From Conflict to Deviance: To foster or not to foster Reciprocity?

DEBORAH GERVASI

Kore University of Enna

deborah.gervasi@unikore.it

Abstract

The present work aims to theoretically analyze the effect of reciprocity in the escalating process that could bring from a badly managed conflict to deviant behaviors in the workplace. More in detail, the analysis unpacks the micromechanisms that from a conflict could lead to the rise of interpersonal deviance up to organizational one. The paper adopts the interpretative framework of Social Exchange Theory to investigate the role of reciprocity in the escalating process of negative behaviors. By considering reciprocity as an individual orientation, it is interesting to note that people who have a strong tendency to reciprocate benefits may not have the same willingness to reciprocate harmful behaviors and vice versa. Applying this distinction in the analyses of conflicting and deviant behaviors leads to different conclusions about the role of reciprocity in organizational behaviors. The proposed conceptual model shows the role of positive reciprocity in mitigating the escalating process that brings from conflict to organizational deviance. This finding suggests exploiting employees' positive reciprocity attitude to reduce the effects of negative phenomena inside the organization. Contrary to previous studies, which suggest avoiding reciprocity to reduce conflicting and deviant behaviors, the paper suggests a new theoretical lens to approach negative organizational phenomena.

1. Introduction

Workplace deviance has a costly and detrimental impact on organizations, bringing managers to find and use effective instruments to mitigate negative outcomes. Statistics show that the phenomenon is still rampant: if previous researches demonstrated that workplace deviance affected from 50% to 75% of employees (Spector et al., 2006), recently the percentage rose to 90% (Bennett et al., 2018).

Workplace deviance is not only widely present in organizations but also extremely costly. Defined as those "voluntary behaviors that violate significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the wellbeing of an organization, its members, or both" (Robinson and Bennett, 1995: 556), workplace deviance has several costs: from the one hand, it prejudices organizational performance and, from the other hand, it damage employees' wellbeing. For these reasons, managers should understand which drivers could unleash deviant phenomena to avoid its presence or mitigate their effects.

Framing workplace deviance in Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) and the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), deviant behaviors could be seen as a response to perceived negative or stressful events (Dalal, 2005). For these reasons, scholars highlighted that high levels of interpersonal conflicts inside organizations are positively related to the rise of

negative behaviors as deviant ones (Raver, 2013). Indeed, studies demonstrated that the management of a workplace conflict has significant effects on the outcome and the resolution of future interpersonal and organizational conflicts, which could have more serious consequences (Trudel and Reio, 2011). As an effect of the frustration felt by employees, improper conflict management could start an escalating effect that brings interpersonal deviance up to the organizational one (Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Mackey et al., 2021). Indeed, Robinson and Bennett (1995) distinguished between organizational and interpersonal deviance: the first one refers to deviant behaviors directed toward the organization as a whole, while the latter refers to deviant behaviors toward other organizational members.

Scholars analyzed organizational deviance using the reciprocity framework, highlighting how reciprocating negative treatment with other negative treatments could lead to the rise of a spiral of negative behaviors that make the conflict difficult to interrupt (Brett et al., 1998; Park and Antonioni, 2007). Thus, according to this perspective, the remedy to reciprocity problems is "not to reciprocate" (Brett et al., 1998). However, conflict management literature does not interpret reciprocity as an individual attitude but as a universal norm; this perspective underestimates the importance of individual differences in the propensity to reciprocate received behaviors.

Indeed, people prone to reciprocate positive treatment could not have the same willingness to reciprocate negative treatments and vice-versa (Eisenberger et al., 2001). More in detail, it is possible to distinguish between positive and negative reciprocators: the first ones are inclined to reciprocate favorable treatment, while the second ones are willing to reciprocate negative behaviors (Perugini et al., 2003). Organizational scholars widely adopted the perspective of reciprocity as a personal attitude (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005); however, they particularly focused on exchange patterns where negative behaviors are reciprocated with other negative behaviors, while positive actions are reciprocated with other positive ones. The literature underestimates the possible mitigating effect that positive reciprocal behaviors could have in contests characterized by negative reciprocity.

The present work tries to analyze, from a theoretical perspective, how a badly managed conflict could bring, firstly, to interpersonal deviance and, secondly, to organizational deviance through an escalating process guided by negative reciprocity. Trying to analyze the phenomenon through the lens of positive reciprocity, we will also investigate the possible mitigating effect of positive reciprocity in interrupting such a spiral. Indeed, positive behaviors could restore interpersonal relationships and, consequently, organizational ones.

2. The norm of reciprocity and the conflict spiral

Conflict is often defined as an interactive process that shows incompatibility or disagreement between social parties (Rahim et al., 1992). Interpersonal conflicts represent one of the main sources of stress and frustration in individuals' everyday life. However, it is not always true that conflicts have only negative outcomes.

Like Aristotle and Plato, classical philosophers consider conflict a pathological status, treating the phenomenon as a threat to social order. Given the negative meaning of the concept, the State had the responsibility to maintain conflict at the minimum level. However, during the XIX century, important philosophical contributions from the dialectical perspective, inspired by Hegel and Marx, began to identify the conflict as a driver of social

change. Similarly, studies on organizational conflict had a significant increase. If previous research framed the conflict as a dysfunctional phenomenon to limit, more recent research focused on positive dynamics and consequences (Mikkelsen and Clegg, 2019).

However, positive or negative consequences mostly depend on managing and solving conflict (Park and Antonioni, 2007). Scholars often analyzed reciprocity as the primary cause of conflict worsening. More in detail, the individual attitude to reciprocate as much as received has often be seen as the driver of conflicts, leading to repetitive and reiterate contentious of increasing intensity difficult to solve (Brett et al., 1998). In other words, a spiral begins when an actor starts with a conflictual behavior; a second actor responds with hostility, and the first one reciprocates with another hostile behavior. Therefore, reciprocity is in at least two moments: (i) between the first and the second interaction and (ii) between the second and the third.

By reciprocating hostile behaviors with other hostile behaviors, a spiral begins instinctively. The primary issue is that using a conflicting hostile attitude tends to provoke emulative behaviors: one party receives something from the other party, and the latest return something equivalent (Park and Antonioni, 2007). Based on these considerations, the literature stigmatized the role of reciprocity in conflict and negotiation, arguing that the more the frequency of negative reciprocal interactions, the more likely conflict will bring unequal and unilateral outcomes (Brett et al., 2017). By using reciprocity as a universal norm (Axelrod, 1984), scholars demonstrated that the "an eye for an eye" strategy equally encourages cooperation and conflict spirals (Park and Antonioni, 2007). Therefore, studies suggest avoiding reciprocal behaviors to interrupt conflict spiral (Brett et al., 1998). However, this perspective underestimates the importance of reciprocity as a personal attitude, excluding individual differences and preferences in the give and take process.

3.   From conflict to deviance: the role of positive reciprocity

3.1.   From conflict to interpersonal deviance

As said, the conflict could trigger a negative spiral characterized by negative behaviors hard to manage and with possible negative outcomes. By analyzing the phenomenon under the norm of reciprocity framework, conflict can be defined as the antecedent of different negative organizational behaviors directed toward colleagues or the organization as a whole (Raver, 2013). At first, inadequate conflict management could be incisive in the frequency and resolution of future conflicts (Trudel and Reio, 2011), likely bringing to interpersonal deviance (Bowling and Beehr, 2006). Indeed, interpersonal deviance includes more severe forms of negative behaviors compared to the hostile communication that characterizes the conflict, like psychological abuses, humiliating comments up to physical violence, and property damage (Mackey et al., 2021). However, interpersonal deviance is not just a higher-level negative behavior than conflict. Indeed, it is defined as the purposeful violation of organizational norms to harm the organization or its employees (Bennett and Robinson, 2003) and, therefore, it could even bring to the shift of the target of the mistreatment (Allen et al., 2018).

Research on negative organizational phenomena shows that stressful conditions are not sufficient to lead to employees' adverse reactions; it is essential that they perceive them as stressful (Spector and Fox, 2002). Thus, individual perceptions of conflict elicit negative

feelings and responses (Greco et al., 2019). In the increasing mechanism of negative responses to negative events, individuals could retaliate against individuals other than the primary instigator (Deng et al., 2018; Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). For this reason, conflict may provoke negative behaviors, like deviance, toward both the organization and its members (Chiu and Peng, 2008).

According to the displaced aggression theory (Allen et al., 2018), when an employee is the victim of mistreatments, he/she could retaliate to an individual other than the harm-doer. Therefore, the frustration deriving from badly managed conflicts could be an important antecedent of interpersonal deviance since frustration is a primary driver of many forms of aggression and deviance in the workplace (Penney et al., 2017). As in the case of conflicts with negative outcomes, frustration results from events that interfere with the achievement of employees' goals in the workplace and lead to the rise of aggressive, hostile, and deviant behaviors (Spector et al., 2006). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that the conflict spiral and its unequal and unilateral outcomes could lead to interpersonal deviance phenomena inside the organization.

3.2. From interpersonal deviance to organizational deviance

Since conflict could trigger a spiral of increasingly more intense actions, this escalatory process could advance up to organizational deviance through the dispersion of the target (Spector and Fox, 2002). Several studies demonstrated that an employee recipient of workplace mistreatments is particularly prone to react negatively toward the source of negative behaviors and the organization as a whole (Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007). Since an individual become the target of interpersonal deviance, she/he could feel the need to reciprocate what received: if the reciprocation is insufficient to restore the equilibrium, it will likely lead to overflowing actions toward a displaced target (Spector and Fox, 2002). This non-balanced and indirect reaction provokes the shift of the action recipient from the instigator to the organization. Therefore, the patterns of negative reciprocity embedded in the organizational deviance phenomenon shift from indirect forms of reciprocal actions towards other colleagues to generalized forms of negative reciprocity toward the organization as a whole (Gervasi et al., 2021). Indeed, employees could accuse the organization of lacking support, fomenting the desire to reciprocate toward the workplace (Itzkovich and Heilbrunn, 2016).

Based on these considerations, if neglected and abandoned to negative reciprocity, the conflict spiral could foster a chain that brings to interpersonal deviance behaviors, at first, and organizational deviance behaviors as a second step. For these reasons, it could be useful to understand which mechanisms could weaken this vicious circle that can bring organizational deviance from the conflict.

3.3. The role of positive reciprocity

The norm of reciprocity is a primary perspective to analyze organizational behaviors since it underlies and guides the social exchange process (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). According to Gouldner (1960), the norm of reciprocity is the rule under which: (i) people should help those who helped them, and (ii) people should not injure those who helped them. The author

highlights that it is possible to analyze reciprocity using three main perspectives: (i) reciprocity as a model of mutual contingent exchange, (ii) reciprocity as a folk belief, and (iii) reciprocity as a personal moral code.

Regarding the first perspective, organizational scholars who adopted the Social Exchange Theory in their studies implicitly assume reciprocity. This assumption derives from the fact that an exchange needs a bilateral transaction: somewhat has to be given and somewhat has to be received. Therefore, a reciprocal exchange is defined as an interaction without an explicit contract (Molm, 2003). Instead, reciprocity as a folk belief is the popular conviction that people should receive what they deserve in the long run (Gouldner, 1960); this perspective is the less analyzed in the literature.

Finally, reciprocity could be understood as a personal moral norm and an individual attitude. In this case, the norm of reciprocity predicts how a person should behave in reciprocal interactions. According to this perspective, the norm of reciprocity could be defined as a universal moral code shared by humans. Defining reciprocity as a personal attitude allows us to consider individual differences in the willingness to adopt the *do ut des* logic. Indeed, studies demonstrated that people prone to reciprocate positive actions do not always have the same willingness to reciprocate the negative ones and vice-versa (Eisenberger et al., 2004). Therefore, it is possible to distinguish between positive and negative reciprocators (Perugini et al., 2003): the first ones are particularly willing to reciprocate positive actions; while, the second ones are inclined to reciprocate negative behaviors. From these considerations, it is possible to understand that the distinction between positive and negative reciprocators has an important impact on conflict management and negative organizational phenomena (Greco et al., 2019).

Individuals do not always choose to react to perceived mistreatment negatively. Firstly, starting from Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), people calculate the costs and the benefits of social interactions choosing those actions that maximize their interest. Thus, actions that bring social approval and positive returns will be preferred compared to actions that lead to negative outcomes. However, analyzing reciprocity as a personal attitude makes it possible to add another consideration to explain each individual's reaction: reciprocity, as a personal norm, could conduct behaviors coherent to personal sentiments rather than strategic or adaptive calculations (Perugini et al., 2003).

Previous studies highlighted the role of positive sentiments in reducing deviant behaviors (Itzkovich and Heilbrunn, 2016), demonstrating how personal traits could weaken the vicious circle of adverse responses. More in detail, positive reciprocators are individuals particularly sensible to the perception of positive behaviors and prone to react favorably. Therefore, these characteristics could disregard negative behaviors, mitigating the "eye for an eye" mechanism. Although both positive and negative reciprocators seek equity, the two types of reciprocators have different preferences. For instance, negative reciprocators are particularly interested in interpersonal equity, immediately returning what they received; positive reciprocators, on the contrary, are more interested in the equal share of the results between actors which contribute to their achievement (Perugini et al., 2003). These differences could bring positive reciprocators to establish positive behaviors even in organizational contexts characterized by negative phenomena, mitigating the chain of adverse responses to negative events.

Positive reciprocity behaviors could trigger virtuous exchange circles that could gradually spread inside the organization. Indeed, previous studies demonstrated that interpersonal

identities are frequently rooted in small face-to-face interactions rather than the interaction of the organization as a whole (Moreland and Levine, 2002). People are more familiar with closer colleagues, which have more influence than the organization. Therefore, positive behaviors between colleagues could become the first step to trigger positive indirect reciprocity inside the organization, interrupting the chain that brings from the conflict to the organizational deviance. Figure 1 summarizes our argumentation.
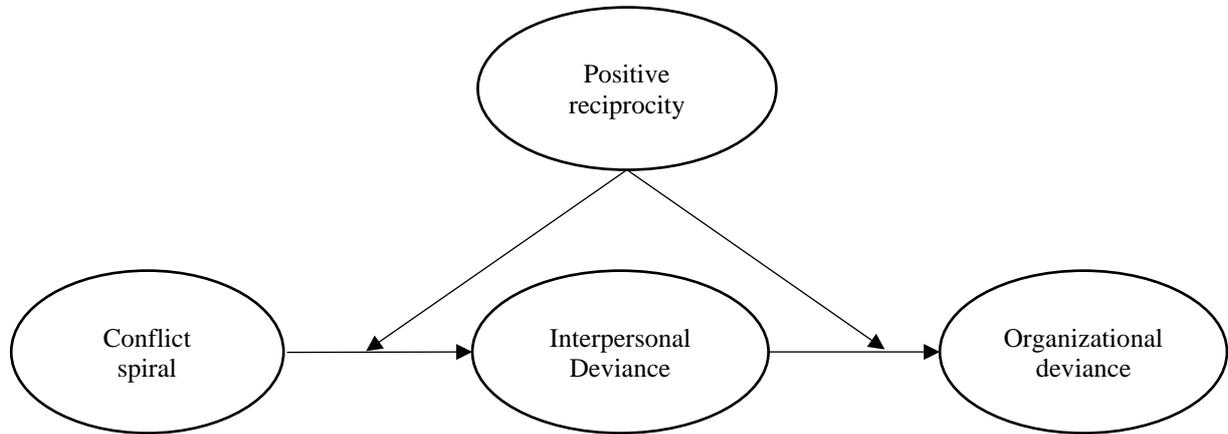

Figure 1 – The relationship between conflict spiral, interpersonal deviance, organizational deviance, and the mitigating effect of positive reciprocity

4. Implications

From a theoretical point of view, the present model could suggest a new path of study on conflict and organizational deviance issues. Indeed, considering reciprocity as a personal attitude rather than a model of mutual contingent exchange, it is possible to reach conclusions discordant from previous findings. As suggested by the literature, the avoidance of reciprocity also means the deletion of patterns that could trigger the rise of positive behaviors and phenomena. By using a different conceptualization of reciprocity, distinguishing between positive and negative, it is possible to suggest other strategies that could exploit the reciprocity potential. Indeed, the theoretical implications deriving from the model also have managerial repercussions. At the organizational level, the knowledge of the micromechanisms that bring from the conflict spiral to the organizational deviance could help the management implement proper strategies to interrupt the vicious circle before it worsens.

Introducing the personal norm of positive reciprocity and its mitigative effect in the described process makes it possible to design intervention at the individual level. For instance, managers could encourage mutual aid between coworkers exploiting the spreading effect of positive reciprocity. Indeed, considering reciprocity as an individual attitude, it is possible to understand how external solicitations could increment it. For instance, managers' behaviors could send important signals to employees regarding organizational values, including the reciprocity attitude. These signals could address employees to positive reciprocal behaviors even in a context characterized by organizational deviance. Therefore, managers should simultaneously create general positive conditions and customize their intervention based on individual differences. In other words, they should discourage the attitude to negatively reciprocate mistreatment, for instance, demonstrating that vindicative behaviors are an

unsuccessful strategy inside the organization and encouraging other forms of conflict resolution like negotiation and communication. At the same time, managers should foster positive reciprocity supporting positive reciprocators' attitudes.

Finally, human resource managers should consider adding reciprocity attitudes in the screening and recruitment process, creating a preventive strategy to fight the rampant phenomenon of deviance inside the organizations. To avoid the social desirability bias of simple interviews, they could test reciprocity attitude through role-playing practices to identify behaviors that could be difficult to manage in the future.

5.   Limitations and future research

This study did not deeply analyze conflict as a social construct; thus, it neglects the importance of the structural and cultural context in which conflict occurs. This dimension is particularly important in organizational conflict since it implies that the phenomenon could occur in work routines and norms embedded in everyday social interactions between organizational members (Mikkelsen and Clegg, 2019). However, also this perspective could be analyzed under the reciprocity framework. Further research could explore how implicit norms of reciprocity embedded in employees' relationships could influence conflict dynamics inside the organization and how establishing a work environment based on positive reciprocity could restrain the negative outcomes of conflict.

Keywords

Reciprocity; conflict; interpersonal deviance; organizational deviance

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