sup>b</sup>N=339.
<sup>c</sup>p < .05.  **p < .01.

Table 2a:<sup>ab</sup>

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>β</th>
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<td>Dep. Var: Supervisor Fairness</td>
<td>35.25</td>
<td>1, 337</td>
<td>-.309**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explanation for Outcome</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup>Mediator Regressed on Independent Variable of Explanation for Work Outcome
<sup>b</sup>n=339.
<sup>c</sup>p<.05.  **p<.01.

Table 2b:<sup>ab</sup>

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<td>Dep. Var: Justification</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>1, 337</td>
<td>.103*</td>
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<td>Explanation for Outcome</td>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup>Dependent Variables Regressed on Independent Variable
<sup>b</sup>n=339.
<sup>c</sup>p<.05.  **p<.01.

Table 2c:<sup>ab</sup>

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<td>Dependant Variable:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>4.657</td>
<td>2, 336</td>
<td>-.108*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation for Outcome</td>
<td>.096</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor Fairness</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Dependent Variable Regressed on the Mediator and Independent Variable
<sup>b</sup>n=339.
<sup>c</sup>p<.05.  **p<.01.

Our findings also provide evidence indicating that justification is positively associated with deviant behavioral intentions. These findings are in line with extant research[11,12] suggesting that justification is related to deviant behavior. The justified feelings began in the cognitive process with the unjustly explained negative outcome. By entering a higher number of working hours and getting a bonus, perceptions of equity may be restored[17].

Finally, our investigation of affective reactions associated with the performance of deviant behavior represents a new and necessary avenue for justification research[36]. Our findings suggest that after engaging in unethical retaliatory behavior, those individuals who felt higher degrees of justification were likely to feel more satisfied, content, happy, and less guilty after
performing the deviant behavior. This is an interesting and important finding for academics and practitioners alike as it suggests that justified individuals gain affective benefits (satisfaction, contentment, and being happy) from acting in a deviant way. These affective benefits can act as a form of reward that motivates individuals toward deviant behaviors. Further, our findings indicate that individuals who feel justified are less likely to feel guilty after acting in a deviant manner. These affective response findings support the growing body of research demonstrating the importance of emotions in the workplace[37], and we add to these findings by investigating emotions in an ethical dilemma.

Implications for Managers: The ultimate goal of this study, and a considerable amount of organizational ethics research, is to identify techniques that managers can use to promote ethical behavior among subordinates. Our findings indicate that individual perceptions are an important component of the justification of deviant behavior. As such, it follows that managers can reduce the frequency of justification by taking steps to help employees form accurate perceptions of negative workplace events. As discussed, past research has suggested that individuals frequently form biased causal explanations in response to negative outcomes. These biased assessments, in turn, might promote justification. Managers can therefore take steps to remove ambiguity from workplace environments so that the causes of negative outcomes are clear, reducing the ability of individuals to form biased perceptions. Causal ambiguity can likely be reduced by providing employees with accurate information and feedback on the true causes of negative outcomes[38]. Further, employee perceptions of injustice might be tempered by explaining how the decisions behind unfavorable outcomes reflect just and honest intentions.

We also argue that managers can take steps to increase the moral capacity of employees in order to decrease the likelihood of justification and the performance of deviant behavior. Moral capacity refers to an individual’s ability to understand the true costs and consequences of unethical behavior[39]. Past research suggests that individuals can become myopic when acting in deviant ways, failing to grasp the extent to which individuals other than the intended target can suffer[39]. As noted in our discussion above, individuals’ expectations of positive emotional reactions to deviant behavior and the ability to justify deviant behavior are often diminished when innocent bystanders are affected by the behavior. It therefore follows that individuals might avoid deviant behaviors if they are aware of the true costs of such behaviors. Thus, we recommend that managers seek to increase employees’ moral capacity by using techniques suggested by past researchers, such as helping employees develop a long-term perspective and an understanding of the factors that might promote self-deception[2,39].

Suggestions for Future Research: The results of this study were illuminating, but suggest a number of additional avenues for future research. First, we suggest that researchers investigate additional factors that might facilitate justification. We examined a scenario in which an employee does not receive a raise (negative outcome), and this is explained with either a just or unjust reason. Not receiving a raise is an organizational action that has a very tangible, dollar impact on the focal employee. However, not all actions that are perceived to be unjust may have this same tangible effect. For example, other actions might have less of a tangible “bottom-line” impact, such as being slighted by a supervisor, having a vacation day taken away, or having to work extra hours on weekends when others get the weekend off. Future research might investigate the impact of such outcomes on justification.

Further, we argue that future research on justification should integrate additional variables that previously have been shown to be important in ethics research. In particular, we recommend that researchers investigate how an organization’s ethical work climate[40] affects employee justification. In terms of personality measures, researchers should determine the extent to which moral intensity and equity sensitivity influence the justification process and individuals’ behavioral reactions to perceptions of injustice and mistreatment.

Conclusion: This study set out to expand upon previous research that has demonstrated the central role of justification in promoting deviant behavior. Specifically, we examined how explanations for negative outcomes and perceptions of supervisor fairness are related to justification, as well as how affect plays a role in the outcomes of justification. We found that unjust explanations and supervisor fairness lead to employee justification, and that these feelings of justification are related to deviant behavioral intentions. Further, when individuals felt justified and then acted in a deviant manner, there were affective benefits (e.g., more satisfaction and less guilt). These results highlight the importance of additional justification research aimed at helping practitioners ensure that employees do not feel justified in performing deviant, organizationally undesirable behaviors.
REFERENCES


