The Differential Effects of Interpersonal Justice and Injustice on Computer Abuse: A Regulatory Focus Theory Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Insider employees have become one of the top security threats to organizations. In order to mitigate their detrimental security behaviors, it is important to understand the thought processes of these insider offenders. Recent security research has examined the role of perceptions of injustice in explaining employee security behaviors. However, there is a paucity of research investigating the differential effects of justice and injustice. Based on regulatory focus theory, this article examines the emotional and behavioral reactions to perceptions of interpersonal justice and injustice. The results show that perceptions of interpersonal injustice are more relevant to employee experiences of hostility than perceptions of interpersonal justice. In addition, the results show that promotion focus and prevention focus have asymmetric effects on the role of emotions in computer abuse. The results have important theoretical contributions to justice and security behavior research and provide critical guidance to organizational security management.

KEYWORDS

Computer Abuse, Hostility, Injustice, Interpersonal Justice, Regulatory Focus Theory

INTRODUCTION

Information security has received increased attention from managers of organizations. Recent security reports indicate that security threats have led to hefty organizational losses. The Gartner 2017 research survey shows that global security investment reached $93 billion in 2018 due to information security threats. Organizations have made tremendous efforts to reduce traditional external information security threats, such as threats from hackers and extortion software. However, recent research scholars have gradually focused on insider threats due to the high success rates of their attacks (D’Arcy & Devaraj, 2012; Lowry et al., 2015; Willison & Warkentin, 2013). A 2016 PwC survey report shows that security incidents due to insiders have increased in recent years. Insider employees have become one of the main threats to organizational security.

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In order to mitigate insider offenders’ detrimental behaviors, organizations should deeply understand these offenders’ thought processes of conducting these behaviors. Willison and Warkentin (2013) proposed that motivations insider offenders conducting detrimental security behaviors include neutralization, expressive motivations, and disgruntlement as a result of organizational injustice. Recent studies have paid more and more attention to organizational injustice and empirically examined the impact of justice or injustice on employee security behaviors, such as distributive and procedural injustice and computer abuse (Willison et al., 2018) and policy justice and cyberloafing (Henle et al., 2009). However, they consider that justice and injustice are interchangeable and employees’ reactions to organizational justice and injustice reflect the same construct.

Colquitt et al. (2015) found out that “reactions to the adherence to justice rules reflected different constructs than reactions to the violations of justice rules” (p.1). Their findings show that organizational injustice is more predictive than organizational justice for counterproductive behaviors. They argue that injustice is more strongly related to some outcomes whereas justice may be more strongly related to others, which represents the concept of regulatory focus (Colquitt et al., 2015). Regulatory focus refers to the cognitive process that individuals interpret and process information during goals pursuit (Higgins et al., 1997). Higgins et al. (1997) proposed that individuals have different types of concerns when pursuing goals. Individuals are sensitive to safety and obligation when facing the absence or presence of negative stimulus, in contrast, individuals are sensitive to accomplish and growing when facing the absence or presence of positive stimulus. Based on regulatory focus theory, we argue that injustice or justice, as a negative or positive stimulus, might have different effects on individuals’ outcome perception.

Interpersonal justice is defined as the quality of “interpersonal treatment individuals receive as procedures are enacted.” (Colquitt, 2001, p. 386). Interpersonal justice is a prominent social influence on deviance (Judge et al., 2006) and has been found to be most relevant to deviant behaviors (Colquitt et al., 2001). The authors propose that employees’ reactions to interpersonal justice and injustice are relevant to different emotional and behavioral outcomes (Barclay & Kiefer, 2014; Colquitt et al., 2015; Judge et al., 2006). This paper attempts to investigate employees’ experience of hostility and computer abuse behavior in reactions to interpersonal justice and injustice. The authors suggest that employees’ perceptions of interpersonal injustice are more relevant to hostility than perceptions of interpersonal justice. The relationships between interpersonal justice, injustice, and computer abuse are mediated by employees’ experiences of hostility.

In the following section, the authors summarize the justice and security behavior research. Based on regulatory focus theory, they develop a theoretical model for use in this project. Then, they introduce the research methodology and report the results. Finally, the authors draw conclusions regarding this project’s theoretical and practical contributions and future research.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Employee Computer Abuse**

Employee computer abuse is defined as “the unauthorized and deliberate misuse of...[the computers and other forms of information technology] of the local organization information systems by individuals with insider access” (Willison et al., 2018). With more data exposed in the organization, the risk of data misuse in a computer system significantly increases (Wang & Siau, 2019). In information security literature, a large number of research projects have investigated computer abuse. Kim et al. (2016) concluded that many prior studies have concentrated on the effectiveness of computer abuse deterrence, typically focusing on the cognitive and rational factors influencing employee computer abuse. For example, D’Arcy et al. (2009) concluded that an awareness of security countermeasures significantly reduces employee computer abuse. Hu et al. (2011) found out that moral beliefs and social control have more effect on reducing abuse than deterrence.
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