

## Supervising Deviance: The Role of Supervisor/Employee Relationships in Workplace Deviance

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*This paper examines employees' perceptions of managers/supervisors' industrial relation behaviour in both domestic- and Chinese-owned companies, and whether the employees' attitudes so derived contribute to conflict in the workplace. Primary data were collected via a structured questionnaire and interviews. The findings of this study indicate that supervisors' positive or negative behaviours (as perceived by the employees) affect employees' organisational commitment. Specifically, poor supervisor-employee relationships are positively associated with deviant behaviours. Secondly, rates of deviant behaviours in most categories were higher in Chinese-owned companies. Mutual trust is seen to be a factor in good organisational learning and information sharing.*

**Keywords:** Supervisors, employee perception, equity, Botswana construction industry

**JEL Codes:** M10, M12, J53

### 1. Introduction

The idea of equitable treatment of employees has been recognised as an important characteristic of effective leadership (Gordon et al. 2014; Loi, Loh & Hine 2015). It is therefore imperative that managers and supervisors treat all employees equally regardless of other factors. Usually, employees expect fair and ethical treatment, given that they have invested much time and energy in their organisations (Cropanzano, Bowen & Gilliland 2007; Simha & Cullen 2012). When employees feel they are treated unfairly, they react to the perceived unfairness by exhibiting negative work attitudes and behaviours (Mitchell & Ambrose 2007; Tepper 2000; Tepper et al. 1998). Employees' perceptions of how well they are treated by the organisation depends primarily on their interactions with supervisors based on two key variables: (a) the fairness of treatment by their supervisors and (b) the overall support received from these supervisors (Boddy 2014; Eisenberger et al. 2014; Eisenberger et al. 2002; Eisenberger et al. 1997; Rhodes & Eisenberger 2002; Tepper et al. 2009). The relationship between an employee and the supervisor has become a key determinant of employee behaviour. However, few studies have investigated the effect of employee-supervisor relationships on deviant behaviour in the construction industry. In addition, evidence regarding the ways in which supervisors relate to their subordinates in the context of developing economies remains scarce in the human resource management literature.

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This paper seeks to explore the ways in which (employee perceived) adverse behaviours and attitudes of managers/supervisors contribute to deviant behaviours at the workplace in both domestic- and Chinese-owned companies. On the basis of social exchange theory, this paper argues that good interpersonal relationships among employees and supervisors would positively influence employees' work-related behaviours.

This study contributes to human resource management literature and construction research by examining the consequences of employees' perceptions regarding their relationships with supervisors in relation to deviant behaviour. Theoretically, this study builds on previous studies on social exchange that propose a positive association between fair treatment and organisational outcomes. It maintains that employees' perceptions of how they are treated by supervisors would influence their work behaviours and attitudes. From a methodological perspective, this study uses mixed methods study design to extend existing management research that has its focus largely on quantitative method of data analysis (e.g., Gordon et al. 2014; Loi et al. 2015). By gathering and analysing data using mixed methods, it was possible for the study participants to express their views based on their individual experiences.

The rest of this paper is organised into 5 sections. Section 2 presents a review of literature in relation to the theoretical stance underpinning the interplay between employee-supervisor relationships and workplace behaviours. The third section sets out the methodology of the study; empirical results are presented and discussed in the fourth section. Sections 5 and 6 conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of the findings for managers and policy makers.

## 2. Literature Review

Workplace deviance can be defined as purposeful behaviour that violates organisational norms with the intention to harm the organisation, its employees or both (Bennett & Robinson 2003). Two primary types of workplace deviance have been identified by Robinson and Bennett (1995). These are organisational deviance, which is directed toward the organisation (e.g., shirking hours, purposefully extending overtime) and interpersonal deviance directed toward individuals (e.g., verbal abuse, sexual harassment). These deviant behaviours begin with employees' experiences at the workplace, and the primary antecedents include frustration, injustices and threats to self (Bennett & Robinson 2003).

In view of social exchange explanations based on the norm of reciprocity, Eisenberger et al. (2014) maintain that employees receiving favourable treatment from the organisation and its agents reciprocate with high commitment and effort. These researchers argue that when subordinates are treated well by their supervisors, they reciprocate by working harder and providing more assistance to supervisors, and this might lead to high-quality leader-member exchange relationships. Leadership is often viewed as a social phenomenon based on interactive relationships between leader and followers (Harris, Kacmar & Zivnuska 2007). According to Burton, Mitchell and Lee (2005), the organisational climate is influenced by the leaders' attitudes in the workplace. As a result, employees are likely to respond to the influences exerted on them by their supervisors which can, in turn, be linked to their attitudes and behaviours (Wimbush 1999). It has also been argued that subordinates may seek to cope with perceived hostile climates and abusive supervision by venting negative emotions through deviant actions that may harm organisations (e.g., stealing from the organisation) or deviant behaviours that allow them to avoid their supervisors or work stations (e.g.

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strategic absenteeism) (Mawritz, Dust & Resick 2014; Thau et al. 2009). Likewise, when employees work hard or overcome obstacles to reach objectives, they expect some acknowledgement from management (Garcia et al. 2015). It has also been recognised that naturally honest employees can be pushed to behave inappropriately if they perceive their work environment as unjust, or if they feel that management has treated them unfairly in terms of their expectations (Greenberg, 1997). Managers can therefore sometimes create an environment in which they unknowingly contribute to their employees' deviant acts (Greenberg & Barling, 1999; Tepper et al. 2009).

Authors such as Skarlicki and Folger (1997) and Wei and Si (2013) contend that if organisational decisions and managerial actions are deemed unfair or unjust, affected employees experience feelings of anger, outrage and resentment, and these feelings may result in counterproductive employee behaviour such as theft. In contrast, if organisations are perceived as just, fair and supportive there are fewer employee absences and incidents of tardiness, less employee theft and less workplace violence (Andersen 2005; Jones 2009; Otake & Wong 2014). For this reason, Buttner and Lowe (2015) and Storms and Spector (1987) suggest that it is important to take these perceptions of justice into serious consideration as it has been shown to affect employee trust – a foundation to effective management-employee relationships. While previous studies that have examined workplace deviance have used the aggression or reactance theories (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose 2003; Brehm & Brehm 2013; Wright & Brehm 1982), this study uses the social exchange theory as a foundation for examining unfair treatment and employees' reactions to poor employee-supervisor relationships.

### 3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to explore employees' perceptions in relation to managers/supervisors relationship in the Botswana construction industry. A survey was conducted with a large sample to provide a broad overview of employees' perceptions of how supervisors' attitude and behaviours contribute to employees' engagement in deviant behaviour. In-depth interviews were also conducted to allow study participants to express their views and personal experiences (Creswell 2013; Bryman & Bell 2015). The proxies used in the questionnaire were developed from the literature, and a pilot study was conducted in order to ascertain the validity of the questions.

Survey data were collected from January to April 2014 from eight companies, but due to confidentiality they are referred to here only as domestic-owned and Chinese-owned companies. Random sampling method was used which implies that each member of the target population had an equal chance of being included in the sample (Creswell 2013). A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed out of which 690 were returned. Of these, 617 questionnaires were found to be usable, giving a response rate of 77%. This response rate compared favourably to those reported in other relevant studies in Botswana (e.g. Pansiri & Temtime 2008, 88%; Phatshwane, Mapharing & Basuhi 2014, 92%). The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (version 21.0) for inferential statistical analysis, t-test and descriptive statistics. In addition, 15 interview respondents volunteered to participate in interviews. The interviewees were drawn from six companies, 47% (7) from domestic-owned companies and 53% (8) of them from Chinese-owned companies. The interviewees included among others an accountant, a driver, cleaners, bricklayers and quantity surveyors. The sample size was made up of 60% (9) men and 40% (6) women. The employees' level of education ranged from a master's degree in engineering to the minimum of primary

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education. While the ages of respondents ranged from 29 to 55 years, most of them were in their mid-to-late 30s. Length of employment ranged from ten months to 16 years.

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### 4. Findings and Discussions

**Table 1: Responses on Manager/supervisor-employee relationship statements in all companies**

	Domestic-owned companies						Chinese-owned companies					
	Mean	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Management behaviour and attitudes is the main cause of dispute	3.90	31	42	15	10	2	4.01	30	51	9	7	3
Employees complaints taken seriously	2.57	6	23	14	35	22	2.42	7	13	14	45	21
Due consideration is given to employees' complaints	2.62	5	20	24	35	16	2.47	2	17	24	40	17
Employees are all treated equally	2.38	5	15	16	40	24	2.28	2	11	23	40	24
Management often act out of self-interest	3.74	30	35	20	11	4	3.91	26	51	13	7	3
Supervisors inform you in time about changes in work	2.84	5	35	11	35	14	2.77	12	28	6	34	20
Supervisors give explanation if something turns out wrong in your job'	2.80	7	26	17	38	11	2.81	9	27	14	37	13
Supervisors treat you in a respectful way	2.78	6	32	15	28	19	2.37	8	12	15	40	25
Supervisors show that you are valuable to the company	2.63	5	23	20	32	20	2.32	3	15	21	33	28
Supervisors communicate in an honest and straight-forward manner	2.74	6	24	27	24	19	2.47	2	16	24	43	15

Respondents were asked to rate the statement on a Likert scale of 5 (agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

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**Table 2:t-test results; Manager/supervisor-employee relationship statements and demographic characteristics**

<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>	<b>Manager-employee relationship statements</b>									
	Management behaviour main cause of dispute		Employees complaints are taken seriously		Due consideration is given to employees' view points		Employees are all treated equally		Management act out of self interest	
	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T
Sex	3.94		2.51		2.52		2.31		3.80	
	3.95	-.120	2.50	.132	2.60	-.835	2.38	-.677	3.85	-.559
Ownership	3.90		2.57		2.62		2.38		3.74	
	4.01	-1.332*	2.42	1.592	2.47	1.757	2.28	1.112	3.91	-2.077*

  

<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>	<b>Supervisor-employee relationship statements</b>									
	Supervisors inform you on time about changes in work		Supervisors give good explanation if something turns out wrong in your job		Supervisors treat you in a respectful way		Supervisors show that you are valuable to the company		Supervisors communicate in an honest and straight-forward manner	
	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T	Mean	T
Sex	2.76		2.73		2.51		2.44		2.58	
	2.89	-1.194	2.93	-2.050*	2.76	-2.448*	2.58	-1.465	2.67	-.912
Ownership	2.83		2.80		2.78		2.63		2.74	
	2.77	.623	2.81	-.143	2.37	4.074*	2.32	3.265*	2.47	3.031*

Note: (\*) means there is significance; p < .05

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Table 1 demonstrates that 73% of respondents in domestic-owned companies and 81% in Chinese-owned companies are of the view that management behaviours and attitudes are the cause of conflict. Also, based on the t-test results shown in Table 2, there are statistically significant differences between domestic-owned and Chinese-owned companies. In addition to the survey results, nine respondents who participated in the interviews, who have either worked or still work in Chinese-owned companies, are of the view that foreign managers do not treat them in a dignified manner. These respondents admitted to have reported verbally abusive behaviours of managers and also complained about managers who often failed to show respect to employees and care about their needs. For most, their jobs have become necessary only in order to survive (survival necessity); they have little joy or pride in what they do. Overall employee perception is illustrated by the following quotation R12, who works in a Chinese-owned company:

“... I am almost proud of myself because I have endured the torture. I am tired of their version of reality. It is hard to say who is right. Money does not motivate me; I am looking for respect and status....for someone to acknowledge my opinion. Employees need their jobs, so they shut up and do as they are told”.

The above quotation vividly demonstrates that organisations do not treat employees fairly and respectfully. As a result, employees are less likely to be convinced that organisations are concerned about their interests in decision-making or general well-being. This finding re-echoed the general view that employees usually perceive relationships between them and their supervisors as negative.

Table 1 shows that 65% of employees in domestic-owned companies and 77% of employees from Chinese-owned companies are of the view that management's acting out of self-interest is one of the causes of conflict. Table 2 indicates that there are statistically significant differences between these two types of companies. The qualitative results also suggest that respondents from Chinese-owned companies are of the view that management acts out of self-interest, which leads to conflict. For instance, most of the respondents expressed views similar to one shared by R9 who works in a Chinese-owned company:

“...some supervisors know everything that's going on, because they are local, they understand our language and listen to what people say. But they only tell the owners what they think will not jeopardize their own jobs”.

This finding is in support of the notion that most of the foreign companies operating in Africa are only driven by profit making motives (Akorsu & Cooke 2011; Baah & Jauch 2009; Tang 2010). Also, the present study's findings are consistent with those of Engelhard and Nägele (2003) who note that local employees view foreign companies as being interested in pursuing vested financial interests and consciously neglecting employee development. Dzimbiri (2010) and Van Brach (2012) maintain that Africans or Batswana in this case are collectivists by nature, and therefore value group effort and success; they want to be active partners of the organisation. Failure to appreciate this aspect of employees' views and their contributions to the decision-making process can lead to employees perceiving employers as not being considerate.

In relation to employees' perception on supervisors' behaviours and attitudes as a cause of deviant behaviours, the results indicate that there are statistically significant differences between domestic- and Chinese-owned companies. Table 1 illustrates that in domestic-owned

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and Chinese-owned companies 47% and 65% of respondents respectively perceive that supervisors do not treat employees in a respectful way. This common finding in both types of companies that participated in the study strongly suggests that supervisors' positive or negative behaviours directly or indirectly affect employees' organisational commitment (Eschleman et al. 2014; Fida et al. 2015; Mitchell & Ambrose 2007).

The findings of this study are therefore consistent with the assumption of social exchange theory that subordinates perceive supervisors as organisational agents and therefore hold organisations and supervisors responsible for the many actions of these supervisors (Eisenberger et al. 1997; Eisenberger et al. 2002; Kickul 2001). Moreover, the result supports the findings of Eisenberger, et al. (2014), Eschleman et al. (2014) and Gordon et al. (2014) who argue that if good relationships exist between employees and supervisors, there will be significant positive effects, as this reduces negative behaviours that could harm organisations. The present study's findings indicate that employees who feel they are not treated fairly will not be satisfied with their job (Miarkolaei 2014). In addition, if employees feel that they are not treated with dignity and respect, they will have less loyalty to the company and would be more likely to consider retaliation. For instance, most of the interviewees echoed the same view as expressed by R8 who works for a Chinese-owned company:

“ [a] few times some of our bosses have told us that people in their country wait in front of the door for someone to leave their job so they might get it, and that employees there are very satisfied. I don't like it, because they disrespect me as a person. They disrespect my knowledge. They disrespect everything. They don't realise that as a human being [I] need to be treated with respect.”

This demonstrates that when employees perceive that the employer only cares about self-interest, or does not value them, then the employees will get to the point where they do not see any good being done by their employers. This finding supports the notion that employees who perceive or experience unfairness at work are less likely to advocate positively for the employers. This is because fair treatment has an important effect on employee attitudes, such as their degree of satisfaction, commitment and likelihood of absenteeism (Otake & Wong 2014). The findings reveal that perceptions of fairness are crucial for both employees and organisations.

The perception held by employees that supervisors are not being honest means that there is little or no trust between the two parties, thus affecting their relationships. This finding strengthens the argument presented by others such as (Boddy 2014; Eschleman et al. 2014; Jones 2009; Skarlicki & Folger 1997; Wei & Si 2013) that poor supervisor-employee relationship is strongly associated with deviant behaviours. This finding is significant as it reveals the link between employees' reactions (unfairness perceived) and retributive behaviours (engaging in counterproductive behaviours) when supervisor/managers' unfair treatment is perceived (Gordon et al. 2014; Mackey et al. 2014; Reynolds, Shoss & Jundt 2016). The finding in this study also demonstrates that those employees who engaged in deviant behaviours perceived the treatment they received to be unfair and unjust. This is consistent with Duffy, Ganster and Pagon's (2002) findings that employees who feel undermined by their supervisors are more likely to engage in both passive and active deviant behaviours aimed at the organisation in general.

Similarly, Boddy (2014) indicates that conflict and supervisor bullying are significantly correlated with counterproductive work behaviours. It is also evident from this present study



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that employees may participate in deviance directed at co-workers to seek revenge. Because deviant behaviours aimed directly at the perpetrating supervisors might sometimes be risky (given that such actions could result in escalation of the mistreatment), employees may direct their actions against their fellows (Mawritz et al. 2014; Mackey et al. 2014; Wei & Si 2013). The findings of this study reveal that the study participants do not think their organisations provide the necessary and appropriate support. They perceive managers' attempts at two-way communication to be insufficient to make things right. This supports the findings of previous studies that employees are concerned with organisational behaviour towards them, and that communication alone is unable to restore or sustain the quality of employee-organisation relationship unless this communication is supplemented by adequate and fair management behaviour (Otaye & Wong 2014; Shoss et al. 2016). Garcia et al. (2015) found that subordinates engage in workplace deviance as a form of retaliation so as to express frustrations and gain retribution for abusive supervision (Colquitt, Scott & LePine 2007). Furthermore, this finding is also consistent with prior research showing that those companies who treated their employees favourably obtained favourable outcomes (Gordon et al. 2014; Tepper et al. 2009; Wang et al. 2016).

Litzky, Eddleston and Kidder (2006) and Krot and Lewicka (2012) emphasise that if managers create an ethical climate, treat their employees with trust and respect and adopt fair workplace rules and policies concerning rewards and punishments, then these steps can reduce the occurrence of deviant behaviours. Therefore, based on these various findings, it is safe to deduce that leadership qualities (of both supervisors and managers) play a major part in the occurrence of deviance behaviours in organisations. An understanding on the part of the supervisor/managers of the needs and wants of their employees, as well as a better understanding of the impact of their own managerial behaviour on employees, can help in terms of improving performance in the workplace. Employees seek value-exchange from their companies/ employers, and it is the responsibility of the latter to ensure that the services they provide are delivered in a way that ensures employees' perception of the existence of fairness and equity. Subsequently, both employees and employers are satisfied as they will feel their investments (of time and money) have been honoured (Burton et al. 2005; Lian et al. 2014). As has been found in previous research, where employees perceived their bosses as fair, caring and supportive, there were reduced incidents of workplace deviant behaviours (Gordon et al. 2014; Lian et al. 2014; Loi et al. 2015). The findings of this current study lend a supporting argument to Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) who view deviant behaviour as a negative reciprocity orientation where an individual returns a negative treatment with a negative treatment - 'an eye for an eye'.

The results of this study are also consistent with Hershcovis et al. (2007) who found evidence suggesting that there is a relationship between gender and deviant behaviour. The results reveal that when a gender variable is used to assess the level of deviant behaviours engaged in by employees, there is a statistically significant difference between males and females. The findings indicate that in both domestic- and Chinese-owned companies males engage more in deviant behaviours as compared to their female counterparts. The finding that women engage less in deviant work behaviour than men is similar to the study of O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005). Likewise, previous studies such as Hershcovis et al. (2007) and Henle (2005) established that there exists a statistically significant effect of gender on work deviant behaviour. These authors found that males engage in more deviant behaviours than females, due in part, perhaps, to the higher levels of overall aggression in males than in females, or to the males' greater sense of responsibility to the (dependent) family as a motivator.

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Abou-Moghli (2015) and Bell and Martin (2012) recommend that organisations should nurture a work environment that emphasises upward communication so that employees will feel involved and so boost self-work, self-esteem and reduce the incidence of workplace deviance. It would also be ideal if companies organise forums for employees to have a voice, as the current findings demonstrate that not all companies provide the opportunity for employees to interact and share their views with managers. Findings from this study indicate that it does not matter if employees feedback is not implemented; rather, managers would be perceived as being fairer if employees feel that they have had the opportunity to voice their opinions and have been given audience (Qin et al. 2015).

### 5. Conclusion and Comments

The findings of this study suggest that management's interaction with employees in the participating companies is perceived as being shallow and irrelevant, as it does not address issues that concern employees. For instance, employees do not perceive that management communication channels lead to positive relationship outcomes or actual changes in the organisation. A general finding across the sample surveyed is that supervisors' attitudes and behaviours are associated with employees' deviant behaviours such as less effort being made on the job, work being done more slowly, machinery being broken and the job in hand deliberately being done incorrectly. This finding is congruent with equity theory and past research that emphasizes the human motivation to achieve fairness in exchange (Adams 1963, 1965). Previous studies have demonstrated that if employees perceive unfairness or any work related ill-treatment they are likely to engage in deviant workplace behaviour in order to 'balance out' or 'even up' the unfairness. The findings of this study not only confirm this, but also demonstrate that in both types of companies, but more especially the Chinese-owned companies, employees tend to increase the amount of deviant workplace behaviour in response to (perceived) unfair workplace treatment.

### 6. Managerial Implications

The results of this study may have practical implications for managers and supervisors in the broader construction industry. Firstly, the study shows that the construction industry needs to pay more attention to the relationship between supervisors and employees. As supervisors often have control over the valuable resource that employees represent, they are responsible for creating and managing the expectations, norms or reward systems that ensure positive employee compliance to achieve goals (Wimbush 1999). Supervisors should be encouraged to take practical actions such as showing concern for employees, involving employees in decision-making and increasing interaction in order to mitigate deviant behaviours and to encourage positive organisational citizenship behaviours. Secondly, the findings here indicate that employees in Chinese-owned companies perceive that conflict arises from a lack of mutual cultural understanding; for instance, language barriers have been indicated as a problem which often leads to poor communication between supervisors and employees, which can in turn lead to misunderstandings of each other's intentions. Based on this finding, it is proposed that foreign managers should be encouraged, if not actually be bound by government regulation, to enrol in short-term workshops or courses that include an introduction to Botswana culture – its history, language and customs. This will aid the cultural adaptation and integration of the supervisors and managers of foreign companies, and enable them to interact in more culturally sensitive ways with their Botswana employees.

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