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Putting the suspicious mindset into context: A conceptual and empirical investigation of cues of untrustworthiness, victim sensitivity, and unethical behavior in organizations

It is widely recognized that trust and trustworthiness play a central role in organizational life and, thus, are one of the most studied topics in organizational behavior. However, the relationship between these concepts and unethical behavior at work remains poorly understood. One theoretical model that holds promise for understanding the interconnection between these concepts but has never been applied to the organizational context is the “Sensitivity to Mean Intentions” (SeMI) model (Gollwitzer & Rothmund, 2009). This model implies that people differ in terms of their sensitivity towards the mean intentions of others. The fear of being exploited and cues of untrustworthiness trigger a state of suspiciousness, which in turn is believed to promote uncooperative, antisocial, and unethical behavior. Drawing on this model as well as on social exchange theory, this paper investigates the effect of cues of untrustworthiness on unethical behavior at work. First, the concepts of cues of untrustworthiness, victim sensitivity, and suspicious mindset are defined, elaborated and translated into the organizational context. Subsequently, a clear differentiation between unethical prosocial behavior and unethical antisocial behavior at work is introduced, and a differing effect of a suspicious mindset on these behaviors is hypothesized. Hence, in this paper it is proposed that a suspicious mindset promotes unethical behaviors that harm the organization and/or its members but inhibits norm-transgressing behavior that is intended to benefit the organization. In order to test these assumptions an experimental study was designed and conducted with German students. The organizational context was simulated and cues of untrustworthiness were manipulated. The findings suggest that a suspicious mindset influences unethical pro-organizational behavior but not individual and organizational deviance. A second study with employees is currently being carried out. This paper not only represents the first conceptual and empirical investigation of the effect of a suspicious mindset on unethical behavior at work but it also contributes to a refined understanding of the relationship between trust and unethical pro-organizational behavior.