

# Types, Antecedents & Outcomes of Organizational Dysfunctional Behaviors – A Review

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*This paper presents a critical and comprehensive review of a few organizational dysfunctional behaviors while highlighting their antecedents, typology, and implications. The paper also discusses key insights from the existing literature on two hidden dysfunctional states and three important causes of organizational dysfunctional behaviors. Apart from the discussion on existing literature, the process of Organizational Fear, Loneliness, and Organizational Retaliatory Behaviors (ORBs) has been synthesized and explained.*

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## Introduction

Like individuals, organizations also suffer from malfunctions, deficiencies, and disorders that affect their health (Levinson, 2002). Kusy and Holloway (2009:10) added to the above observation saying that “Toxic people thrive only in toxic systems”. Organizational dysfunctional behaviors (ODB) are not only reflective of an organization’s culture, but they are manifestations of systemic problems that need to be addressed. It is vital to know the antecedents and outcomes of possible organizational deficiencies to sustain a healthy organization. These deficiencies are internal, often hidden from the employees and management but steadily prevent the organization from performing at intended levels. (Samuel, 2010; Carlock, 2013)

Organizational maladies happen due to dysfunctional behaviors at various levels (Appelbaum & Roy Girard, 2007; Carlock, 2013):

- (a) Top management level - unethical practices; focus on the short-term bottom line, even at the cost of the business’s long-term health and employees; incon-

sistent policies. Many workers become a party to or victim of unethical practices, creating unease, dissatisfaction, mistrust, and guilt.

- (b) Co-worker Level - poor communication, workplace incivility, political work environment
- (c) Employee level -Inability to cope with change, issues of prestige, personal (family incivility, family responsibilities, personal health)

Although toxic behaviors and incidents appear to be relatively minor, these seemingly minor but persistent abrasive behaviors have a greater potential to negatively affect the well-being than once-in-a-while events. (Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001)

We discuss in this article the implications of organizational dysfunctional behaviors and the typology of ODBs. We introduce two hidden dysfunctional states – fear and loneliness – that are caused due to organizational policies. Apart from inputs of extant literature, we also explain the processes associated with fear and loneliness. We examine three important causes of ODBs – organizational injustice, workplace incivility, and organizational politics. We also discuss organizational retaliatory behaviors (ORBs), which are often the outcomes of organizational policies and other dysfunctional behaviors. Finally, the article concludes with a reflection on possible remedies for ODBs.

### Implications of ODBs

Almeida (2005) highlights that dysfunctional behaviors within an organiza-

tion have indirect or direct cost implications. In a fiercely competitive workplace, stress and burnout are becoming a norm. These problems are compounded by issues such as abusive supervision, organizational injustice, and organizational politics. Frequent workplace conflicts and small social battles take a toll on an individual and seep out significant cognitive and affective resources leading to heightened stress. Chronic social stressors at the workplace can lead to anxiety, loneliness, depression, or reduced self-esteem leading to lower productivity and reduced team morale. (Dormann & Zapf, 2004; Penhaligon, Louis & Restubog, 2009).

**Annual organizational losses due to ODBs could range as high as \$200 billion.**

Apart from indirect costs, there can also be direct costs due to sabotage or theft. Besides, demotivated or disgruntled employees can affect product quality, which affects the market reputation. Organizations can also be sued if adequate measures to prevent dysfunctional behaviors (say sexual harassment) are not in place, leading to decreased reputation and increasing hiring costs. (Litzky, Eddleston & Kidder, 2006; Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006). Litzky et al. (2006) report that deviant behaviors cost businesses more than \$20 billion every year and cause 30 percent of business failures. Robinson and Bennett (1995) report that annual organizational losses due to ODBs could range as high as \$200 billion.

## **Typology**

Robinson & Bennett (1995) define organizational dysfunctional behavior (ODB) as any voluntary behavior that harms the organization or its employee. Dysfunctional (also called deviant) behaviors include sabotage, theft, or violent behaviors against fellow employees, late arrival, absenteeism, withholding effort, taking excessive breaks, and workplace incivilities (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006; Carlock, 2013). Extant literature contrasts unethical behavior and deviant behaviors. There can be some actions that are both deviant and unethical. However, some actions could be considered ethical from a society point of view but will be considered deviant from an organizational perspective. Then there can be actions that are not considered deviant from an organizational perspective but are nevertheless considered unethical from society's perspective (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Litzky et al., 2006).

Few researchers (Merriam, 1977) claim that deviant behaviors are due to personal attributes. Others (e.g., Greenberg, 1990) point out that organizational policies and contexts drive employees towards deviant behaviors. Then there are researchers (Litzky et al., 2006; Carlock, 2013) who emphasize that dysfunctional behavior is a function of both organizational values and individual personality.

## **Individual Factors**

Individual-level studies have focused on understanding what kind of person is

more likely to be involved in deviant behaviors. These studies have examined the impact of personality, genetics, family background, and social influences on an individual. Some studies (Neuman & Baron, 1998) have identified certain personality types that are more emotionally fragile and react by being aggressive and increase cases of workplace conflict. Other studies (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006) have identified some personality types that get a perverse pleasure in troubling others.

## **Organizational Factors**

Organizational policies and practices can encourage dysfunctional behaviors in multiple ways. First, culture and values create such conditions that employees feel slighted. Inconsistent organizational policies and poor interpersonal behaviors often lead to resentment, which then leads to deviant behaviors. Second, organizations can contribute to dysfunctional behavior by having a high tolerance for such behaviors. Van Fleet and Griffin (2006) point out that over a period, some employees "learn what kind of behavior they can get away with." Third, in some organizations, uncivil behavior is supposed to be a part of the initiation, and accepting such behaviors is a sign of "belonging here<sup>1</sup>."

<sup>1</sup> The concept of Generalized Hierarchical Abuse (GHA) relates to this idea. (Rospenda et al., 2000). GHA reflects a general culture where subordinates experience an institutionalized atmosphere of bullying and mistreatment. For example, some niche clubs, societies, or security units often boast of a specific code which the subordinates are duty-bound to honor."

**Dysfunctional behavior can range from low level such as inappropriate dress, playing loud music to higher-level offenses such as sabotage, theft, or violent behaviors against fellow employees.**

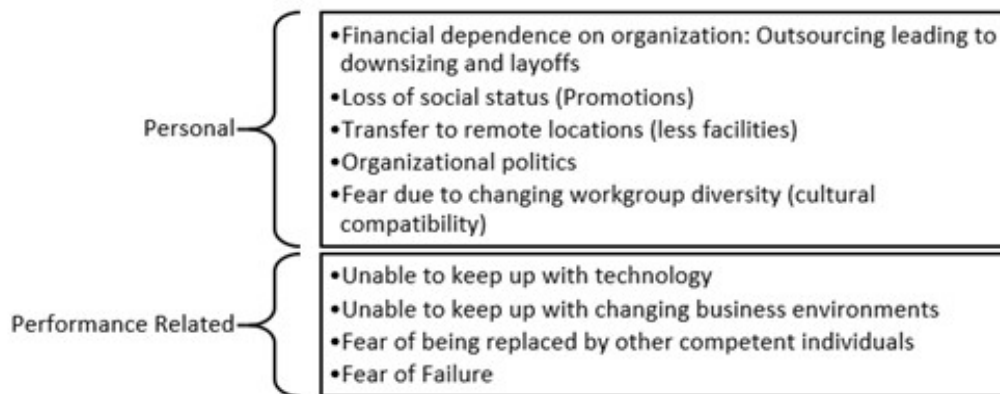
Robinson and Bennett (1995) classified workplace deviance along two dimensions. One is related to the severity of the action. Dysfunctional behavior can range from low level such as inappropriate dress, playing loud music to higher-level offenses such as sabotage, theft, or violent behaviors against fellow employees. The second dimension is related to the target: organizational or interpersonal. Organizational deviance includes behaviors that violate organizational policies or destroy organizational property. Interpersonal deviance includes unacceptable behavior (workplace incivility or ethnic discrimination) against specific persons (Aryee, Chen & Budhwar, 2004; Hershcovis et al., 2007; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

### Hidden Dysfunctional States

There are two hidden dysfunctional states that are caused by organizational factors.

*Organizational Fear:* Fredrickson (2004) explains that organizational fear is linked with the urge to escape. Fear arises when there is discomfort in the existing or impending situations. May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) point out that employees feel unsafe when situations are ambiguous, unpredictable, and threatening. For example, organizational changes (restructuring, downsizing) cause fear because of an unsure future. As technology outpaces workforce skill levels, workers find themselves out of touch and at the risk of being replaced. New business models such as aggregator-based business and other disruptive innovations replace hitherto stable businesses, which causes fear and anxiety. Organizational fear is often deep-seated, and the affected persons rarely discuss it – not even with their families. This generation of perennial stress even-

Fig. 1 Causes of Fears



tually affects their professional and personal lives. (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998)

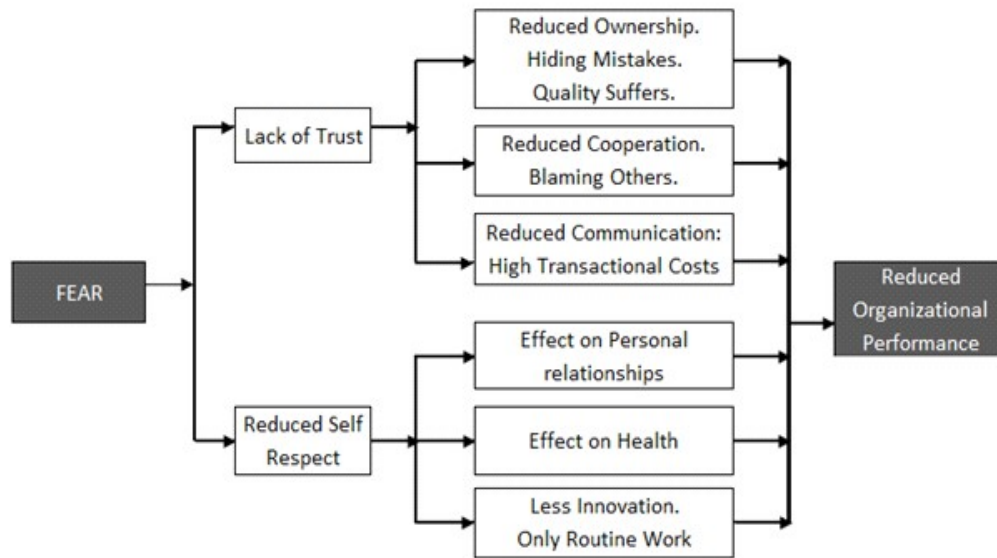
*Causes of Fear:* Organizational fear can be caused due to personal and professional reasons. Fig. 1 lists these fears.

**Fear causes mistrust the on one hand and lack of self-respect on the other.**

*Outcome of Fear:* Fear is a pervasive emotion that leads to suboptimal output. Fear creates a scenario when one is constantly distracted by the unknown and uncontrollable, rather than on one's skills. Fig. 2 explains that fear causes mistrust on the one hand and lack of self-respect on the other. An unpredictable environ-

ment makes persons unsure and ill at ease. A fearful employee keeps initiative on sidetrack and confines to doing routine tasks. Fear brings survival to the forefront and takes away spontaneity, creativity, service, and development. Due to the survival mindset, the employees focus on the bare minimum output, and their true potential is not achieved, leading to a depletion of self-respect. Due to fear, mistrust develops, and due to mistrust, communication reduces, which further reduces effectual work output. People do not want to commit and, instead of seamless transactions, resort to verifying each step. As the person is always on guard, such a high level of mistrust leads to reduced social relations, which erodes the joy of work. (Ryan & Oestreich, 1998; Frost, 2007; Carlock, 2013)

Fig.2 Organizational Fear and Its Outcomes



*Loneliness:* Loneliness comprises a complex set of depressing and negative feelings wherein one believes that the

quality of existing relationships does not fulfill one's social needs. Loneliness not only influences self-perception but also

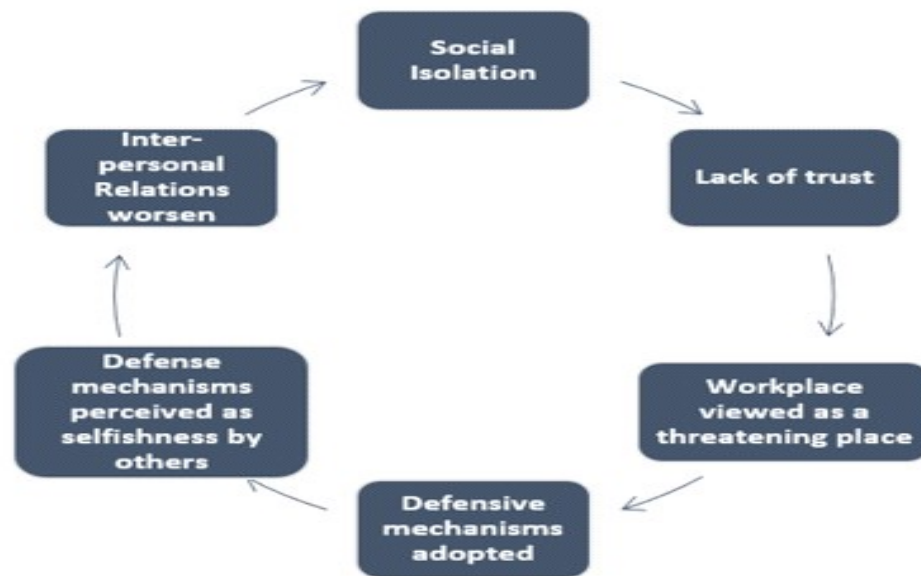
affects the perception about and behavior with others. Loneliness is a subjective construct, and the situations when a person will feel lonely will depend on that person's social and emotional needs and expectations. A person can be surrounded by many people and still feel lonely, whereas a person can lead a solitary life by choice and still not suffer from loneliness (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Loneliness is different from ostracism, a form of workplace incivility perpetrated by a group, wherein they deliberately ignore, exclude, or avoid a person or a group. (Lyu & Zhu, 2019; Wang et al., 2020)

Employees are social beings, and therefore they desire social acceptance from others, particularly in a workplace, where a significant period of their active time is spent. Experiences of ill-treatment or undermining from colleagues are as-

sociated with feelings of being excluded leading to sadness and stress. (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Ferris et al., 2008; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Short-duration loneliness is experienced by entry-level employees or persons working in a different cultural setting. However, it becomes a cause of worry when it is prolonged. Sustained loneliness can have severe consequences leading to a decline in cognitive ability and dementia. (Jones & Hebb, 2003; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

*Loneliness in the workplace leads to negative affectivity.* Due to near non-existent social relationships, a person turns cynical. The vicious circle shown in Fig. 3 explains how loneliness leads to some behavioral outcomes that further accentuate social separation.

Fig. 3 Vicious Circle of Loneliness



### **Organizational Injustice**

Organizational Justice is linked with the employee's perception of being treated fairly by the organization. If the employee believes that the organization and its policies have mistreated them, he feels anger, shame, and resentment. (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Bies & Tripp, 2005). The fairness of employee-organizational exchange is intricately connected to employee motivation and hence to employee work performance. (Masterson et al., 2000; Podsakoff et al., 2000).

### **Psychological Contract**

Organizational injustice often causes severe heartburn and stress among the employees. One reason that employees feel betrayed is connected to the breaking of the psychological contract.

Robinson and Rousseau (1994) explain that a psychological contract is a perception of an employee that (s)he is entitled to some benefits based on some implicit or explicit commitments made by the employer. The perception of employees and management regarding the agreed promises might not be the same, but each party believes that their interpretation is the correct one. Therefore, the expectations from both ends could be quite different.

Robinson and Rousseau (1994) contrast psychological contract with individual expectation. A psychological contract is linked to the trust dimension, and therefore when a psychological contract is broken, its impact is more severe than

unfulfilled expectations. In the case of expectations, employees are somewhat ready for a negative outcome. In the case of a psychological contract, employees feel it is obligatory on the part of the organization to fulfill its commitment. As such, the violation of a psychological contract brings in a feeling of betrayal. The violation showcases that the employers' actions do not match their words or, even worse, that their intentions were insincere from the beginning.

### **Organizational Justice**

Skarlicki and Folger (1997) identified three dimensions of organizational justice.

The first is called Distributive Justice (Adams, 1965) and is linked with perceived fairness in distributing benefits or resources. An example of distributive injustice would be all workers getting the same pay irrespective of the hour worked.

The second is called Procedural Justice (Levanthal, 1980) and is linked with the perception that the outcomes were derived using a fair process. Procedural justice is based on the ideas of consistency, meritocracy, and impersonal decision making. The adherence to procedural justice indicates that an organization views its social exchanges with its employees with seriousness and respect. (Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002; Aryee et al., 2004)

The third dimension is called Interactional Justice (Bies & Moag, 1986). Interactional justice is linked with interpersonal behavior be-

tween workers and their supervisors. Interactional justice is served when subordinates are treated with dignity and respect. (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997)

Procedural justice appeals to the cognitive dimension, whereas Distributive justice and Interactional justice appeal to the emotional dimensions. Therefore, organizational commitment is most affected by perceptions of procedural justice, whereas interpersonal behaviors and citizenship behaviors are affected by interactional justice perceptions. (Masterson et al., 2000; Aryee et al. 2004)

Extensive work has been done on the implications of perceived injustice in an organization. Perceived injustice leads to poor work attitudes and reduced job performance (Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991; Daly & Geyer, 1995), enhanced aggression, and reduced pro-social behaviors by employees (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997), dysfunctional behaviors such as sabotage or theft (Greenberg, 1990; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998).

### **Workplace Incivility**

Workplace incivility includes willful and sustained behaviors at the workplace that are not physical (hostile, verbal, and non-verbal behaviors) but are meant to demean and insult a fellow employee. Examples of uncivil behavior are abusive supervision, sexual harassment, rude or sarcastic responses, public insults, deliberate delays, and obstructions in work. (Tepper, 2000; Cortina et al., 2001; Zellars et al., 2002).

The perpetrator of workplace incivility can indulge in such activities for: a) personal gains (sadistic pleasure), (b) for task completion, or (c) it could be a case of Generalized Hierarchical Abuse. (Rospenda et al., 2000; Litzky et al., 2006)

### **Effects of Incivility**

Uncivil or hostile behaviors are perceived as demeaning by the employees. Abused subordinates have reported greater psychological distress and increased dissatisfaction with their personal and professional lives than their non-abused colleagues. (Zellars et al., 2002; Hoobler & Brass, 2006)

Workplace incivility is a significant and pervasive organizational problem. Carlock (2013) reports that approximately 37 % of American workers have suffered health issues due to workplace incivility, and around 49 % of workers have witnessed this phenomenon in their workplace<sup>2</sup>.

### **Organizational Politics**

Organizational politics is defined as an informal interpersonal behavior by an individual or a set of individuals for their interest and at the expense of other individuals or organizational goals. (Randall et al., 1999; Aryee et al., 2004). Pfeffer (1981) mentions organizational politics as the "study of power in action." Power refers to the control of few persons over

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<sup>2</sup> Zogby International Workplace Bullying Survey 2007.

reward (tangible: leaves, postings; intangible: respect, including in social circle) and punishment (postings at hardship locations) and using that control to “induce unwilling compliance.” Political behaviors vitiate the organizational atmosphere and lower the group trust leading to reduced informal communication – which in turn, leads to mistrust, higher transactional costs, and lower productivity. (Bozeman et al. 1996; Samuel, 2010. Some specific political behaviors have been discussed below:

*Backstabbing* is intentional covert behavior that seeks to harm individuals while pretending to be their well-wisher. Backstabbing involves discrediting a person, stealing an idea, taking credit for others’ work, and malicious gossiping. (Malone, 2007; Carlock, 2013)

*Blaming* is another intentional action wherein failures of other persons are highlighted or their achievements are denigrated. Blaming can be both proactive and reactive. Proactive blaming is designed to show the other (primarily competitors for promotion or bonus) in a poor light, thereby getting a more favorable status. (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick & Mayes, 1979).

The reactive version of blaming is called *Scapegoating*. It is a survival mechanism deployed by persons associated with a failed project to ‘get off the hook.’ In this situation, efforts are made to minimize one’s association with the failed project and highlight mistakes of some other person or group of persons. The selection of prospective victim(s) is incidental in this case. (Allen et al., 1979)

*Using Information*: In a political environment, information is often strategically utilized or withheld. A commonly used variant is to give half information and withhold some significant part. The second variant of information sharing is called “overkill,” wherein a deluge of information is given to confuse the recipient. (Allen et al., 1979)

*Preferential Treatment (Favoritism, Cronyism & Nepotism)*: Preferential treatment involves giving rewards for reasons unconnected to work and performance. Favoritism happens when due to demographic similarity, a specific group or a person gets better treatment, benefits, or both. Cronyism happens when benefits are given to persons in a close group, though they might be demographically different. Nepotism involves giving out prominent positions, opportunities, and benefits to close relatives or friends. (Samuel, 2010; Carlock, 2013)

*Turf Wars*: Turf wars are continuous sparring between various departments or regions of the same organization. Turf wars are an outcome of a lack of systemic thinking and lead to duplication of work and higher transactional costs. (Birkinshaw, 2001; Carlock, 2013)

### **Organizational Retaliatory Behaviors**

Some organizational policies and practices (organizational injustice, workplace incivility, and organizational politics) or deviant behaviors by some se-

nior employees or group of employees can bring about a desire for revenge. These actions, called Organizational Retaliatory Behaviors, are low-intensity deliberate behaviors and actions meant to harm an organization, employees, or both. (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997).

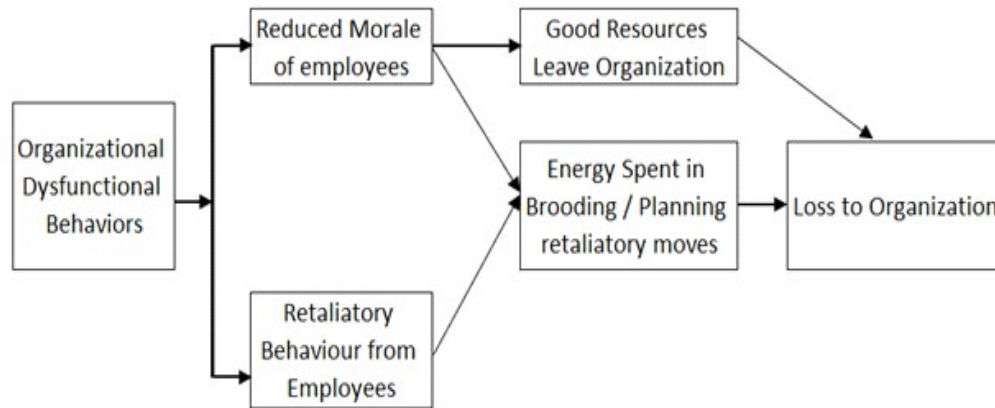
**Reactance Theory states that employees like to have a sense of control.**

Reactance Theory states that employees like to have a sense of control. Individuals who are targets of uncivil behavior or injustice feel a loss of control. To preserve a sense of autonomy and restore that sense of control, they

could indulge in retaliatory behavior (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wright & Brehm, 1982). The Organizational Justice theory conveys a similar idea that talks about Negative Reciprocity. As per this concept, the affected employee indulges in deviant activities to “restore a balance of justice.” (Bies & Tripp, 2005; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

Retaliatory behaviors by employees can have two levels. At a lower level of discontentment, employees do not follow the organization’s prescribed norms. As discontentment increases, disgruntled employees take more active actions such as theft or sabotage. (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998)

**Fig. 4 How Dysfunctional Behaviors Affect Organizational Productivity**



It can be seen from Fig. 4 that organizational dysfunctional behaviors affect employees’ morale, thereby affecting their productivity or even driving them to leave. Dysfunctional practices or toxic behaviors within organizations lead to lower employee self-esteem. In such organizations,

employees tend to focus more on organizational injustice and personal loss instead of concentrating on their work. Besides, such behaviors give rise to retaliatory behaviors from employees, which further harm the organization. (Appelbaum & Roy Girard, 2007; Frost, 2007)

Organizational Retaliatory Behaviors (ORB) is often manifested indirectly because the victim of uncivil behavior is usually less potent than the perpetrator. These indirect ways can include wastage of organizational resources, deliberate delay in processing orders, withdrawal of organizational citizenship behavior. (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007).

Another form of the indirect method of retaliation is called Displaced Deviant Behavior, guided by a classic Theory of Displaced Aggression given by Dollard et al. (1939). The displaced aggression theory says that individuals who are upset due to some cause or with some person may outpour (displace) their aggression on another person who is not the source. Disgruntled seniors who are unhappy with organizational policies take it out on hapless juniors

### Conclusion

In this article, we have critically discussed the antecedents, typology, and implications of a few organizational dysfunctional behaviors (ODBs). We discussed two hidden dysfunctional states – fear and loneliness and three important causes of ODBs – organizational injustice, workplace incivility, and organizational politics. We also discussed organizational retaliatory behaviors (ORBs) in general and displaced deviant behaviors, which are often outcomes of organizational policies and other dysfunctional behaviors. Further, the process of Organizational Fear, Loneliness, and ORBs has also been synthesized and explained.

The article also discusses the implications of dysfunctional behaviors. Appelbaum & Roy-Girard (2007) report that organizations had to spend billions in out-of-court settlements, severance payments, medical expenditure, and productivity losses due to dysfunctional behaviors.

**Dysfunctional organizational culture breeds mistrust, increases transaction costs, and prevents people from focusing on work, thereby “limiting individual- and group-level capabilities.”**

Therefore, it is vital for an organization to carefully examine its policies and processes and the deep-rooted cultural norms. A dysfunctional organizational culture breeds mistrust, increases transaction costs, and prevents people from focusing on work, thereby “limiting individual- and group-level capabilities.” Therefore, organizations must do a socio-cultural audit and look at the gaps between professed and practiced values. Besides investing in employees, facilitating employees to have a better connection within and better relationships with co-workers is also a worthwhile investment. (Samuel, 2010; Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006)

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