



Inevitable violations? Etiology of deviance in organizations

Maurizio Catino¹

Received: 25 December 2024 / Accepted: 9 January 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract

People in organizations bypass safety rules, and commit theft, and other deviant acts. Is deviance in organizations primarily driven by self-interest, or do organizational factors play role? And is punishment the best strategy for dealing with it? This article addresses these questions focusing on a specific type of organizational deviance—rule violations. While rule violations are often explained using individual-level mechanisms, including character deficiencies, this article argues that violations are inevitable when there is decoupling between means and ends, between formal rules

and the actual performance requirements placed on operators. The article analyzes two case studies selected from very different organizational contexts – rail transport maintenance and career promotions in the judicial system – to inductively develop a general theory that explains a particular type of violations in organizations. From the research it emerges that violations in organizations are favored (1) by the degree of decoupling between an organization’s internal and external rules and the tasks to be carried out; and (2) by executors’ attitude (favorable or unfavorable) towards the norms. When formal governance in an organization fails to meet its objectives, an alternative, self-organized extralegal governance emerges to achieve the same goals through different, non-lawful methods. In such cases, punishment by itself is insufficient to reduce deviance. Rather, reducing means–ends decoupling requires enhancing the alignment of rules with established practices and strengthening consensus over the relevant norms.

Keywords Organizational deviance · Organizational rules · Violations · Decoupling

✉ Maurizio Catino
maurizio.catino@unimib.it

¹ Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, Via Bicocca Degli Arcimboldi 8, Milan 20126, Italy

Introduction

Deviance appears so widespread in organizations that it seems normal, more physiological than pathological. People in organizations commit theft (Greenberg, 1997), loaf (Kidwell & Bennett, 1993; Roy, 1959), and institutional abuses (Brown et al., 2020; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Keenan, 2012; Wadham & Connor, 2023), harass others (Fitzgerald et al., 1997), bypass safety rules (Hofmann & Stetzer, 1996; Reason, 1997), and engage in other deviant acts. This prevalence creates a scenario of normal organizational wrongdoing (Palmer, 2012). This view resonates with research showing how organizational structures and pressures can systematically produce misconduct (Greve et al., 2010). The frequency of deviance in organizations highlights an anomaly to be explained in both fieldwork and literature. Through the theory of decoupling and the study of two distinct cases, this article will address these issues, focusing on a specific type of organizational deviance—rule violations.

Rule violations have been explained by various theories and individual mechanisms, including character (Hogan, 1973), motivational (Vardi & Weiner, 1996) or incentive (Harris & Bromiley, 2007) deficiencies. Rule violations can be the consequence of uncontrolled automatic or intuitive inclinations (Knoch et al., 2006; Moore & Loewenstein, 2004; Shalvi et al., 2012), or poor task variety¹ (Derfler-Rozin et al., 2016). In addition, rule violations may occur in order to optimize work processes (Reason, 1997).

This article argues that, in some situations, violations are inevitable. When there is decoupling between means and ends, between formal rules and the actual performance requirements placed on operators to carry out activities, the risk of crossing the line between what is right and what is wrong is high. This helps explain why rule violations and deviance in organizations are so widespread. The persistence over time of these violations is ensured by substantial tolerance from supervisors, at least until something critical happens. In other words, the reason people break rules is the same reason that makes organizations effective and efficient.

The theory of decoupling has been used to analyze various settings such as schools (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976), hospitals (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1983), courts (Hagan et al., 1979), prisons (Thomas, 1984), financial markets (Westphal & Zajac, 1998), the corporate context (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011), environmental policies (Short & Toffel, 2010), the control system (Power, 1997), and many others.² Less attention has been paid to the consequences of decoupling as a mechanism favoring deviance and violations in organizations, apart from some exceptions (among these, Catino, 2023; Monahan & Quinn, 2006). The article aims to fill this gap.

In this article, organizational deviance refers to organizational members' voluntary, intentional departures from formal rules (norms, procedures, instructions) that govern organizational behavior, and this deviance benefits the organization. While

¹ Poor task variety is a job design issue where employees have to perform a limited number of repetitive tasks, which can lead to job dissatisfaction, low morale, and counterproductive work behavior like lateness or damaging equipment (Morf et al., 2017).

² For further details, see Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008); Greenwood et al. (2008); Bromley and Powell (2012).

these findings may apply to other forms of deviance, this excludes events caused solely by human error or planned criminal behaviors (e.g., fraud, corruption). To understand organizational deviance, it's essential to not only focus on deviant behavior within the organization but also consider both the organization and its environment as contexts that shape human actions.

When formal governance in an organization fails to meet its objectives, an alternative, self-organized extralegal governance tends to emerge to achieve the same goals through different, non-lawful methods. There is an inverse relationship between the quality of official governance and the rise of extralegal governance (Skarbek, 2020). Increased tension between internal and external demands can lead to decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2008), resulting in organizational deviance (Monahan & Quinn, 2006). To change or eliminate extralegal governance, it is essential to first address the formal governance mechanisms that create it. This article exploits two cases of different organizational contexts (rail transport and the judicial system) to inductively develop a theory that sheds light on the origin of a particular type of violations in organizations. The choice of these two cases is motivated by the paradox that both magistrates, who are charged with enforcing the laws, and railroad workers, who violate safety regulations designed to protect them, should strictly adhere to the rules. Means-ends decoupling is at the root of the two cases, the decoupling between the formally provided rules for performing activities and the actual performance requirements for carrying out the required activities.

The analysis of the two cases will highlight that deviance in organizations seems to be favored by a type of decoupling related to (1) how well an organization's internal or external rules fit the contingencies to be addressed; (2) the attitude (favorable or unfavorable) towards the norms by the executors.

In conclusion, I contend that any meaningful reduction of deviance depends on minimizing means-ends decoupling, which can be achieved by improving the alignment between formal rules and established practices and by fostering broader consensus regarding the norms.

Organizational violations and decoupling

The organizational decoupling

The theory of organizational decoupling offers insight into how deviance arises in organizations. Meyer and Rowan (1977) discussed how organizations conform to institutional environments through isomorphism, adopting formal structures as myths rather than practical tools. This is especially true for organizations lacking intrinsic efficiency criteria, such as schools or political parties, which prioritize external legitimacy to survive.

When external pressures conflict with internal efficiency, decoupling arises. Meyer and Rowan describe two parallel structures: one formal, adhering to institutional rules, and another informal, prioritizing efficiency. Decoupling lets organizations maintain legitimacy while adjusting internal operations. This system is effective as long as controls remain minimal and ceremonial. Factors at individual, organizational, and

institutional levels heighten the likelihood of decoupling (Cole, 2005, 2012; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Westphal & Zajac, 2001). In heterogeneous environments, organizations adopt multiple strategies to address inconsistent institutional demands.

Organizations operating in heterogeneous environments often adopt strategic responses to manage tensions and maintain legitimacy. One common approach is *decoupling*, where organizations formally implement structures or policies that meet external expectations while keeping their core operations unchanged—creating a gap between appearance and practice. Another strategy is *selective coupling*, in which organizations align with certain institutional demands while ignoring others, based on perceived relevance or feasibility (Ye et al., 2024). Alternatively, they may adopt a *compromise strategy*, partially conforming to multiple, sometimes conflicting, demands to sustain legitimacy across different constituencies (Pache & Santos, 2010). In some cases, organizations *practice avoidance*, shielding themselves from competing pressures by working in areas where such demands are less intense or by limiting exposure to institutional scrutiny (Wang et al., 2025). A more assertive response is *defiance*, where organizations reject specific institutional expectations, challenging their legitimacy or relevance (Pache & Santos, 2010). Lastly, *hybridization* involves blending elements from different institutional logics to create innovative structures or routines that reconcile conflicting requirements (Ye et al., 2024). The chosen strategy depends on several factors, including the nature of the institutional demands, organizational capabilities, and the surrounding environment. For example, a large multinational operating across varied regulatory and cultural contexts may find selective coupling or hybridization especially effective. In contrast, a smaller organization facing pressure from both a dominant regulatory agency and internal stakeholders might prefer compromise or decoupling as more practical options.

Sometimes, decoupling is infeasible due to resource or capability limitations, as shown in studies of isomorphic national structures and differing political practices (Camp Keith, 1999; Drori et al., 2003; Lim & Tsutsui, 2012; Meyer et al., 1997; Thomas et al., 1987). Decoupling preserves efficiency (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1983) and increases legitimacy (Westphal & Zajac, 1998; Zott & Nguyen Huy, 2007), bridging gaps between policies and practices, and between means and ends (Bromley & Powell, 2012). Thus, policies often diverge from daily practices.

Decoupling at the policy-practice level happens when rules are either unimplemented or consistently violated. At the means-ends level, it arises when policies are implemented, but their connection to outcomes is unclear. Bromley and Powell argue that means-ends decoupling is more prevalent today, adding complexity to organizations. Policy-practice decoupling, while widely studied, often manifests as ceremonial policies weakly enforced and barely altering daily routines (Bromley & Powell, 2012). However, this type is less common than often suggested (Bromley et al., 2009; Coburn, 2004).

Means-ends decoupling, more frequent and significant, occurs where structures impact activities, yet their link to effectiveness remains obscure (Bromley & Powell, 2012, 14). Organizations implement practices and evaluations that are weakly tied to outcomes. Bromley and Powell note its prevalence increases in contexts where

results are hard to measure, laws focus on procedures over results, or fragmented environments exist. This form is crucial to understanding organizational deviance, its causes, and spread, as explored in the two case studies.

Decoupling and rule violation

Neo-institutional theory on decoupling highlights its role in organizational deviance. Organizations often violate rules, as strain theory suggests, when achieving goals is blocked by restrictive means (Merton, 1938; Vaughan, 1982, 2016). As classic strain theorists have observed, when legitimate means are constrained, actors may resort to alternative, sometimes illegitimate, means to accomplish organizational goals (Cloward, 1959).

For instance, NASA's decisions tied to competition and resource scarcity reveal how decoupling fosters misconduct. Decoupling enables deviance by allowing flexibility and ceremonial controls, as seen in Barama Ltd.'s unethical practices under sustainability certification (Whiteman & Cooper, 2016) or increased abuses after ratifying human rights treaties (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Flexibility, while balancing efficiency and legitimacy, creates room for fraud, as observed in Abu Ghraib prison (Monahan & Quinn, 2006).

Organizational deviance includes intentional violations benefiting operators or organizations, deviating from norms or laws. Unlike errors, violations are intentional and shaped by social, cultural, and managerial contexts (Reason, 1997). Routine and optimizing violations occur due to human tendencies to reduce effort, often in environments that neglect to punish violations. Exceptional violations, by contrast, arise from unique conditions and are less frequent. Minimizing violations requires managers to account for human tendencies and operational realities. Deviance often stems from organizational pressures, normalizing behaviors that conflict with rules, making violations a key focus for understanding organizational misconduct.

There is a strong link between violations and accidents, with rule breaches contributing to 70% of accidents in some industries (Mason, 1997). Free (1994) found violations play a key role in British railway accidents. While violations are often viewed negatively, Desai (2010) suggests they can foster learning by highlighting outdated rules and prompting better practices. Managers could use patterns of violations to address underlying issues. Organizations face a constant tension between human behavior and system rules. High-risk systems enforce procedures to ensure safety and productivity, but conflicting norms often force operators into "situational violations" (Reason, 1997), choosing between safety and production rules.

A notable example is coupling and uncoupling train wagons. Operators must violate either a safety or production rule, as performing the task safely often requires breaching one rule. Fatal incidents have occurred, not solely due to violations but from low attention or poor coordination. A study conducted in the United Kingdom during the 1990s highlighted the risks associated with the work of shunters, who are responsible for train composition and, specifically, for coupling wagons before train departures (Free, 1994). The railway regulations in force at British Rail at the time

prohibited shunters from standing between two wagons if one of them was in motion, requiring that entry between wagons occur only after they had come to a complete stop. This regulation aimed to reduce the risk of being crushed between buffers—one of the main causes of serious accidents in the past. However, the observation of day-to-day operational practices revealed that many wagons were equipped with couplings that were too short, making connection impossible when the buffers were fully extended. The best way of making this connection was by remaining between the wagons during the easing-up process. As a result, the rule intended to improve safety ended up systematically inducing shunters to violate it. Yet it was not the rule violation itself that directly caused the accidents, but rather the subsequent errors to which operators were exposed: momentary distractions, incorrect positioning between wagons, or the possibility of slipping on the tracks.

The absence of a technically efficient alternative made exposure to risk unavoidable, progressively normalizing non-compliant behavior. In this context, a perception became entrenched among shunters that a minor violation would not lead to significant harm, even though it remained formally unauthorized. Beyond the practical implications and the ways in which the issue has since been addressed in modern railways, what is most significant here is the paradoxical effect of certain safety regulations: while aimed at prohibiting previously dangerous behaviors, they may inadvertently generate new forms of risk exposure within actual operational settings. These violations stem from means-ends decoupling, forcing operators to breach rules to complete tasks (Free, 1994; Reason, 1997, 49–51).

Replacing personnel does not address the underlying issue, as the problem stems from systemic organizational pressures that render rule violations virtually inevitable.

Empirical settings: Inevitable violations at work

Researching violations in organizations is challenging due to their “clandestine informal interdependencies” (Anteby, 2008) and the lack of robust methodologies for analyzing complex events (Rasmussen, 1990; Snook, 2000; Yin, 2018). My research examines two case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018) drawn from distinct organizational settings: railway maintenance and a judicial commission responsible for evaluating magistrates for promotion. Both cases are characterized by systematic violations occurring in contexts where strict compliance with rules is expected—safety regulations for railway workers and legal-procedural norms for magistrates.

I employed triangulation to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Triangulation is a methodological strategy used to enhance the validity and reliability of research findings by integrating multiple data sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives. Its primary purpose is to cross-verify information from different angles, thereby strengthening the credibility of the conclusions and mitigating potential biases.

Specifically, I adopted four types of triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1987): data triangulation using multiple sources, investigator triangulation involving diverse analysts, theoretical triangulation drawing on varied frameworks, and methodological triangulation incorporating interviews, documents, and multimedia materials.

This approach enabled a more complete reconstruction of the two cases and facilitated the validation of information through the convergence of different sources.”

As an external observer, I reconstructed organizational structures and processes retrospectively based on documents and interviews rather than direct participation. Specifically, I used the following types of sources³:

- (1) Written documents. Legislative acts, internal regulations, and procedures of the two organizational contexts.
- (2) Interviews. I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews, by phone, and via video conference with some members of the two organizations. In particular, the judicial case is based on interviews and conversations (including repeated ones) with serving magistrates, members of the Superior Council of the Judiciary, and experts in judicial organization, interventions, and interviews that appeared in the media or elsewhere with serving or retired magistrates,⁴ and the press. The railway context case is based on interviews and conversations (including repeated ones) with railway workers, operators and maintenance workers, investigative journalists specializing in the incident case, and defense lawyers for the parties involved in the incident.
- (3) Mass media. I systematically analyzed the media coverage over time of the two events by the main newspapers; investigative TV programs and newscasts; interviews and video testimonies of the main actors involved in the event.

The study of the two cases reconstructs the “concrete system of action” (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977) of maintenance (railway system) and career management of magistrates (judicial system). The objective is to compare the elements of the formal organization—regulations, ordinances, and normative sources—with the reconstructions, statements, and empirical sources that describe the real organization. To do this, I used internal documents and regulations of the analyzed organizations. The aim of the interviews and textual analysis was to analyze the correspondence or lack thereof between what is provided for in the normative text and formal regulations and the real organizational practice. That is, what actually happens when implementing formal rules, how it works, and what mechanisms underlie extra-legal governance, what issues of effectiveness and efficiency it allows to resolve. In other words, what are the “good reasons” obviously for the actors—for having followed such widespread extra-legal practices.

The empirical analysis favored the longitudinal-historical dimension, integrating history, ethnography, and complex organizations (Vaughan, 2016, 61-459). This is not so much because these are past events, but rather because, to explain the event, it was essential to reconstruct the “long history” of their incubation period. I retrospectively reconstructed the events, integrating the individual level (micro), with the meso (organizational) and macro (organizational field) levels, from a longitudinal perspective.

³ See the complete list in the Sources section at the end of the article.

⁴ In reference to the issue of organizational change and learning see Catino et al., 2023.

The CSM affair and Judges' careers

In May 2019, a huge public scandal emerged in the Italian judiciary, involving the Superior Council of the Judiciary (CSM - the self-governing body of the Italian judiciary), concerning the management of judges' careers. Specifically, it related to the appointment procedures of court presidents and chief prosecutors. This scandal revealed that judges' careers and promotions were not based on merit—as required by law—but primarily on belonging to one of the four groups (*correnti*) that make up the National Association of Magistrates (ANM), the association of Italian judges.

During the investigation, it emerged that a magistrate, president of the ANM and a former member of the CSM (2014-2018), often met with members of political parties and other individuals in a Rome hotel to decide on the appointments of court presidents and chief prosecutors. Despite the hyper-legalistic and complex framework provided by the law, the most important judicial roles were assigned through an informal bargaining process. In this scenario, the ANM groups managed the relations between external actors (politicians) and internal members of the CSM. The CSM and the judiciary framed the scandal as the result of “a few bad apples” among the judges and continued to ignore the underlying systemic problems.

Unlike many European civil law countries, in Italy, all magistrates, judges, and prosecutors belong to the same professional category.⁵ They are recruited through the same public competition procedure, and throughout their careers, they can move from one function to another, albeit with some limitations. The Superior Council of the Judiciary is chaired by the President of the Republic and is composed of two-thirds (16) judges elected by their peers, and one-third (8) lay members with legal training elected by both houses of Parliament in a joint session. The CSM makes all decisions regarding the status of judges and prosecutors. It has the power over the selection, assignment, transfer, and promotion of judges, as well as disciplinary measures. Among its functions, the CSM has the authority to select and appoint court presidents and chief prosecutors after evaluating “the best candidates” among those received by an ad hoc internal commission. Only judges who meet career requirements can apply.

A complex and bureaucratic evaluation process. The CSM case highlighted the existence of an extralegal governance system of judges' career paths involving almost all Italian magistrates. The appointments of chief prosecutors and court presidents were decided through informal contacts between the four groups that make up the National Association of Magistrates and relevant extrajudicial actors such as the government, Parliament, political parties, the President of the Republic, and other stakeholders.

This extralegal governance system emerged in response to a number of difficult-to-solve problems, primarily that of contrast between bureaucratic rules designed to achieve merit-based selection and the resources and efficiency requirements needed

⁵After more than sixty years, a law currently under discussion in 2025 may introduce the separation of career paths for public prosecutors and judges. The law will be submitted to a confirmatory referendum in 2026. However, even if the separation of careers were to be approved, the problems identified here would not be resolved.

to carry out the selection. Until 2006, judges' career paths were primarily based on seniority. Starting in 2006, the Italian Parliament introduced new rules for judges' career advancement aimed at selecting candidates with strong managerial skills. The new complex selection process involves evaluation reports produced by various judicial bodies and offices. All these reports are collected in a dossier and submitted to the final evaluation of the CSM's Fifth Commission, the unit in charge of selecting court presidents, consisting of (only) six members. Finally, the opinion of the Fifth Commission is submitted to the CSM plenum for final ratification. Each candidate's dossier consists of multiple qualitative and quantitative data collected from different offices, namely: a) all previous professional evaluations; b) statistical summaries of the candidate's workload in the previous three years; c) documents that can usefully demonstrate professional experience; d) the candidate's proposed organizational project for the office they are applying for; e) CSM inspection reports; f) if necessary, the minutes of the Fifth Commission's hearings; g) inspection reports from the Ministry of Justice; h) any other relevant documents or information. According to the new procedure, in summary, candidates' evaluations must be based on many indicators and different, heterogeneous, and uninformative documents. On average, the Fifth Commission receives at least 8-9 opinions or reports for each applicant. Based on these documents, it calculates about 30 different indicators and formulates an opinion.

Such a long list of documents and the high number of actors suggest an extremely bureaucratic selection process, conflicting with the logic of efficiency that should characterize the evaluation activity. Efficiency requires practical, clear, simple, and quickly formulated criteria to classify candidates and fill job positions. Instead, several features of the described complex bureaucratic process make candidates' evaluations difficult to carry out in practice. This is due to a large quantitative dimension with a multitude of documents to evaluate; a complex qualitative dimension as it is extremely difficult to extract adequate data from these documents, which contain lengthy descriptions of their activities or vague positive feedback. There is also a stringent temporal dimension, with tight deadlines complicated to manage in light of a high number of applications (1050 applications to evaluate in the 2014-2018 four-year period). All this within a system characterized by scarce resources (only six magistrates in the selection commission), a defective evaluation culture among CSM magistrates who, moreover, lack expertise in human resource management. In summary, a bureaucratic, complex, and time-consuming formal procedure, coupled with the CSM's lack of resources and expertise, has made adherence to new formal policies an impractical option for the CSM.

Decoupling: the extralegal governance system to manage trade-offs

In the case of the CSM, the formal procedure is formally followed, but in reality, candidates' dossiers are often ignored, and the appointments of court presidents were decided through an extralegal governance system. To address such complex problems, the CSM relies on an extralegal governance system based on political logic and consensus-building rather than professional and evaluative logic. As required by law, the CSM plenum, on the recommendation of the Fifth Commission, appoints court presidents and chief prosecutors. Candidates are effectively chosen in advance by the

ANM groups through a collusive process based on bargaining. Specifically, the selection process consists of discussions among members of the same faction, discussions among faction leaders, and frequent contacts between the latter and the Fifth Commission members. Agreements reflect the balance of power among the factions, and the main criterion is the candidates' faction affiliation rather than their actual merits.

In summary, the ANM groups have become the actual key actors of the extralegal governance system for appointments. They have acquired such influential status because they were already powerful actors who, entirely managing the elections of the Superior Council of the Judiciary, were then able to influence the CSM's decisions themselves. After the 2006 reform, this faction-centered decision-making mechanism was used to address a problematic trade-off between bureaucratic rules and efficiency, a means-ends decoupling between formal rules and goal-pursuing requirements in selecting chief prosecutors and court presidents. In a context characterized by low alignment between rules and established practices, those tasked with applying the norms tended to adopt a broadly oppositional stance, while those responsible for enforcement generally displayed a tolerant attitude.

Trains. the Brandizzo incident and the maintenance case

A few minutes before midnight on August 30, 2023, an empty passenger train traveling towards Turin at about 100 km/h struck and killed on the spot five workers from a maintenance company, who had just begun working on the tracks at the Brandizzo station in the province of Turin, Italy. The accident appears to have been caused by an authorization for the start of maintenance work given by the head of operations at Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (the company that manages the railway network) at the Brandizzo station to the maintenance crew, without having received an actual authorization from the traffic controller (the person managing railway traffic in that section) based in Chivasso (Turin), and with train traffic still active.

The maintenance procedure requires that shortly before the start of the maintenance intervention, the head of operations requests authorization from the traffic controller to interrupt the line for the work, filling out a coded paper form specifying the location of the interruption, the time, and other information. This request is transmitted by the head of operations to the traffic controller via phonogram, dictated and recorded over the phone: one writes and the other repeats to verify that the message is correct.

If the traffic controller authorizes the interruption, the head of operations then authorizes in writing the start of work to the foreman of the maintenance company or the work group. Upon completion of the work and after on-site verification, the flow of communications travels in the opposite direction: from the maintenance workers to the head of operations, and finally to the traffic controller. Only from that moment can the line be reopened to traffic and trains allowed to pass again.

As emerged from the initial investigations, this authorization from the traffic controller was never given to the head of operations, indeed it was denied three times in three phone calls between 23:26 and 23:47 on August 30. The last phone call occurred just as the accident was happening. The head of operations instead gave the go-ahead for the work, committing a violation (intentional, albeit not malicious) and then an error (unintentional). The violation consisted of authorizing the start of work

before receiving clearance from the traffic controller, done to speed up operations and meet deadlines. Train traffic would have been managed using the visual control technique and warning workers to move off the tracks (“If I say train, go that way” is the phrase heard in the video shot with the cellphone of one of the victims moments before the accident). The error was a distraction favored by the fact that, shortly before the accident, a train had passed, which might have led the head of operations to (erroneously) think that the expected train, after which the work could start, had actually already passed, while in reality, one last, unplanned train was still to come. Therefore, the head of operations must have felt reassured that there were no more dangers. In any case, there was no authorization, neither on paper nor by phone. He himself admitted to making a mistake.

Decoupling: the extralegal governance system to manage trade-offs

Prescriptive controls over work processes will not absolutely guarantee safe behavior, even if the personnel scrupulously comply. Moreover, safety rules and procedures can never be entirely exhaustive or universally appropriate. There will always be situations where rules are unavailable or where local specifics do not allow the applicability of available rules (Reason et al., 1998).

The procedure for authorizing the opening of the maintenance site for over 70% of the railway network is based on a rather outdated paper and phonogram communication system. Regarding maintenance activities, Reason and Hobbs (2003) stated that “Maintenance offers many opportunities and temptations for situational violations. Personnel are often faced with the dilemma of being urged by their employers to follow the procedures, while at the same time being encouraged to meet often pressing deadlines” (58) ... “Maintenance jobs typically start and finish with documentation (64) ... Poorly designed procedures are a common source of maintenance error (70)”.

This communication and authorization system is inadequate for situations requiring prompt operations and leaves the door open to possible adaptations to account for the needs of maintenance work. Work, if not completed on time, would create delays on the line with consequent economic penalties for Rete Ferroviaria Italiana. Therefore, the head of operations at RFI is incentivized to complete maintenance operations within the indicated time, even if insufficient, under penalty of losing reputation.

This can favor, as seems to emerge, the realization of inevitable violations, made to achieve the goal within the increasingly reduced timeframes. Operators could hardly exceed the times, even in the event of unforeseen events. Operators acted in conditions of “the need to anticipate risk and control danger in short time intervals constrained by urgency or time pressure. Urgency characterizes unexpected and risky situations that require adequate responses in short times. Time pressure concerns situations with deadlines where there is a conflict between given times and the times the operator estimates necessary for action, a conflict that can destabilize them” (De la Garza et al., 2011, p. 2). Therefore, operators try to achieve maintenance goals as a sort of obstacle course to be completed within a certain time.

A very common condition not only at the railway station where the accident happened. Knowing, for example, that a train was late, getting ahead with the work was

not unusual. With two or three hours available to close a site, it happened that some safety measures were bypassed. It was not rare, indeed, the practice of starting work on the tracks before authorization, to be able to complete the work on time. Similar events occurred and, in some cases, near misses happened, as stated by some maintenance workers working for the railway infrastructure manager: “I report two very similar episodes. One happened to me, the other to a colleague. We were operating near the station when we realized that a train was arriving on the tracks that we considered interrupted. We immediately moved away. We later discovered that, due to a misunderstanding, the traffic controller had resumed train traffic both on our interrupted section and on another track, where the work had already been completed.” The second episode is similar: “Train traffic was resumed at the scheduled time, but they forgot that my colleague’s team had not yet communicated to the station that they had finished due to the extension of the work” (La Stampa, September 5, 2023).

This alternative practice of managing authorizations for maintenance interventions was very widespread, even systemic. Another three near misses occurred a few hours after the Brandizzo accident with workers working on maintenance without train traffic being interrupted (La Stampa, October 31, 2023). In the days following the accident, hundreds of reports arrived at the judiciary or unions from workers and maintenance workers who reported being sent to work on the tracks without authorization to proceed (La Repubblica, September 9, 2023). A similar event occurred in 2014 in the province of Caltanissetta, resulting in the death of three maintenance workers. Even in the case of the Pioltello (Milan) accident on January 25, 2018, where three people died and about a hundred were injured, similar maintenance management practices to those of Brandizzo seemed common. To reduce the waiting times between requesting and receiving authorization, the head of operations warned the maintenance team with a whistle to move off the track when the train was passing.

In this way, the interdependence between the maintenance components shifts from pooled interdependence to reciprocal interdependence (Thompson, 1967), with coordination by mutual adjustment. This coordination method imposes increasing burdens on communication and decision-making, unsupported by any procedure or safety rule, especially in higher-risk situations.

Such a practice, apparently widespread not only in Brandizzo, thus leads over time to a phenomenon of normalization of deviance (Vaughan, 2016): people within an organization can become progressively so insensitive to deviant practices that they no longer consider them wrong. In this way, the violation, initially exceptional or rare, becomes routine. And it is in these situations that attention levels drop, and workers face dangerous activities without adequate defenses as if it were normal. In these situations, an error, always possible, can lead to disaster.

Discussion: deviance and decoupling

The two cases reveal work areas where workers and supervisors engaged in officially prohibited yet tolerated practices, unaddressed until critical events—like a fatal railway accident or judicial scandal—brought them to public attention. These practices

violated organizational rules but not state laws, though criminal charges followed public exposure.

In railway maintenance, safety-critical tasks involved visibly prohibited practices tolerated by the organization. Similarly, judiciary practices, though widely known, breached formal rules. Workers faced means-ends decoupling: tight performance demands clashed with strict procedural adherence. This misalignment forced operators to flexibly apply rules to meet deadlines, limiting freedom of choice. When accidents occurred, blame fell on rule violators, perpetuating organizational scapegoating (Catino, 2023). However, it is the conflicting demands and rules themselves that create inevitable violations.

In both analyzed cases, it is "licit deviance" at least until the critical event. Such practices were tolerated by the organizations, constituting "indulgency patterns" (Gouldner, 1954), which favored their duration over time, rooting as actual practices compared to formal ones. When the group's goals conflict with those of the organization, informal norms may arise that encourage rule violations. The supervisor, being close to the work group, may share the group's norms and therefore support such violations (Lawton, 1998, 91). This can lead to the phenomenon of the normalization of deviance (Vaughan, 2016). Several authors have shown how socialization processes in organizations and society can lead to the normalization of deviance (Catino, 2023; Crelinsten, 2003; Hochstetler & Copes, 2001; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). It is a process through which incremental decisions over time extend the boundaries of what is acceptable and accepted within a work group, in a management team, up to the entire organization. Thompson wrote that "Leniency by supervisors in enforcing rules is a way of creating an obligation for subordinates to respond energetically in emergencies" (1967, 124). These alternative practices are somewhat similar to Anteby's (2008) gray zones regarding tolerance by management and supervisors, but they differ in that they were closely connected to production goals, not primarily to the pursuit of identity goals.

But where do these practices originate? At the core of both cases lies means-ends decoupling—that is, a disconnect between the formal rules prescribed for performing activities and the actual performance demands required to execute them effectively.

Within this form of decoupling, two dimensions are of particular relevance:

- (1) the degree to which an organization's written rules—whether internally or externally produced—fit established practices and the contingencies they are intended to address; and
- (2) the dispositions of those charged with implementing these written rules.

(1) The first dimension refers to the degree of congruence between an organization's formal and explicit rules—let us call them written rules, whether produced internally by management or externally by legislators, regulatory agencies, or oversight bodies—and the activities they are designed to regulate. Written rules are elaborated based on models of functioning and governance of the work process, on one side, and based on the model of behavior of the executors (De Terssac, 1992).

However, these models are often incomplete because not all possible situations are foreseen, or they are unable to account for possible disruptions, that is, events that

may hinder the usual course of production (breakdowns, organizational contingencies, incidents, operational problems, etc.). Therefore, these limits favor the emergence of unwritten rules by operators as an organizational solution to face difficulties, solve problems, and achieve production. As Lawton argued, “If the rules do not work, within a particular situation, then people will violate in order to do the job” (1998, 91). These unwritten rules are not the result of individual strategies derived from individual interests but are a collective solution to a problem. In this way, unwritten rules coexist complementarily with written rules. In this regard, Snook (2000, 193) coined the concept of practical drift to indicate those situations where, when rules do not match the situation, pragmatic individuals adapt their behavior accordingly, based on their perception of performance demands, even by breaking the rules.

(2) The attitude towards the rules by the executors constitutes the second relevant dimension. Yager (1991) highlighted the relationship between managers' perception of the law as illegitimate or not necessarily restrictive and costly, leading to a lower likelihood of compliance with the law itself. Gouldner (1954) identified different types of bureaucracy based on the attitude towards the rules by the management of an organization and its workers: (1) "mock bureaucracy" when rules are seen as externally imposed by both management and workers, resulting in bureaucratic rules that exist but are largely ignored or inoperative, (2) "punishment-centered bureaucracy" when rules are imposed by one party on the other, focusing on rule enforcement regardless of their usefulness, (3) "representative bureaucracy" when both management and workers support the rules and abide by them, with voluntary consensus based on mutual interests.

According to Gouldner, all three types of bureaucracy can coexist in different areas of an organization. Therefore, rules respond more to the socially shared meaning that actors give to a particular situation rather than a technical function. Moreover, they must be considered and evaluated concerning the cultural context in which they are situated, as this context gives them meaning and cogency. Hence, when there is decoupling in the attitude towards rules by management and workers, together or one party towards the other (imposed or mock bureaucracy), the likelihood of organizational deviance increases. Establishing rules by imposition instead of consensus does not increase organizational compliance; on the contrary, it creates the basis for possible deviance (Table 1).

From the intersection of these two dimensions (how well the written rules fit, attitude towards norms), four main findings emerge from this research (see Table 2).

In particular:

- Proposition 1: When the degree of compatibility between rules and established practice is low, and the attitude towards rules by executors is contrary, the propensity for organizational deviance and violations is highest (quadrant 2).
- Proposition 2: When the degree of compatibility between rules and established practice is high, and the attitude towards rules by executors is favorable, compliance is highest (quadrant 3).
- Proposition 3: When the degree of compatibility between rules and established practice is low but the attitude towards rules by executors is favorable, the possibility of non-compliant behavior increases (quadrant 1).

Table 1 Qualitative evidence from the field (Selection)

| Dimensions | Representative quotes |
|---|--|
| <i>How well the rules fit</i> | <p>Trains The rules are a formal facade, but inapplicable (Interviewee 1). You make do with what's available... They have the time that's available, not the time they would like to have (Interviewee 1). The (logic of) safety is centered on (protection of) the machine and not on the protection of the person (Interviewee 6). The problem is that when there's a train delay, work begins (Interviewee 5). Maintenance companies pressured to complete activities; otherwise, they faced penalties... otherwise, maintenance couldn't be done (Interviewee 6). The IPC (the worksite protection instruction document) is something archaic (Interviewee 7)</p> <p>Judges The "documents from the judiciary school are ignored" (they are made but not used in evaluations; only the formal requirement is considered: whether the course was attended or not, without any consideration of the content or evaluation) (Interviewee 5). Appointments of managers cannot be decided without involving actual politics (Interviewee 5)</p> |
| <i>Attitude towards rules and norms</i> | <p>Trains They (the maintenance workers) do that work and live among the trains (Interviewee 1). Ansfisa (the regulation and control authority) has no responsibility... They've never seen a train pass (Interviewee 1). All these things change from one day to the next... You wouldn't have time to work before it changed (Interviewee 4). The rule arrives, you sign it, and put it in the drawer (Interviewee 4). When the new rule arrived, someone would say: explain it to me later (Interviewee 4). It's always been done this way, even if it's wrong (Interviewee 6). I've already started work in that section before (railway worker, La Stampa, September 3, 2023). It happened several times while I was there, we went on the track to hurry the work (railway worker, Il Corriere della Sera, September 5, 2023)</p> <p>Judges Each followed a specific geographical area. They interacted with the territory through "informants," trusted individuals who provided information about the candidates, reducing information asymmetry (Interviewees 8 and 9). Agreements among the leading members of the currents aimed not so much at identifying the most suitable magistrate for a certain position, but rather at distributing positions to maintain a balance of power among the currents (Interviewees 2, 16, and 17). The mechanism of distribution agreements among the currents is integrated by relational activities, conducted outside the venues permitted by formal regulation, with actors external to the CSM and the judiciary (Interviewees 1, 6, and 5)</p> |

Table 2 Etiology of organizational deviance

| | | ATTITUDE TOWARDS NORMS | |
|-----------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| | | Favorable | Contrary |
| THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE RULES FIT | Low | Non-compliant behavior 1 | Inevitable violations 2 |
| | High | 3 Compliance | 4 Non-compliant behavior |

- Proposition 4: When the degree of compatibility between rules and established practice is high but the attitude towards rules by executors is contrary, the possibility of non-compliant behavior increases (quadrant 4).

From these findings, we suggest a more general model of how means-ends decoupling can favor organizational deviance, leading to a vicious circle (see Fig. 1).

Initially, a means-end situation favors a low level of compatibility between rules and established practice, coupled with a contrary attitude towards these rules by the workers. This increases the propensity for organizational deviance, making violations inevitable in many cases with the creation of alternative unwritten rules to pursue the work activity. Superstitious learning (Levitt & March, 1988) emerges, an erroneous inference resulting from short-term learning aimed at reinforcing the written rule, even if unsuitable. Therefore, a means-ends decoupling situation is reproduced. Instead of modifying the misalignment between the formal rule and the task to be performed, a self-fulfilling diagnosis (Azoulay et al., 2010) is implemented, where diagnosis means "the identification of a problem of a certain type, which then guides the inference processes that circumscribe the treatment that is indicated" (505).

This model constitutes a starting point. Future studies may add new elements to the model and/or show additional mechanisms of the vicious circle. Moreover, decoupling situations can produce functional effects on the organizational system, with greater efficiency and goal achievement, but also dysfunctional effects such as organizational accidents.

For Gouldner (1954) and Crozier (1964), non-compliance allows the organization to move forward; however, this research reveals the dark side. Non-compliance is not always positive and can cause disasters, as in the case of the Brandizzo railway

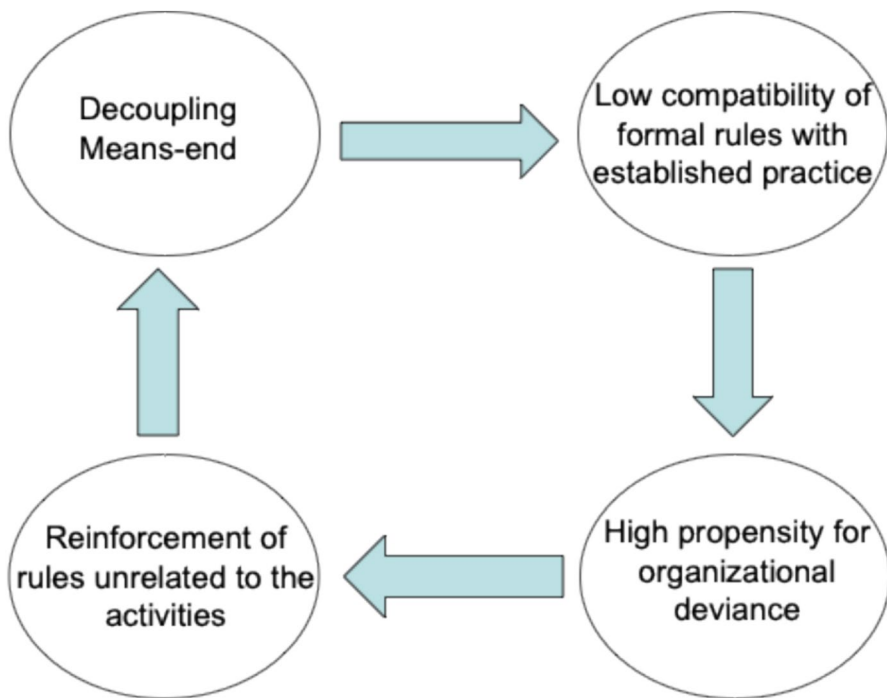


Fig. 1 The vicious circle of decoupling and organizational deviance

accident. According to Gouldner, safety rules would be an example of representative bureaucracy, of shared norms, as workers do not want to get hurt, and management does not want production to stop. However, the railway case shows different behavior, of mock bureaucracy when safety rules are not appropriate for the task at hand. Facade and obsolete rules compared to the evolving task requirements. March et al. (2000) argue that suspending a rule is the death of the rule itself. Instead, the rule can be practically suspended while continuing to exist formally, and management can claim that the rule exists when things go wrong, such as after an accident (Zhou, 1997).

Conclusions

Violations exist because rules exist. This study documents how and why some forms of organizational deviance, such as "inevitable violations," are so widespread and enduring in organizations. When an organization's formal governance (e.g., written rules) does not work as it should, when it fails to ensure the achievement of the indicated objectives, a form of extralegal governance (e.g., unwritten practices and rules) tends to develop. An emergent and self-organized form, alternative to the legal-formal one, to pursue the same demands, albeit in different ways. There is, therefore, an inversely proportional relationship between the quality of official governance and the importance of extralegal governance (Skarbek, 2020). As emerged in the two analyzed cases, the lower the degree of compatibility between rules and established practice and the higher the task uncertainty, the greater the possibility of organizational deviance and non-compliant behavior.

The emerging paradox concerns the relationship between organizational regulation and behavioral autonomy. Organizational regulation and procedures aim to produce predictability and regularity in operators' behavior within organizations, to reduce operators' discretion, understood as the action spaces that operators choose between behavioral alternatives within an externally regulated work process. However, in situations of means-ends decoupling, not only does discretion not decrease, but the propensity for behavior based on autonomy, i.e., operators' ability to self-regulate and govern their action process, increases (De Terssac, 1992).

The analysis of the two cases is necessarily provisional and suggestive. The lessons learned provide the basis for a series of theoretical propositions that would be useful to systematically test in future research. In conclusion, the findings of this research have theoretical and practical implications for organization science. Theoretically, as this study shows the increasing necessity, as already argued by Barley and Kunda (2001), of bringing work back into organization studies and into the theory of organizational deviance, in particular. It is necessary to study social systems in organizations (Anteby, 2008; Homans, 1950) to understand the etiology of organizational deviance. Practically, as this study highlights how exclusively punitive measures do not remove the generating conditions of some forms of deviance in organizations. At the same time, motivational strategies, social influence, or incentive-based strategies do not work in cases like these (Lehman & Ramanujam, 2009; Martin et al., 2013; Tyler & Blader, 2005). To increase compliance, it is necessary to reduce means-ends decoupling by increasing the degree of compatibility between rules and established

practice and reducing the degree of uncertainty about the activity to be performed. When an organization's formal governance does not work, an extralegal one develops. If we want to reduce extralegal governance, we need to change the legal one that generates it.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-026-10266-5>.

Author's contribution I am the only author of the manuscript.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Milano - Bicocca within the CRUI-CARE Agreement. No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical approval Not applicable.

Statement regarding research involving human participants and/or animals Not applicable.

Informed consent Not applicable.

Competing interests Not applicable.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Anteby, M. (2008). *Moral gray zones: Side productions, identity, and regulation in an aeronautic plant*. Princeton University Press.
- Azoulay, P., Repenning, N. P., & Zuckerman, E. W. (2010). Nasty, brutish, and short: Embeddedness failure in the pharmaceutical industry. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55, 472–507.
- Barley, S. R., & Kunda, G. (2001). Bringing work back in. *Organization Science*, 12(1), 76–95.
- Boxenbaum, E., & Jonsson, S. (2008). Isomorphism, diffusion, and decoupling. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, & K. Sahlin (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 78–98). SAGE Publications.
- Bromley, P., Hwang, H., & Powell, W. W. (2009). *Common tendencies and divergent responses: Critical junctures in the institutionalization of strategic planning in nonprofits*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.
- Bromley, P., & Powell, W. W. (2012). From smoke and mirrors to walking the talk: Decoupling in the contemporary world. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 6(1), 1–48.
- Brown, S., Redmond, T., Rees, D., Ford, S., & King, S. (2020). Truth project thematic report: Child sexual abuse in the contexts of schools. *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*.

- Camp Keith, L. (1999). The United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Does it make a difference in human rights behavior? *Journal of Peace Research*, 36(1), 95–118.
- Catino, M. (2023). *Scapegoating: How organizations assign blame*. Cambridge University Press.
- Catino, M., Dallara, C., & Rocchi, S. (2023). The organizational reasons for wrongdoing: The case of Italy's Superior Council of the Judiciary (CSM). *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 79(4), 453–472.
- Cense, M., & Brackenridge, C. (2001). Temporal and developmental risk factors for sexual harassment and abuse in sport. *European Physical Education Review*, 7(1), 61–79.
- Cloward, R. A. (1959). Illegitimate means, anomie, and deviant behavior. *American Sociological Review*, 4(1), 164–176.
- Coburn, C. (2004). Beyond decoupling: Rethinking the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom. *Sociology of Education*, 77, 211–244.
- Cole, W. M. (2005). Sovereignty relinquished? Explaining commitment to the international human rights covenants, 1966–1999. *American Sociological Review*, 70(3), 472–495.
- Cole, W. M. (2012). Human rights as myth and ceremony? Reevaluating the effectiveness of human rights treaties, 1981–2007. *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(4), 1131–1171.
- Covaleski, M. A., & Dirsmith, M. W. (1983). Budgeting as a means for control and loose coupling. *Accounting, Organizations, and Society*, 8, 323–330.
- Crelinsten, R. D. (2003). The world of torture: A constructed reality. *Theoretical Criminology*, 7(3), 293–318.
- Crozier, M. (1964). *The bureaucratic phenomenon*. University of Chicago Press.
- Crozier, M., & Friedberg, E. (1977). *L'acteur et le système*. Éditions du Seuil.
- De Terssac, G. (1992). *Autonomie dans le travail*. Presses Universitaires de France.
- Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The research act*. McGraw-Hill.
- Derfler-Rozin, R., Moore, C., & Staats, B. R. (2016). Reducing organizational rule-breaking through task variety: How task design supports deliberative thinking. *Organization Science*, 27(6), 1361–1379.
- Desai, V. M. (2010). Rule violations and organizational search: A review and extension. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(2), 184–200.
- Drori, G., Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., & Schofer, E. (2003). Loose coupling in national science: Policy versus practice. In G. Drori, J. W. Meyer, F. O. Ramirez, & E. Schofer (Eds.), *Science in the modern world polity: Institutionalization and globalization* (pp. 155–173). Stanford University Press.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14, 532–550.
- Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. (2007). Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50, 25–32.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Drasgow, F., Hulin, C. I., Gelfand, M. J., & Magley, V. J. (1997). Antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment in organizations: A test of an integrated model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(4), 578–589.
- Free, R. (1994). *The role of procedural violations in railway accidents* (PhD thesis). University of Manchester.
- De la Garza, C., Maggi, B., & Weill-Fassina, A. (2011). Tempo, autonomia e discrezionalità: Analisi di attività nella manutenzione ferroviaria. *TAO Digital Library*. <http://www.taoprograms.org/tao-digital-library/>
- Gouldner, A. W. (1954). *Patterns of industrial bureaucracy*. The Free Press.
- Greenberg, J. (1997). The steal motive: Managing the social determinants of employee theft. In R. A. Giacalone & J. Greenberg (Eds.), *Antisocial behavior in organizations* (pp. 85–108). SAGE Publications.
- Greenwood, R., Oliver, C., Suddaby, R., & Sahlin-Andersson, K. (2008). *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism*. SAGE Publications.
- Greve, H. R., Palmer, D., & Pozner, J. (2010). Organizations gone wild: The causes, processes, and consequences of organizational misconduct. *Academy of Management Annals*, 4(1), 53–107.
- Hafner-Burton, E., & Tsutsui, K. (2005). Human rights in a globalizing world: The paradox of empty promises. *American Journal of Sociology*, 110(5), 1373–1411.
- Hagan, J., Hewitt, J. D., & Alwin, D. F. (1979). Ceremonial justice: Crime and punishment in a loosely coupled system. *Social Forces*, 58, 506–528.
- Harris, J., & Bromiley, P. (2007). Incentives to cheat: The influence of executive compensation and firm performance on financial misrepresentation. *Organization Science*, 18(3), 350–367.
- Hochstetler, A., & Copes, H. (2001). Organizational culture and organizational crime. In N. Shover & J. P. Wright (Eds.), *Crimes of privilege* (pp. 210–222). Oxford University Press.

- Hofmann, D. A., & Stetzer, A. (1996). A cross-level investigation of factors influencing unsafe behaviors and accidents. *Personnel Psychology, 49*(2), 307–339.
- Hogan, R. (1973). Moral conduct and moral character: A psychological perspective. *Psychological Bulletin, 79*(4), 217–232.
- Homans, G. C. (1950). *The human group*. Harcourt College Pub.
- Keenan, M. (2012). *Child sexual abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, power, and organizational culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Kidwell, R. E., & Bennett, N. (1993). Employee propensity to withhold effort: A conceptual model to intersect three avenues of research. *Academy of Management Review, 18*(3), 429–456.
- Knoch, D., Pascual-Leone, A., Meyer, K., Treyer, V., & Fehr, E. (2006). Diminishing reciprocal fairness by disrupting the right prefrontal cortex. *Science, 314*(5800), 829–832.
- Lawton, R. (1998). Not working to rule: Understanding procedural violations at work. *Safety Science, 28*, 77–95.
- Lehman, D. W., & Ramanujam, R. (2009). Selectivity in organizational rule violations. *Academy of Management Review, 34*(4), 643–657.
- Levitt, B., & March, J. G. (1988). Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology, 14*, 319–340.
- Lim, A., & Tsutsui, K. (2012). Globalization and commitment in corporate social responsibility: Cross-national analyses of institutional and political-economy effects. *American Sociological Review, 77*(1), 69–98.
- Lyon, T. P., & Maxwell, J. W. (2011). Greenwash: Corporate environmental disclosure under threat of audit. *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy, 20*(1), 3–41.
- March, J. G., Schulz, M., & Zhou, X. (2000). *The dynamics of rules: Change in written organizational codes*. Stanford University Press.
- Martin, A. W., Lopez, S. H., Roscigno, V. J., & Hodson, R. (2013). Against the rules: Synthesizing types and processes of bureaucratic rule-breaking. *Academy of Management Review, 38*(4), 550–574.
- Mason, S. (1997). Procedural violations—Causes, costs, and cures. In F. Redmill & J. Rajan (Eds.), *Human factors in safety-critical systems* (pp. 297–318). Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Merton, K. R. (1938). Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review, 3*(5), 672–682.
- Meyer, J. W., Boli, J., Thomas, G., & Ramirez, F. O. (1997). World society and the nation-state. *American Journal of Sociology, 103*(1), 144–181.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organization: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363.
- Monahan, S. C., & Quinn, B. A. (2006). Beyond ‘bad apples’ and ‘weak leaders’: Toward a neo-institutional explanation of organizational deviance. *Theoretical Criminology, 10*(3), 361–385.
- Moore, D. A., & Loewenstein, G. (2004). Self-interest, automaticity, and the psychology of conflict of interest. *Social Justice Research, 17*(2), 189–202.
- Morf, M., Feierabend, A., & Staffebach, B. (2017). Task variety and counterproductive work behavior. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 32*(8), 581–592.
- Pache, A. C. P., & Santos, P. (2010). When worlds collide: The internal dynamics of organizational responses to conflicting institutional demands. *Academy of Management Review, 35*, 455–476.
- Palmer, D. (2012). *Normal organizational wrongdoing: A critical analysis of theories of misconduct in and by organizations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. SAGE Publications.
- Power, M. (1997). *The audit society: Rituals of verification*. Oxford University Press.
- Rasmussen, J. (1990). Human error and the problem of causality in analysis of accidents. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. b, Biological Sciences, 327*, 449–462.
- Reason, J. (1997). *Managing the risks of organizational accidents*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Reason, J., & Hobbs, A. (2003). *Managing maintenance error*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Reason, J., Parker, D., & Lawton, R. (1998). Organizational controls and safety: The varieties of rule-related behavior. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 71*, 289–304.
- Roy, D. (1959). Banana time: Job satisfaction and informal interaction. *Human Organization, 18*(4), 158–168.
- Scott, W. R. (2008). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas and interests* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Shalvi, S., Eldar, O., & Bereby-Meyer, Y. (2012). Honesty requires time (and lack of justifications). *Psychological Science, 23*(10), 1264–1270.
- Short, J. L., & Toffel, M. W. (2010). Making self-regulation more than merely symbolic: The critical role of the legal environment. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 55*, 361–396.
- Skarbek, D. (2020). *The puzzle of prison order*. Oxford University Press.

- Skolnick, J. H., & Fyfe, J. J. (1993). *Above the law: Police and the excessive use of force*. Free Press.
- Snook, S. A. (2000). *Friendly fire: The accidental shootdown of U.S. Black Hawks over northern Iraq*. Princeton University Press.
- Thomas, G., Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., & Boli, J. (1987). Institutional structure: Constituting state, society, and the individual. Sage.
- Thomas, J. (1984). Some aspects of negotiated order, loose coupling, and mesostructure in maximum security prisons. *Symbolic Interaction*, 7, 213–231.
- Thompson, J. D. (1967). *Organizations in action*. McGraw–Hill.
- Tyler, T. R., & Blader, S. L. (2005). Can businesses effectively regulate employee conduct? The antecedents of rule following in work settings. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(6), 1143–1158.
- Vardi, Y., & Weiner, Y. (1996). Misbehavior in organizations: A motivational framework. *Organization Science*, 7(2), 151–165.
- Vaughan, D. (2016). *The Challenger launch decision* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Vaughan, D. (1982). Toward understanding unlawful organizational behavior. *Michigan Law Review*, 80, 1377–1402.
- Wadham, B., & Connor, J. (2023). Commanding men, governing masculinities: Military institutional abuse and organizational reform in the Australian armed forces. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 30(5), 1533–1551.
- Wang, Y., Ma, J., Chang, X., & Wang, T. (2025). The multifaceted government influence on CSR activities: CSR decoupling in an emerging market. *Long Range Planning*, 58(1), 102497.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 21, 1–19.
- Westphal, J., & Zajac, E. (1998). The symbolic management of stockholders: Corporate governance reforms and shareholder reactions. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43(1), 127–153.
- Westphal, J., & Zajac, E. (2001). Decoupling policy from practice: The case of stock repurchase programs. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46(2), 202–228.
- Whiteman, G., & Cooper, W. H. (2016). Decoupling rape. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 2, 115–154.
- Yager, P. (1991). *The limits of law: The public regulation of private pollution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ye, Q., Cai, Y., & Wang, J. (2024). Navigating institutional complexity: How firms respond to conflicting patenting demands from competing institutional logics. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 204, 123431.
- Yin, T. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications*. SAGE Publications.
- Zhou, X. (1997). Organizational decision making as rule following. In Z. Shapira (Ed.), *Organizational decision making* (pp. 257–281). Cambridge University Press.
- Zott, C., & Nguyen Huy, Q. (2007). How entrepreneurs use symbolic management to acquire resources. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 52, 70–105.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.