CHAPTER 3

Employee Theft

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Employee theft remains a long-standing employee concern, and in some settings, it is commonplace. Employee theft occurs across all business domains; estimates of employees who steal vary from 28% of manufacturing workers to 33% of hospital employees, and 35%, 43%, and 62% of retail business employees (Hollinger & Clark, 1983a), supermarket employees, and fast food restaurant employees, respectively (Slora, 1989). With increasing social changes, more companies may be faced with theft as a result of jobs becoming temporary (McLean Parks & Kidder, 1994), and employees switching jobs and maintaining multiple careers (Tucker, 1989). Given the widespread nature of employee theft (Bales, 1988), and its consequences for consumers and employers, we need to understand it better in the hope of moving towards better control and possible prevention. Employee theft is of interest to us, not only as an activity that must be regulated or prevented, but because it indicates the health of the relationship between employer and employee.

In this chapter, we will discuss the problems with defining employee theft, the costs of employee theft, and finally, the causes and possible prevention of employee theft.

DEFINING AND MEASURING EMPLOYEE THEFT

There is little consistency across studies in the identification of different types of theft and in the definition of employee theft. For example, Hollinger and Clark (1983a) defined theft as "the unauthorized taking, control, or transfer of money and/or property of the formal work organization that is perpetrated by an employee during the course of

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occupational activity" (p. 2). However, Slora (1989) distinguishes between production deviance and employee theft; production deviance includes activities which interfere with the rate or quality of output, while employee theft refers to the unauthorized taking of cash, merchandise, or property. In his review of employee theft, Caudill (1988) lists behaviors which he classifies as employee theft (e.g., taking unauthorized long lunch breaks, misusing sick leave, using alcohol or drugs in the workplace, industrial espionage, releasing confidential information, taking kickbacks and embezzling money). Typically, however, most other researchers would not include these behaviors in their definition. Instead, these behaviors are usually classified as production deviance. Hollinger, Slora and Terris (1992) have identified another type of theft, altruistic property deviance, which is defined as the giving away of company property to others, either at no charge or at a substantial discount, usually to improve social relationships with peers. Similarly, Hawkins (1984) reported that waiters commonly give away "free food to friends" (p. 56); he described this behavior as socially based theft. Instead of suggesting that there is only one definition of employee theft, therefore, perhaps a more appropriate approach would be to accept that employee theft takes many different forms which are both profuse in number and elaborate in design.

Employers and employees vary considerably in what they consider to be theft. The above behaviors may be considered to be theft by researchers but not by the "victims" (i.e., the organizations) or the "thieves" (i.e., the employees), or may be considered to be theft by the victims but not by the thieves. Taylor (1986) suggests that management may nominate a behavior as stealing if employees sell what they stole but not if they keep it for their personal use. Even employees who take company property (e.g., food) often do not view their own behavior as stealing; they will admit to eating food on the job but will not call it theft.

An even larger deterrent in defining theft is that it may be completely overlooked or ignored for several reasons. For example, employee theft might be perceived as managerial weakness by the public (Taylor, 1986), there may be no apparent solutions to prevent it (Taylor, 1986), organizations may believe erroneously that they are immune to employee theft (Caudill, 1988), or that it is not a major problem for them. Lastly, employee theft may be accepted as an unavoidable part of fixed operating costs, that is, a cost of doing business (Taylor, 1986).

The discussion so far demonstrates some of the obstacles to a consistent definition of employee theft. The lack of a consistent definition is one source of difficulty for obtaining accurate base rates of employee theft. Before organizations begin to tackle the problem of employee theft, its extent must be determined (Slora, 1989). Several different indices have been used. For example, using shrinkage (the unaccounted loss in dollars after sales reductions and unsold stock have been subtracted from initial inventories) to estimate internal theft is problematic because shrinkage can result from several different factors other than employee theft, such as shoplifting, misplaced merchandise, and bookkeeping errors. Similarly, using the number of employees apprehended as an indication of the extent of theft will not provide an accurate estimate because of the low base rate of such apprehensions. Anonymous surveys to collect self-report data on theft behavior (e.g., Hollinger & Clark, 1983a) have problems with unreported acts of theft because of the socially undesirable nature of this behavior, and employee self-perceptions that they are not thieves. Thus, the actual prevalence of employee theft is probably much higher than what is reported (Kamp & Brooks, 1991).

COSTS OF EMPLOYEE THEFT

Both organizations and consumers must contend with the consequences of employee theft. It has been estimated that employee theft results in an annual loss exceeding 40 billion dollars for American businesses (Palmiotto, 1983); ten times that of street crime (see Bacas, 1987). In fact, the greatest source of loss due to crimes against business comes from employee theft (American Management Association, 1977) making it the most expensive form of non-violet crime against business (Greenberg, 1990). Over and above an organization's potential losses in profits, is the more deleterious consequence of employee theft being a major factor in 20 to 30% of bankruptcies (American Management Association, 1977; Morgenstern, 1977). If this is indeed the case, all employees—including those who do not engage in employee theft—would be hurt as well. Lastly, customers and consumers suffer because prices inevitably rise to offset losses due to employee theft (Brown & Pardue, 1985).

The focus of this chapter now turns to two different theories accounting for the occurrence of employee theft, namely person theories and workplace theories. Thereafter, some theories and approaches to prevention and control will be considered.

PERSON THEORIES

Person-based theories attempt to explain why *some* people would pilfer from an organization; as such, they imply a consistency of behavior across both time and situations.

The Need Approach

The notion that employees steal from their organization because of their own financial needs is not new. Cressey (1953) posited that employees steal to resolve financial difficulties that have no conventional solutions (e.g., drug habits, gambling). Within this framework, people rely on illegitimate methods to achieve socially acceptable goals when external financial pressures become great (Merton, 1938). More recently, this theory has been criticized because it does not adequately explain the association between the type of the economic needs and how the stolen materials satisfy those needs (Hollinger & Clark, 1983a).

Social needs can also lead to employee theft for people with high belongingness needs, particularly if there is pressure from peers to steal. This may be especially relevant for young employees (Caudill, 1988). The social need theory could be extended to explain "altruistic deviance" (Hollinger, Slora & Terris, 1992) where employees give stolen goods to others so that they may be accepted by them.

Deviant Individual Backgrounds

Another current theory suggests that the propensity to engage in workplace theft is a function of deviant individuals. Proponents of the "deviant background" approach hold that if a consistent link can be demonstrated between certain attitudes and theft, there may be an underlying personality construct which can explain employee counterproductive behaviors, including employee theft. For example, a profile of the "typical" employee-thief would include being more tempted to steal, engaging more in rationalizations for theft, being prepared to punish other thieves less, thinking frequently about theft-related activities, attributing more theft to others, showing more loyalty to those guilty of employee theft, and being more vulnerable to peer pressure to steal (e.g., Terris & Jones, 1982). In one study, employees who were fired for counterproductive behaviors including theft were more likely to admit to past theft and scored significantly lower on an honesty scale (Jones, Joy, Werner & Orban, 1991).

Greed or Temptation (Opportunity)

This theory suggests that people are inherently greedy and that every employee would steal if given the chance (Astor, 1972; Lipman, 1973). Researchers who advocate this theory propose that greed will not translate into theft unless opportunities, which bring out the natural greed of employees, present themselves (e.g., misplaced trust with cash, records, keys and safe combinations). Opportunity certainly correlates positively with theft (Kantor, 1983; Lydon, 1984). This approach lends itself to theft-deterrence by minimizing opportunity (e.g., provide constant surveillance over employee activity, locking everything up).

"Epidemic of Moral Laxity"

Employee theft has also been attributed to an "epidemic of moral laxity", especially among younger members of the workforce (Merriam, 1977). This notion postulates that today's employees do not possess the same trustworthy qualities as employees of yesteryear. There is some support for this theory in that more theft involvement has been found among younger employees (Franklin, 1975; Hollinger & Clark, 1983b). However, the higher proportion of theft among employed youths can also be explained by alternative theories: they disproportionately occupy marginal positions (low status, minimal tenure, social isolation) and steal as a way to express grievances (Tucker, 1989), they manifest lower commitment to their employers (Hollinger, 1986), they are often dissatisfied with their employment experience (Hollinger & Clark, 1982), and they are not sufficiently deterred by the threat of existing formal or informal negative sanctions (Hollinger & Clark, 1983b). These alternative theories suggest that theft is more closely related to an employee's position in the organizational hierarchy, tenure, and dissatisfaction than it is to moral laxity, and that a thorough investigation of employee theft should consider the role of workplace predictors in addition to personal characteristics.

The Marginality Proposition

One popular explanation for employee theft is that the youth of today are morally lax. In contrast, as the marginality hypothesis suggests, it is not so much employees' age that is related to theft, but rather the nature of jobs that the youth of today often hold.

According to Tucker (1989), the underlying cause of theft of property is the employee's "degree of marginality". Marginal employees are characterized by their low status, low rank in the organizational hierarchy, low wages, expendability, little opportunity for advancement, short tenure, little chance to develop relationships, lack of security, and social isolation. Also, the temporary nature of work consistently emerges as important in distinguishing between high and low deviance involvement (Hollinger & Clark, 1983a; McLean Parks & Kidder, 1994; Robin, 1969). Temporary workers often have not had an opportunity for developing a commitment to a career with the organization (Hollinger,

1986) and have had little time to develop a relationship with their employer (Tucker, 1989). Temporary and contingent workers, who are increasing in number, should probably be included in this category because of their marginal status (Barling & Gallagher, in press; McLean Parks & Kidder, 1994).

Person theories have implications for reducing employee theft: They generally advocate prevention through personnel selection (or more accurately, through personnel exclusion). They focus on devices designed to discover employees who have tendencies to steal (e.g., paper and pencil honesty tests) once on the job, and presumably select the most honest and trustworthy employees from a pool of applicants (that is, screen out the potential thief).

WORKPLACE THEORIES

Person theories attempt to explain why some people would steal from an organization. In contrast, workplace-based theories attempt to explain why *specific* organizations might suffer higher levels of employee theft. In this way, workplace-based theories are situation-specific and result in a different set of strategies for understanding and controlling employee theft.

Organizational Climate

Kamp and Brooks (1991) suggest the existence of an "organizational theft" climate which can be either honest or dishonest in nature. An honest organizational theft climate would send messages to employees that theft was unacceptable. Supporting this notion, Kamp and Brooks (1991) found that employees' perceptions about management's attitudes to theft, and the attitudes of their immediate supervisor, their coworkers, and their own personal attitudes toward theft were related to employees' self-reported on-the-job theft. Support for this particular approach emanates from research showing that absenteeism is associated with perceptions of the organization's absence climate (Johns, 1987).

Deterrence Doctrine

Similar to the organizational climate theory of theft is the "deterrence doctrine" which holds that the perceived threat of organizational sanctions influences personal behavior (Gibbs, 1975). The essence of this approach is that employee theft will be more likely in an organization that does not make its anti-theft policies explicit. The deterrence process includes three major variables: perceived certainty (risk of being discovered), perceived severity (possible criminal justice punishment options), and visibility of punishment. Research indicates that it is the perceived certainty of punishment that is most effective in deterring theft (Tittle & Logan, 1973). Kantor (1983) suggests that a large number of employees will engage in employee theft if they see others doing so without being apprehended or punished. It follows that an organization must overtly show that they do not tolerate theft so as to prevent employees from stealing. The deterrence doctrine is supported by findings showing that the likelihood of males engaging in sexually harassing behavior is reduced significantly when they believe that the organization will invoke sanctions against such behavior (Dekker & Barling, 1995).

Perceived Organizational Fairness

Another explanatory model points to a relationship between employees' perceptions of organizational fairness and employee theft. In this respect, interpersonal and payment fairness have been associated with employee theft.

Several different researchers have noted that rather than considering theft a crime, it is better characterized as a mode of social counter-control (Black, 1987). Within this framework, employee theft is seen as a specific response to perceived deviant behavior of the employer (Tucker, 1989), perhaps even a way of getting back at the employer (Mars, 1982). As such, this theory demonstrates the "flipside" of the "theft by inherently bad employees" argument; it points to exploitation by the employer as a cause of pilferage. Although this phenomenon has not been directly studied, there is some empirical support for this theory. For example, Hollinger and Clark (1983a) found that the single best predictor of theft was employee attitudes and feelings of being exploited by the company or its officers. Similarly, job burnout and job dissatisfaction are associated with employees' admissions of theft (Clark & Hollinger, 1981).

A second form of perceived unfairness that can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction is payment inequity, which would arise when the rewards employees receive, relative to the work they are doing, are seen to be less than they should be. In that situation, employees are likely to respond in one of two ways (Adams, 1965): they could lower their inputs (e.g., job performance) or raise their outcomes (e.g., pay demands, employee theft). For example, when studying maritime dock workers, Mars (1974) discovered that employees engaging in theft viewed it "as a morally justified addition to wages . . . as an entitlement due from exploiting employers" (p. 244). Findings from more recent research sustain this argument. When pay cuts were perceived as unfair, they resulted in substantial employee theft and turnover. In contrast, when pay cuts of exactly the same magnitude were introduced in the same organization in a more informative and sensitive manner, employee theft and turnover were substantially lower (Greenberg, 1990, 1993). These findings will have important implications for intervention as well as future research.

INTERACTION OF PERSON AND WORKPLACE FACTORS

Because many factors contribute to an employee's decision to steal, a complete model of theft should include both person and workplace factors. This approach would be consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, as well as data showing that using an interaction of workplace and person factors provides a better prediction of both workplace aggression (Greenberg & Barling, 1995) and sexual harassment (Dekker & Barling, 1995).

It is believed that three factors must be present for an employee to steal (e.g., Bologna, 1980): opportunity (when employees believe there is little risk of being caught or punished, i.e., no deterrence), need (this factor is mostly the perception of need as opposed to a real need), and attitudes toward theft. Regardless of the presence of both opportunity and need, employee theft can be minimized when attitudes are clearly intolerant of such behavior (Brown & Pardue, 1985). An anecdotal study suggests that an employee's characteristics when entering an organization, organizational characteristics that directly or indirectly relate to theft, and the employee's emotional and intellectual reactions to these organizational characteristics all combine to result in theft behavior (Taylor, 1986).

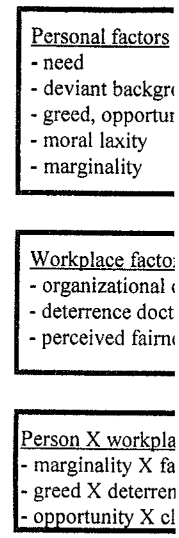
The way in which personal and organizational factors predict employee theft independently is presented in Figure 3.1. In addition, some of the potential interactions between organizational and personal factors are also identified in Figure 3.1.

REDUCING OR PREVENTING EMPLOYEE THEFT

There are two main approaches to reducing the occurrences of employee theft: prevention and control. Prevention has been referred to as a bottom-up approach while control has been called a top-down approach.

Prevention of Employee Theft: Strategies from Person Theories

The person theories that explain why employees steal advocate prevention through personnel selection. Consistent with this approach,



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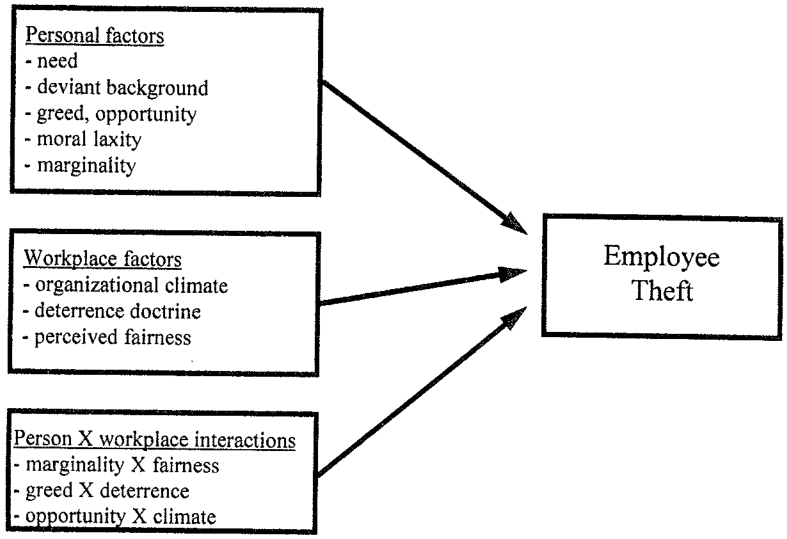

Figure 3.1 Predictors of employee theft

questionnaires are designed to discover applicants who have tendencies to steal, and once potential thieves are identified, they are excluded during the hiring process. The most often used methods of screening are background checks, employment interviews, polygraph examinations, and written integrity tests. Preemployment "paper-and-pencil" honesty tests, for example, have been suggested by some to be successful at identifying potential employee thieves (e.g., Jones, Slora & Boye, 1990; McDaniel & Jones, 1988). Polygraph tests (Terris & Jones, 1982) and investigations into past employers, credit bureaux, and police agencies (Owens, 1976; Willis, 1986) have also been claimed to be effective at discovering employees with propensities for theft.

Background check. –The underlying assumption for the background check is that a history of previous theft behavior predicts future theft. While seemingly uncomplicated, there are several limitations to this screening method.

- The majority of employee thieves are never caught.
- Even if employees are apprehended, they will often go unpunished. Thus, there would be no existing record of their theft because they were not formally charged.
- It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain information about prior employment because of privacy legislation.

- There may be no relationship between an individual's theft behavior in two different organizations or across two different situations in the same organization (Greenberg, 1990).

Hence, choosing to hire someone because of the absence of a prior record of employee theft, or choosing not to hire someone because of prior instances of employee theft, could lead to a series of incorrect decisions. As a result, the background check is an unreliable tool for theft prevention.

Polygraph test. –The polygraph test, better known as the lie-detector, was frequently used as a screening instrument in the past. The polygraph is not without its faults; some limitations include a lack of standardized procedures in its use, and its high costs in terms of both time and effort (Terris, 1982). In 1988, the federal Employee Polygraph Protection Act in the United States banned the use of the polygraph as a selection tool in most areas of the private sector.

Employment interview. –Although the employment interview may be useful for narrowing down the choices for a job position, it should not be relied on as a method to identify employees who are likely to engage in counterproductive behavior in the workplace. Interviewers often rely on false criteria because of the lack of information concerning behaviors that might be associated with theft.

Honesty tests. –Another response to employee theft and its consequences has been increased efforts to detect dishonest job applicants through personality testing. The interest in, and use of paper and pencil honesty tests (or integrity tests) as a selection instrument have increased because of legislation prohibiting the use of the polygraph. Honesty tests are paper and pencil devices developed primarily to predict theft and other forms of dishonesty. Overt integrity tests typically contain self-report indices that inquire directly about the applicant's attitudes toward theft and violence, past theft involvement, and alcohol and drug use. These tests are based on the assumption that job applicants who are at high risk of stealing while on the job can be identified successfully. Once these potential thieves are identified, they can then be selected-out during the application/hiring process.

Some Advantages of Preemployment Testing

There is some support for the use of preemployment screening in reducing theft. In general, employee theft rates are lower in organizations which conduct careful and extensive preemployment screening (Baumer & Rosenbaum, 1984), and this has been replicated in supermarket chains (Jones, Slora & Boye, 1990), convenience stores (Terris & Jones, 1982) and retain drug chains (Brown & Pardue, 1985). Similarly, preselecting employees on the basis of honesty and integrity reduces subsequent terminations and prosecutions for employee theft (Hartnett, 1990). Thus, honesty tests are useful in reducing both the number of dishonest people in the workplace and the occurrences of employee theft, and in increasing the probability of hiring honest and dependable employees from a pool of applicants (Jones, Slora & Boye, 1990; Jones et al, 1991). One question that remains for future research is whether it is the honesty testing per se that affects employee theft, or whether organizations that engage in such practices implicitly construct an organizational theft culture that discourages employee theft (i.e. they send a message to employees that theft will not be tolerated).

Integrity tests can also be used to predict theft among current employees. Screening current employees also creates a "non-theft climate", and deters theft in that employees perceive their employers as taking theft very seriously (Jones & Terris, 1984).

Limitations of Preemployment Testing

Although integrity tests have been shown to predict on-the-job theft, they still need to be used with caution for several reasons:

- It is ironical and unreasonable to expect dishonest people to answer questions truthfully about their own attitudes toward theft and past dishonest behavior.
- Attitudes about theft or personality tendencies are only moderately correlated with theft behaviors.
- Opportunity for theft does not necessarily lead to greater occurrences of theft. In fact, most employees in various occupations have access to money or merchandise but choose not to steal (Hollinger & Clark, 1983a).
- Labelling someone a "thief" may become a self-fulfilling prophesy (Guastello & Rieke, 1991), and would certainly make it more difficult for that person to obtain alternative employment.
- Privacy issues (Guastello & Rieke, 1991).
- Most importantly, this approach ignores the potential contribution of workplace factors that might lead to employee theft.

Reducing Employee Theft: Strategies from Workplace Theories

These strategies differ from preselection in that they are concerned with theft by *current* employees in *specific* situations. To reduce employee theft, it is necessary to focus on redesigning the workplace. Several methods or techniques are consistent with this approach:

- Surveillance techniques that monitor employees' behavior are being used with increasing frequency to control employee theft, as are undercover security personnel. While these techniques may be effective against shoplifters, employees can usually circumvent them. In addition, the financial costs of such strategies are huge, and employees generally resent electronic systems that monitor them.
- Keeping accurate records to limit the mishandling of funds or supplies. While this detects large cash shortages, it provides little deterrence to employee theft, and does not help in identifying the average employee who steals occasionally.
- Inspections (checking bags/lunch boxes). These are similar to "sting" operations that catch thieves in the act. However, the savings gained from the few people who get caught does not compensate for the negative environment that results from the mistrust of employees.

Both personnel selection and these control approaches assume that employees are greedy or morally lax; these strategies attempt to screen out potential thieves or limit opportunities to steal for any remaining dishonest employees in the workplace. Organizations using these approaches do not try to understand the nature of employee theft; they may assume employees steal for personal gain, without taking into consideration organizational factors that might contribute to theft.

Alternative approaches derive from the workplace theories of theft. First, it has previously been suggested that a positive climate throughout the workgroup would foster norms that discourage employee theft. Derived from the organizational climate and deterrence literature, this strategy is consistent with a top-down approach to theft prevention. The highly visible development, communication, and enforcement of company policies regarding employee theft can promote a strong anti-theft climate. Research on sexual harassment strongly supports this (Dekker & Barling, 1995). Consistent with social learning theory that emphasizes person X environment interactions, this research showed that company policies were most effective for employees most likely to engage in sexual harassment.

Consistent with organizational fairness theory, some specific recommendations to control theft would include improving relationships between employees and employers, reducing marginality (e.g., promote long-term employment), introducing employee ownership (shares in the company), and changing the way grievances are handled (Tucker, 1989). Other suggestions include treating employees with dignity, respect and

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trust (Greenberg, 1990, 1993), encouraging managers and supervisors to build non-adversarial relationships with employees, striving to enrich employees' jobs, providing opportunities for disgruntled employees to vent their emotions, and providing a model of organizational integrity (Taylor, 1986).

In keeping with payment equity theory, if adequate and fair compensation cannot be provided, employee theft can still be reduced by adequately explaining the basis for the inequity in an informative and interpersonally sensitive manner (Greenberg, 1990, 1993). A major benefit of these workplace interventions is that they are very inexpensive to implement.

CONCLUSION

The most important point to be emphasized is that none of the person-based or workplace-based theories/preventive strategies alone will effectively explain/reduce all instances of employee theft. The nature of employee theft is complex in that it results from an interaction of personal and organizational factors. Therefore, any comprehensive theory or preventive strategy should consider all of the different factors that contribute to employee theft. One last thought: Why do we continue to emphasize employee theft rather than the "flipside" which is employer exploitation? Changing our focus to include both employee theft and employer exploitation would simultaneously expand our research agenda and increase the likelihood that intervention would be more successful.

AUTHOR NOTES

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