

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF DISCIPLINED AND GRIEVING EMPLOYEES IN A NONUNION ORGANIZATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the impact of employees' age, education, occupation, race, sex, and tenure on employee discipline and grievance filing in a non-union organization. The results indicate that nonwhite and older employees are more likely to be disciplined and to grieve when they are disciplined. Clerical and service employees have similar discipline rates but service employees are more likely to grieve. The differences in the frequency of discipline may reflect problems in the administration of discipline or may represent real disparities in employee behavior. Whatever the cause of the differences between disciplined employees, grievants, and other employees, appropriate remedial actions should be taken.

Every organization needs to maintain order. To meet this requirement some organizations have developed elaborate sets of rules and schedules of penalties for employees who violate the rules. Other organizations function on a much less formal basis. Whatever the case, employees who violate organizational norms are subject to discipline.

While organizations find it necessary to discipline employees for violating organizational rules, employees expect a degree of organizational justice with respect to the imposition of discipline [1]. This involves both procedural and distributive justice [2-3]. The former refers to the process through which disciplinary decisions are made and the latter involves the substance of the decisions.

The need for organizational justice ordinarily is met through grievance procedures. Employees represented by a union almost always enjoy a negotiated grievance procedure. A 1980 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of collective bargaining agreements covering 1,000 or more employees found that 98 percent of the 1,550 agreements included a grievance procedure [4]. Where employees are not represented by a union, an increasing number of employees have adopted complaint or appeal procedures. In fact, a survey of business lines (divisions or subsidiaries of large corporations) conducted in 1986-87 revealed that about 50 percent of the 494 respondents had a formal grievance procedure [5].

Questions that arise regarding discipline and grievance procedures are: 1) which employees are most likely to be disciplined? and 2) among the employees who are disciplined, which are most likely to grieve? Although there is no research that attempts to identify the demographic and other characteristics of disciplined employees, employers appear to have ideas or prejudices regarding which employees are more likely to be disciplined. A significant body of research compares the characteristics of grievants and nongrievants, but nearly all of the studies involve union settings and none distinguish between employees who are grieving discipline and those who are grieving for some other reason such as the denial of a benefit.

This study examines the characteristics of disciplined employees and grievants. First, it identifies the demographic and job characteristics that distinguish disciplined employees from employees who have not received discipline. Second, the study highlights the characteristics that separate employees who grieve disciplinary penalties from those who opt not to protest the discipline they have received. Finally, it compares the discipline and grievance experience of different demographic and occupational groups and discusses the significance and implications of the findings.

## **PRIOR RESEARCH**

Much has been written about employee discipline. Many of the studies focus on different types of offenses and the impact of various offenses on the severity of discipline [6-8]. Some research suggests ways to avoid disciplinary problems and the techniques that should be used by managers in imposing discipline [9-12]. Other studies focus on managerial decision making regarding employee discipline [13-15]. However, none of the research compares the demographic and job characteristics of disciplined and nondisciplined employees.

As indicated above, there are a number of studies that seek to identify the characteristics of employees who file grievances versus other employees. Most of the research focuses on unionized work places and uses simple tests of statistical significance. Eckerman examined a large manufacturing plant where he found grievances were highest among semiskilled employees and employees with greater seniority [16]. In a study of workers in a heavy machinery company,

Sulkin and Pranis found that grievants had more education than nongrievants [17]. Ash examined a manufacturing firm employing more than 10,000 production and maintenance workers and found white workers and younger workers were more likely to grieve [18]. A study by Price et al. of more than 25,000 persons employed in a manufacturing company found those who had filed one or two grievances were younger and more educated than those who did not grieve, employees who filed more than two grievances did not differ from other employees, and employees who grieved the imposition of discipline were younger than other employees [19]. Kissler discovered the grievants in a federal agency tended to be nonwhite and younger than the other employees [20].

Two more recent studies employed more sophisticated statistical techniques. Using discriminant analysis and data from the 1977 national quality of employment survey, Allen and Keaveny found grievants were younger than nongrievants [21]. When Lewin and Peterson used regression analysis to compare grievants and nongrievants in a steel company, a retail department store, a nonprofit hospital, and a local school district, they discovered the grievants tended to be male, black, more educated, and younger than nongrievants in each organization and in the four organizations combined [22].

The literature regarding the characteristics of grievants versus nongrievants in nonunion settings is very limited. Berenbeim examined data from a National Conference Board survey of 778 companies with 9.3 million employees [23]. He found production and clerical workers accounted for the majority of complaints and professional and managerial workers made little use of complaint procedures [23]. Lewin compared 2,125 grievance filers and 2,145 nonfilers from three nonunion firms [24]. Regression analysis revealed filers tended to be younger, male, and minority, and to be employed in higher status occupations [24]. In a later study Lewin considered grievance filer characteristics in five nonunion businesses [25]. Regression analysis of a sample of 320 employees indicated that years of service was positively related to grieving.

Although previous studies suggest a number of characteristics that may be related to employee discipline and grieving, they have several shortcomings. First, the majority of the research focuses on unionized settings with very few attempts to identify grievants and nongrievants in nonunion organizations. This is significant because there are likely to be differences in employee behavior with respect to grievance filing between union and nonunion environments. For example, the presence of a union steward to assist an employee in filing and processing a grievance may affect the number of grievances filed by some employees. Second, prior studies fail to distinguish between different types of grievances. Lewin, as well as Labig and Greer, recognizes that it is necessary to consider the various causes of grievances to understand grievance initiation [26-27]. Third, research that compares grievants and nongrievants may be misleading because it ignores the fact that employees must be aggrieved before they can file a grievance. This raises the possibility that the characteristics that

distinguish grievants from nongrievants may not indicate that certain employees have a greater tendency to grieve but may reflect the fact that they are more frequently disciplined. The two studies that take this point into account attempt to identify aggrieved employees by asking employees whether they felt they had been treated unfairly in the previous year and then comparing the employees who felt they had been treated unfairly but had not grieved with those who had grieved [28-29]. However, this approach may provide misleading results regarding which employees are most likely to grieve because many forms of unfair treatment cannot be addressed through the grievance procedure.

## PROCEDURE

This study attempts to remedy some of the shortcomings of the previous research. It focuses on a nonunion health care facility located in a major metropolitan area. The organization is a large, nonprofit corporation that enjoys a reputation as a provider of high quality health care services. It has remained nonunion despite its location in a highly unionized area.

The organization's disciplinary system is clearly specified in an employee handbook. It involves four steps—verbal warning, written warning, suspension, and termination. The reasons for discipline are: attendance including absenteeism and tardiness; poor job performance including incompetence, inefficiency, carelessness, and excessive job errors; and policy/rule violations including theft, gambling, and insubordination.

The employer has adopted a four-step grievance procedure similar to union-negotiated grievance procedures except that it does not include arbitration. The process begins with an employee presenting a written complaint to an employee relations counselor. The employee relations counselor gathers relevant data and presents it to the first-level supervisor or manager, who is required to respond to the employee in writing within five working days. The second step allows an employee to appeal to the next level of management. If the employee is not satisfied with the response, the third step involves the chairperson of the division. The final step is a review and decision by the chief executive officer.

The study compares the characteristics of three samples of employees. The first is a sample of 150 employees who were not disciplined during the three-year period selected for examination. The second sample consists of 150 employees who were disciplined but did not grieve. The last group consists of the 115 employees who were disciplined and grieved during the relevant time period.

Based on the studies comparing grievants and nongrievants, four demographic variables—age, education, race, and sex—are considered along with two job-related variables—occupation and tenure. All of the data were obtained from employees' personnel files. Age is measured in years. Race consists of white and nonwhite employees. Sex is self-explanatory. Education is represented by the number of years of school completed by the employee. Tenure is the number of

years of continuous employment in the organization. Occupation consists of four categories. Professional jobs are those that usually require at least a four-year college degree. Such positions include supervisory staff, social workers, registered nurses, and dietitians. Technical positions normally involve a two-year college education or advanced training in a specialty area. Positions such as licensed practical nurses, computer operators, and lab technicians are included in this group. The clerical group contains clerical/secretarial support positions. Examples of these positions include cashiers, secretaries, typists, and bookkeepers. The service category includes manual workers and protective and non-protective service occupations. The skill level varies greatly. Positions in this group include carpenters, security guards, building service workers, and stationary engineers.

Two sets of hypotheses were tested. First, it was hypothesized no differences exist between disciplined and nondisciplined employees. For the nominal variables—race, sex, and occupation—this means the percentage of disciplined employees accounted for by a particular category of employees is the same as the percentage of nondisciplined employees made up by that category, e.g., males are the same percentage of disciplined and nondisciplined employees. For the continuous variables—age, education, and tenure—the hypotheses are that the mean values for each variable are equal for disciplined and nondisciplined employees, e.g., the mean ages of disciplined and nondisciplined employees are the same. Second, it was hypothesized no differences exist between grievants and disciplined employees. For the nominal variables this means the percentage of grievants and disciplined employees are equal for each category of employees. For the continuous variables the hypotheses are that the mean values for each variable are equal for grievants and disciplined employees.

The hypotheses that the proportions or means are equal were evaluated using *t*-tests. This procedure was selected rather than analysis of variance and multiple comparisons because two distinct questions were being examined. The first issue is whether disciplined employees differ from nondisciplined employees. The second question is whether disciplined employees who grieve can be distinguished from disciplined employees who opt not to grieve.

## RESULTS

The impact of four demographic variables on employee discipline and grievance filing is considered. The influence of age is examined in Table 1. It indicates disciplined employees are older than nondisciplined employees and grievants are older than disciplined employees. Although these differences in age do not reach statistical significance, the difference in age between the non-disciplined employees and grievants is statistically significant at the 5 percent level ( $t = 2.20$ ). This difference is due to the fact that older employees are more often subject to discipline and tend to grieve when they are disciplined.

Table 1. Employee Characteristics: Age, Education, and Tenure (Mean Years)

	Nondisciplined	Disciplined	Grievants	$t_1^a$	$t_2^b$
Age	30.42 (8.18)	31.13 (8.24)	32.83 (9.32)	0.74	1.41
Education	12.90 (1.68)	12.88 (1.59)	12.73 (1.79)	0.11	0.71
Tenure	5.53 (4.44)	6.21 (5.07)	5.36 (4.06)	1.24	1.53

<sup>a</sup>Difference between nondisciplined and disciplined employees.

<sup>b</sup>Difference between disciplined employees and grievants.

**Note:** Numbers in parentheses show standard deviations.

Table 1 also shows the impact of education. The differences in education between the three groups are small, so it is impossible to reject the hypothesis that the mean levels of education of the nondisciplined employees, disciplined employees, and grievants are equal. It appears education has no impact on the likelihood of being disciplined or the frequency with which employees grieve when they are disciplined.

The race variable is dealt with in Table 2. The table reveals white employees constitute slightly more than 50 percent of the nondisciplined employees but only 40 percent of the disciplined employees. Correspondingly, nonwhite employees represent slightly less than 50 percent of the nondisciplined employees but account for 60 percent of the disciplined employees. *T*-tests indicate that these differences are significant at the 5 percent level. Thus, it appears white employees are less likely to be disciplined than nonwhite employees.

The data also suggest white employees are less likely to grieve than nonwhite employees. As indicated below, white employees constitute 40 percent of the disciplined employees but they constitute only 28.7 percent of the grievants. At the same time, nonwhite employees are 60 percent of the disciplined employees but are 71.3 percent of the grievants. The differences in these proportions are statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 2 also examines the relationship between sex and employee discipline and grieving. Although the results are not statistically significant and cannot be considered more than suggestive, two observations can be made. First, females appear to be subject to discipline more frequently than males—females are 63.3 percent of the nondisciplined employees and 68 percent of the disciplined employees versus males, who are 36.7 percent of the nondisciplined employees but only 32 percent of the disciplined employees. Second, females appear less

Table 2. Employee Characteristics: Race, Sex, and Occupation (Proportions)

	Nondisciplined	Disciplined	Grievants	$t_1^a$	$t_2^b$
<b>Race</b>					
White	51.3	40.0	28.7	1.96**	1.92***
Nonwhite	48.7	60.0	71.3	1.96**	1.92***
<b>Sex</b>					
Male	36.7	32.0	38.3	0.86	1.06
Female	63.3	68.0	61.7	0.86	1.06
<b>Occupation</b>					
Professional	18.7	15.3	16.5	0.79	0.28
Technical	23.3	27.3	32.2	0.80	0.88
Clerical	26.7	26.7	11.3	0.00	3.10*
Service	31.3	30.7	40.0	0.11	1.58

<sup>a</sup>Difference between nondisciplined and disciplined employees.

<sup>b</sup>Difference between disciplined employees and grievants.

\* $t$ -test significant at 0.01 level

\*\* $t$ -test significant at 0.05 level

\*\*\* $t$ -test significant at 0.10 level

likely to grieve when they are disciplined. They account for 68 percent of the disciplined employees but only 61.7 percent of the grievants, while males, who are only 32 percent of the disciplined employees, are 38.3 percent of the grievants. Thus, it appears males tend to be disciplined less frequently than females but are more likely than females to grieve when they are disciplined.

This study also considers the effect of two job-related characteristics on employee discipline and grieving. Table 2 reports the impact of occupation. Professional employees account for approximately the same proportion of nondisciplined employees, disciplined employees, and grievants, so the hypothesis that the proportions are the same cannot be rejected. Although the differences in the proportions for technical employees fall short of statistical significance, they are consistent with the view that technical employees are more likely to be disciplined and more likely to grieve than professional employees.

The clerical and service categories present an interesting contrast. Clerical employees constitute 26.7 percent of the nondisciplined employees and the same proportion of the disciplined employees. However, they constitute only 11.3 percent of the grievants. The low proportion of the grievants accounted for by the clerical employees is not because clerical employees are not disciplined but because they do not grieve when they are disciplined. Although none of the differences in the proportions for service employees reaches statistical

significance, the differences do suggest a different behavior by the service employees. While service employees constitute nearly the same proportion of the nondisciplined and disciplined employees as clerical employees, they account for a larger proportion of the grievants. This reflects the fact that service employees tend to grieve when they are disciplined while clerical employees tend not to grieve.

The second job-related characteristic—tenure—is shown in Table 1. The data indicate the mean tenure of disciplined employees is more than either nondisciplined employees or grievants. However, while the difference between disciplined employees and grievants is close to statistical significance, none of the other differences is close to being statistically significant. Thus, the hypotheses that the mean tenure of the nondisciplined employees, disciplined employees, and grievants are equal cannot be rejected.

## DISCUSSION

Although this study must be viewed as an exploratory effort, it suggests some differences in the demographic characteristics of nondisciplined employees, disciplined employees, and grievants. It appears that disciplined employees are older than nondisciplined employees and that older employees are more likely to grieve when they are disciplined. There is strong evidence that white employees are less likely to be disciplined and less apt to grieve than nonwhite employees. The results regarding sex suggest males are less frequently disciplined than females but are more likely to grieve than females. An examination of occupation indicates professional and technical employees represent approximately the same proportions of nondisciplined employees, disciplined employees, and grievants. Clerical and service employees appear to be disciplined in proportion to their representation in employment, but clerical employees who are disciplined seem less likely to grieve than service employees. Education and tenure do not appear to be related to status as a nondisciplined employee, disciplined employee, or grievant.

These findings provide some insight into the results of the research that compares grievants and nongrievants. For example, the finding that grievants tend to be nonwhite appears to reflect the fact that nonwhite employees are disciplined more frequently as well as the fact that they grieve more frequently when they are disciplined. Although this interpretation cannot be viewed as definitive since not all grievances relate to discipline, it is likely to be an important factor because a significant proportion of grievances relate to discipline [22].

Gordon and Miller questioned the desirability of the type of research that is the focus of this article [30]. They wondered “what practical purpose(s) might be served by identifying the grievant profile” [30, at 131]. More specifically, Gordon and Miller warned that “the possibilities for jeopardizing the well-being of certain employees because of their proclivities for dissent (a right they enjoy outside of the employing organization) suggests that researchers bear a special obligation to



proceed more cautiously in this line of inquiry" [30, at 131]. They state that "it would also be judicious to postpone new research until it becomes clear whether there are legal mechanisms and precedents for protecting the rights of workers victimized by unscrupulous management decisions based upon grievant profiles" [30, at 132].

This view regarding the research on identifying the characteristics of grieving and disciplined employees must be rejected. First, it is prudent to find out whether certain groups of employees are more frequently disciplined and, if so, to ascertain the reasons and implement appropriate remedies. For example, the higher discipline rates for nonwhite employees may reflect discrimination in the administration of the disciplinary system, which should be eliminated. If the higher disciplinary rate represents a real difference in behavior, then training, counseling, or other interventions should be undertaken to improve performance. Second, in many instances employers have based their actions on beliefs that research has shown to be inaccurate. For example, some employers have assumed the quit rates of female workers are higher than males, while the research has shown that when factors such as earnings, education, and length of service are considered, the quit rates for females are not higher than for males [31]. Research regarding the characteristics of disciplined employees and grievants may reveal similar misconceptions by employers.

A particular concern should be the apparent reluctance of some groups of employees to use the grievance procedure. As Hirschman indicated, employees who face a dissatisfying situation can complain or leave the organization [32]. Freeman and Medoff suggested that where other alternatives are limited, some employees may quit the organization or withhold productivity [33]. Encouraging those employees who appear reluctant to use the grievance procedure to do so may be the least costly way for an organization to deal with employee dissatisfaction.

## CONCLUSION

This research contributes to existing knowledge in a number of ways. First, it confirms some of the findings of prior studies comparing grievants and non-grievants in both the union and nonunion sectors. Second, this study considers the characteristics of disciplined employees while prior research has considered only employees who grieved. Third, it helps to explain why certain characteristics tend to distinguish between grievants and nongrievants.

The limitations of this study suggest opportunities for future research. First, a subsequent study should use a sample large enough to permit the use of multivariate statistical techniques. This will make it possible to isolate the impact of a single variable on employee discipline and grieving. Second, future research should go beyond identifying demographic and job factors associated with employee discipline and grieving. An attempt needs to be made to develop a model that focuses on the psychological and sociological factors related to

demographic and job factors identified in this study and are the more immediate causes of differences in employee discipline and grieving. Obtaining the necessary data will require the cooperation of employers and employees. However, the results of such a project would result in a better understanding of employee discipline and grieving and would yield significant benefits to both employers and employees.

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