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Perceived Politics and Workplace Deviance: Test of a moderated mediation model

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Abstract

The current research delves into the liaison between employees' perceptions of organizational politics and deviant behaviour at the workplace. Precisely, it proposes that perceived politics is positively related to deviant work behavior, and utilizing the Job Demands-Resources perspective, it establishes that emotional exhaustion intervenes this relationship as a mediator. Crucially, the study puts forth that servant leadership moderates this relationship such that it mitigates the positive impact of employees' perceived politics on their levels of emotional exhaustion and subsequent deviant behavior. Analysis results of survey data gathered from IT organizations reveal that perceived politics is positively related to deviant behavior, emotional exhaustion partially mediates this relationship, and servant leadership negatively moderates the *perceived politics-emotional exhaustion-deviant behavior* relationship. These findings hold key implications for theory and practice. Lastly, the study proffers limitations and directions for future research.

Keywords: perceived organizational politics; servant leadership; deviant behavior; emotional exhaustion

Article type: Research paper

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Introduction

Of late, theoretical and empirical research on organizational politics has intensified owing primarily to its damaging effects on individual employee and organizational outcomes (Hochwarter et al., 2020). Referred to as illegitimate, organizational politics is usually studied in terms of its perceptions i.e., perceived organizational politics (POP), that denotes the extent to which individuals see their work milieu as political, comprised of self-serving elements (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997). Though the extant research has shed light on diverse behavioral outcomes of perceived politics in employees (Al Jisr et al., 2020; Brouer, Harris, & Kacmar, 2011; Ferris, Russ, & Fandt, 1989), the mechanisms/processes which lead to these outcomes remain inadequately explored. To this end, the current study investigates the impact of employees' perceived politics on their deviant behavior, a prominent behavioral outcome that is noxious for the organization's health and hampers its productivity.

Deviant behavior is defined as intentional behavior that disregards organizational norms and jeopardizes the organization's or its' members' well-being (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). Workplace deviance encompasses behavior such as taking extended lunch breaks, leaving before time, gossiping, and indulging in violent behavior (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). Given that such behavioral acts mar the organization's effectiveness, organizations are in the quest for sources of deviant behavior among employees and means to discourage it. In this context, a political work milieu though is considered as a factor that fosters such behavior, the underlying mediating and moderating mechanisms of this liaison are understudied, particularly with respect to aspects such as employees' emotional states and the role of leadership (De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017), therefore merit scholarly attention. Attending to this research lacuna, the present study examines the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of servant leadership in the employees' perceived politics and deviant behavior relationship.

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Hypotheses Development

Perceptions of Organizational Politics - Deviant Behavior

Prior research associates perceived politics with plummeted levels of job involvement and job performance (Ferris & Kacmar, 1992; Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005). Also, employees' perceptions of politics negatively impact their commitment towards the organization (Vigoda-Gadot & Kapun, 2005); and employees less committed towards the organization have been demonstrated to exhibit deviant behavior at work (Meyer et al., 2002). Furthermore, perceptions of politics create distrust among organizational members (Bedi & Schat, 2013); thereby, encourage behaviors such as gossiping or interpersonal aggression, which are indicative of employee deviance. Therefore, it is surmised that:

H1: Perceived organizational politics is positively related to deviant work behavior.

Emotional Exhaustion as Mediator of the Perceptions of Organizational Politics - Deviant Behavior relationship

Employee exhaustion is defined as “physical and emotional depletion from excessive job demands and continuous hassles” (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). As per the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) perspective (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), since coping with workplace politics requires employees to exert psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort, it is largely considered a job demand (Bedi & Schat, 2013). A political work environment is permeated by sycophancy, hypocrisy, injustice etc., all of which tax employee energy, and are associated with psychological costs; hence, it negatively affects employee well-being (Bedi & Schat, 2013; Naseer, Raja, & Donia, 2016). Such environment requires employees to exercise greater watchfulness, which drains their psychological resources, resulting into stress, burnout, and lower levels of contentment with the job (Miller et al., 2008). Augmenting this, a political workplace is typified by inapt feedback, appraisals and rewards, which are key motivational job resources, the lack of which may leave employees in

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ambiguous situations (Bedi & Schat, 2013), and they may end up not being able to perform to their full potential (Demerouti et al., 2001). This may as well induce cynicism, which is corroborated to encourage deviant work behavior in employees (Davis & Gardner, 2004). Also, emotional exhaustion disengages employees from work, rather, encourages destructive coping behaviors among employees (Huang, Chuang, & Lin, 2003). Likewise, prior research as well corroborates that negative emotional states/reactions mediate the link between employee's experiences of injustice or disregard at the workplace and their indulgence in deviance behaviors (Hur, Kim, & Park, 2015; Khattak et al., 2019). Conclusively, the study hypothesizes that:

H2: Emotional exhaustion mediates the positive relationship between perceived organizational politics and deviant work behavior.

Servant leadership as moderator of the Perceptions of Organizational Politics – Emotional Exhaustion - Deviant Behavior relationship

Servant leadership, the “other-oriented” leadership, is known especially for its penchant to serve (Eva et al., 2019). A servant leader is characterized as an empathetic, aware, and persuasive person; one who contributes to growth and development of subordinates (Liden et al. 2008). Given that the relationship between the supervisor and subordinates holds tremendous importance in determining subordinate behavior (Harris, Harris, & Wheeler, 2009), the present study posits that servant leadership behavior exhibited by the supervisor will lessen the positive effect of employees' perceived politics on their emotional exhaustion and subsequent workplace deviance. Being empathetic, servant leaders assist subordinates with tough work situations. In context of a political workspace, they may thus be able to assuage the negative impact of politics on their emotional state. Also, characterized as just and aware, they may be able to assist subordinates understand the environment, help them do away with ambiguities in it, and so aid employees in dealing with it in a way that their crucial

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psychological resources are not unnecessarily expended with. A servant leader in endeavors to contribute to the subordinates growth, empowers subordinates and fosters mutual trust (Liden et al., 2008), both of which are otherwise thwarted by a political environ. In congruence with the JD-R (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), servant leadership thus may lessen the damaging effects of politics on employees' emotional and cognitive resources (Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010), and mitigate the positive effect of politics on their emotional exhaustion and subsequent indulgence in deviant behavior. All together, it can be hypothesized that:

H3: Servant leadership moderates the indirect effect of employees' perceived organizational politics on their deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion, that is, servant leadership will mitigate the positive effect of politics on employee's emotional exhaustion and subsequent deviant behavior.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed hypotheses.

Figure 1

Methodology

Sample

Multi-source data collection from IT organizations in India was carried out, keeping in view the ethical guidelines for research, in that voluntary participation was requested ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The focal employees provided their ratings of perceptions of organizational politics, emotional exhaustion, and their immediate supervisor's servant leadership. And considering the suitability of peer ratings for evaluating employee behaviors (De Clercq, Fatima, & Jahanzeb, 2021), randomly chosen peers who had been coworkers with these employees for no less than six months, provided ratings of their deviant behavior. Finally, from the 250 administered questionnaires, 152

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usable employee-peer responses were received, yielding a response rate of 60.8%. Pertaining to demographics, a bulk of the respondents were males (67%), belonged to the age group of 25-35 years (52%), and tenure range of 3-8 years (69%).

Measures

The survey instrument comprised of a five point Likert scale (with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Perceptions of Organizational Politics was measured using Hochwarter et al.'s (2003) 6-item scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.91). Sample items are "I feel that individuals in my organization work for their own benefit" and "I feel that individuals in my organization are working behind the scenes to ensure that they get their piece of the pie". Servant Leadership was measured using Sendjaya et al.'s (2019) SLBS-6 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89). Sample items are "My supervisor uses power to serve others, not to reach his/her individual goals" and "My supervisor contributes to my personal and professional growth". Emotional Exhaustion, was measured utilizing Maslach and Jackson's (1981) 9-item scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84). Exemplary items are "I feel used up at the end of the workday" and "I feel emotionally drained from my work". Deviant Work Behavior was measured employing Bennett and Robinson's (2000) 19-item scale (Cronbach's alpha = .85). Sample items are "This employee acts rudely towards others at work" and "This employee takes an additional or longer break than is acceptable at the workplace". Additionally, the demographic variables (gender, age, and tenure) were employed as controls.

Analysis and results

At the onset, Exploratory Factor Analysis was employed. Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation gave four components with Eigen values greater than 1; and, the first factor demonstrated 26% variance (< 50%), indicating that Common Method Bias was not a

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major issue in the current study. Additionally, the multi-source data collection also aided in alleviating concerns surrounding method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Augmenting the above, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was employed. The model fit was found to be satisfactory since the fit indices ($\chi^2/df = 2.010$, GFI = .831, AGFI = .749, RMSEA = .061, NFI = .822 CFI = .901) abided by the suggested benchmarks (Hair et al., 2010). Convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) of the constructs was established since: (1) Composite Reliability > 0.7, (2) Average Variance Expected > 0.5, (3) Factor loadings > 0.7. Also, Discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2010) was established given that: (1) Average Variance Expected > Maximum Shared Variance and Average Shared Variance, and (2) inter-correlation of constructs < square root of Average Variance Expected.

Mediation and moderated mediation: Employing path analysis, the SEM results indicated that perceived organizational politics has a positive significant effect on deviant work behavior ($\beta=.511$, $p<0.05$), thus corroborating H1. Next, with regards to the mediating role of emotional exhaustion, it was found that the effect of perceived politics on deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion was statistically significant, thus supporting H2, crucially, it was a partial mediation ($\beta=.457$, $p<0.05$). Finally, utilizing PROCESS macro (Hayes et al., 2017) for deciphering the moderated mediation effect, the results demonstrated that servant leadership negatively moderated the *perceived politics-emotional exhaustion-deviant behavior* relationship such that higher levels of servant leadership lessened the positive impact of perceived politics on emotional exhaustion and subsequent deviant behavior. That is to say, servant leadership emerged as a significant moderator in that the relationship between perceived politics and emotional exhaustion was positive when servant leadership was low ($\beta=.101$, $p < .05$) but negative when servant leadership was high ($\beta=-.124$, $p = .05$) (see Figure 2), thereby lending support to H3.

Figure 2

Discussion and implications

The study results substantiate that: employees' perceptions of organizational politics are positively related to their deviant behavior at the workplace, emotional exhaustion partially mediates this relationship, and more importantly, servant leadership negatively moderates the positive impact of perceived politics on deviant behavior through emotional exhaustion. These findings by explicating the mechanism underlying the *perceived politics-employee deviance* relationship augment the existing literature on the impact of perceived politics on employee behaviors (Chang et al., 2009; Crawford et al., 2019; De Clercq & Belausteguigoitia, 2017). The mediating role of emotional exhaustion accentuates the JD-R perspective, and highlights the significance of job demands and resources in influencing employee behavior. The moderating role of servant leadership sheds a light on the key boundary role that leader behavior plays in influencing the impact of organizational politics on employees (Rosen et al., 2011).

The research findings offer crucial implications. First, it encourages organizations to be vigilant of and endeavor to do away with factors that may be fostering politics' perceptions at the workplace. For instance, transparent and just performance evaluation and reward systems can help. Second, it is recommended that organizations take steps to emotionally uplift employees so that organizational politics does not drain them emotionally and impact their work behaviors. Finally, considering the moderating role of servant leadership, it is suggested that leadership training and development programs focused on inculcating servant leadership aspects should be carried out.

Limitations and future research

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The current study has some limitations, which offer avenues for future research. First, given that the study hypotheses are tested at the individual level, a multilevel approach to understanding of the relationships is encouraged. Second, although the study employed measures to cope with the common method bias issue, yet employing a longitudinal approach may furnish added insights. Third, the study evinces the liaison between perceived politics and deviant behavior investigating in particular the role of emotional exhaustion as mediator and servant leadership as moderator; given that emotional exhaustion emerged as a partial mediator, the role of certain other key variables in influencing the *perceived politics-employee deviance* relationship can't be ruled out, and so future research taking into consideration other variables that might impact the relationship either as mediator or moderator is encouraged. For example, personality traits could serve as potential moderators influencing the relationship (Naseer et al., 2016). Finally, given that the study is restricted to the IT sector of India, the results can't be generalized, and so, future research across other industries and geographies is encouraged.

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Appendix

List of figures

Figure 1: Proposed model

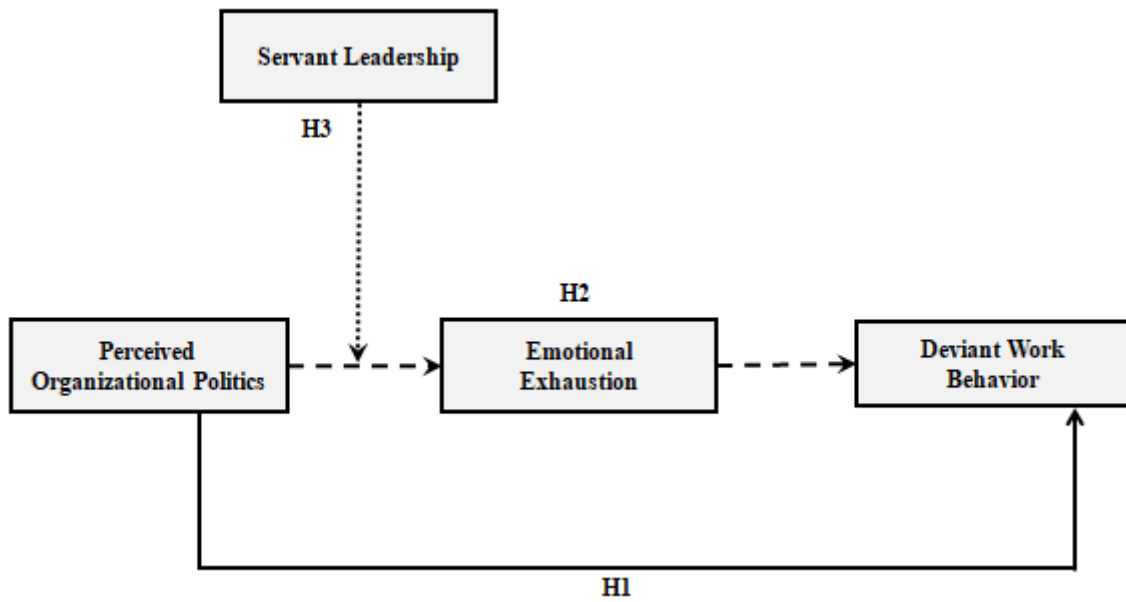


Figure 2: Moderating Effect Plot

