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EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS AND DISCIPLINE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of age, gender, marital status, race, and seniority on the likelihood of an employee being disciplined. It views differences in discipline rates as a function of the frequency of rule-violating behavior and the extent to which those who violate rules are disciplined. The results of logistic regression indicate that young, male, single, and nonwhite employees are more likely to be disciplined.

All organizations have norms and rules that govern employee conduct. In some organizations formal rules and procedures define acceptable employee behavior. In other organizations accepted customs and norms govern employee conduct. Whatever form the standards of conduct take, they are considered necessary to insure an organization's effectiveness and survival [1].

Employees who violate an organization's standards of conduct are subject to discipline. In a unionized setting both the rules and penalties for the violation of the rules are likely to be well-defined and may be the result of negotiations between the employer and the union. Where employees are not represented by a union, the regulations and sanctions may be less clearly defined.

Regardless of the particular setting, one of the questions relating to disciplinary systems is which employees are subject to discipline. Supervisors and human resource managers sometimes claim younger workers, nonwhite workers, or other groups more frequently violate the rules and consequently are more often the object of discipline. These claims, however, may be the result of

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limited personal experience or prejudice. Furthermore, if employees with certain personal characteristics are more frequently disciplined, it may be due to differences in earnings, the type of work performed, or other job-related factors rather than employee characteristics.

The goal of this article is to examine the relationship between employee characteristics and the likelihood of discipline. This was accomplished by selecting a sample of employees from a large, unionized hospital and comparing the characteristics of the employees in the sample who were disciplined with those who were not. A number of job-related variables were included in the analysis to control for factors other than employee characteristics that might account for differences in discipline.

PRIOR RESEARCH

Although discipline is commonplace in organizations, it has been the subject of relatively little research. Arvey and Ivancevich suggested this may reflect the belief that discipline is ineffective, has undesirable side effects, or produces unwanted employee reactions [2]. They speculated that it may also reflect the view that discipline or punishment is unethical or nonhumanitarian. Most of the existing research focuses on the impact of various offenses on the severity of discipline, theories of discipline, or the proper techniques for imposing discipline [3-8].

Only a few studies have examined the characteristics of disciplined employees. Mulder compared disciplined and nondisciplined employees in a Dutch iron and steel plant and found no differences in age, marital status, or seniority of the two groups [1]. Larwood, Rand, and Hovanessian conducted an experimental study of 104 federal and state government employees [9]. They discovered that in both traditional and nontraditional jobs women were disciplined more often than men. Nelson and Uddin examined the disciplinary process in a large, nonunion hospital [10]. When they compared a sample of 150 disciplined employees with a sample of 150 nondisciplined employees, they discovered that the proportion of nonwhite employees who had been disciplined was significantly higher than white employees, but they found no difference in the discipline based on age, gender, or seniority.

MODEL

An investigation of the relationship between employee characteristics and the likelihood of discipline is properly based on a model of the disciplinary process. Arvey and Jones provided a four-stage model [11]. The first stage involves the observation of an event or a possible rule violation. It also includes a comparison of the behavior to the organization's standards or norms to determine the appropriateness of the event. In stage two the agent makes a determination about the

individual's responsibility for the act. The attribution process is mediated by the characteristics of the act, the employee, and the supervisor. This process forms the basis for a decision about whether to ignore or respond to the observed behavior. Stage three follows from the decision to impose discipline. It involves the selection and application of a particular form of discipline. The choice is mediated by the contextual and situational factors and the characteristics of the employee. In the last stage the employee perceives and interprets the discipline. The employee then makes a judgment about its cause, intent, and legitimacy. This attribution reflects many factors including perceived equity and social comparison processes. The employee then selects the behavioral and affective responses.

The instant research relies on a simple model of the discipline process involving only the first two stages of the Arvey and Jones model. The disciplinary process begins with an employee violating an organization's rules or standards of conduct. The employee's supervisor either observes the misconduct or learns of it indirectly through the comments or reports of other individuals. The supervisor then determines whether to impose discipline on the employee. Thus, the likelihood of certain employees being disciplined can be high because they more frequently violate an organization's rules or because they are more likely to be disciplined when they violate the rules or both.

Employee characteristics are expected to affect both phases of this process. They may influence the likelihood of an employee violating rules and standards of conduct. The same characteristics may also influence a supervisor's decision to impose discipline or to ignore the misconduct. Thus, the influence of employee characteristics on either or both phases of the process may lead to differences in discipline rates.

HYPOTHESES

A number of employee characteristics are expected to be related to the likelihood of an employee receiving discipline. One of these characteristics is age. Research indicates young people are more rebellious and less willing to conform [12-13]. This suggests they are more likely to violate rules and standards of conduct exposing them to possible discipline. While there is no reason to believe young people who violate the rules are more likely to be disciplined than others, their more frequent rule violations should be reflected in higher discipline rates.

Gender is hypothesized to be associated with discipline. Men are generally regarded as more aggressive than women and more likely to engage in violence at work [12, 14-16]. This may mean more frequent rule violations. In addition, field studies in criminal justice indicate men who commit offenses are more likely than women to be arrested [17-18]. This suggests males who violate organizational rules are more likely to be disciplined. Thus, males are more likely to be

disciplined than females because they are more likely to commit offenses and are more likely to be disciplined when they violate the rules.

Marital status is expected to be related to the likelihood of an employee being disciplined. Single employees do not have the financial responsibilities attendant on having a family and may be more likely than married employees to risk their job by violating organizational rules. It may also be that supervisors are more likely to discipline a single employee than a married employee when the discipline involves a loss of pay, in recognition of the greater financial responsibilities of a married employee. For both of these reasons discipline rates are expected to be higher for single employees than for married employees.

Race is hypothesized to be related to the likelihood of discipline. Although some supervisors may maintain that nonwhite employees are more frequent violators of organizational rules, there is no evidence that any difference that may exist is not a function of other factors such as differences in wages and the type of jobs. There is, however, abundant evidence of discrimination in employment, which suggests that a nonwhite employee is more apt to be cited for a minor offense than a white employee [19-20]. The result is expected to be that nonwhite employees are more likely to be disciplined than white employees.

Seniority is expected to affect discipline. The literature on organizational socialization indicates that employees "learn the ropes" of an organization later in their careers [21-22]. This suggests that greater seniority means fewer violations of an organization's standards of conduct. Research indicating that senior employees have a stronger commitment to an organization is also consistent with fewer rule violations by senior employees [23-24]. In addition to fewer infractions by senior employees, supervisors may be more likely to overlook their minor rule violations. Thus, senior employees are expected to be less likely to be disciplined because they engage in less norm-violating behavior and because they are less likely to be disciplined when they do so.

In addition to age, gender, marital status, race, and seniority, there are a number of job-related variables that may affect the imposition of discipline. These include full- or part-time status, occupation, union membership, and wages. These factors are included in the analysis as control variables.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected from a large hospital located in a major metropolitan area. Employees are represented by a major national union. The hospital's disciplinary system is clearly specified in the collective bargaining agreement. It requires the hospital to discipline an employee within seven working days of the events upon which the discipline is based. The employee must receive a written notice stating the reason for the disciplinary action. Penalties range from a verbal warning to discharge.

A sample of employees was selected from an alphabetical list of employees as of January 1, 1996. Probationary employees were excluded. Selecting every eighth name on the list resulted in a sample of 305 employees.

The dependent variable relates to the disciplinary status of an employee. If an employee was disciplined in 1996, the variable is coded 1. If the employee was not disciplined, it is coded 0. No distinction is made for differences in the degree of discipline or between employees who were disciplined once and those who received multiple disciplines.

The independent variables include five employee characteristics—age, gender, marital status, race, and seniority. Age and gender are self-explanatory. Race is divided into two categories—white and nonwhite. Marital status is divided into married and single employees. Married employees include those who live with their spouse. Single employees consist of those employees who were never married as well as those who are divorced, separated, or widowed. Seniority reflects an employee's years of service with the hospital.

Four job-related characteristics are included to control for the effects of other factors that might influence the likelihood of an employee being disciplined—full-time/part-time status, occupation, union membership, and wage. Full-time/part-time status is self-explanatory. Union membership is a dichotomous variable showing employees who are union members and nonmembers who are required by the contract to pay a fair-share fee equal to dues. Wage is an employee's straight-time hourly wage.

The occupation variable is based on the six job categories used by the hospital for equal employment opportunity purposes. Professional jobs require knowledge acquired through a four-year college degree. Examples include registered nurses, occupational therapists, and vocational counselors. Technical jobs require basic scientific or technical knowledge obtained through specialized postsecondary school education or through equivalent on-the-job training. The jobs include licensed practical nurses, mammography technologists, and computer programmers. Professional and technical jobs were combined because of the similarity between the two groups and the small number of professional employees in the sample. Paraprofessional occupations are those in which workers perform some of the duties of a professional or a technical position in a supportive role such as medical team assistants, child support workers, and rehabilitation attendants. The clerical group consists of clerical and secretarial support positions. Service occupations are those in which workers perform duties related to the upkeep and care of the buildings, facilities, or grounds. Examples include food service attendants, porters, and messengers. Craft workers perform jobs that require special manual skill and comprehensive knowledge acquired through formal apprenticeship programs or extensive on-the-job training. Electricians, painters, and plumbers belong to this group. Service and craft occupations were combined because employees in both of these groups perform duties that contribute to the comfort, convenience, hygiene, or safety of the employees, patients,

and the general public. Moreover, the number of craft employees in the sample is very small.

The study employs two levels of analysis. First, univariate tests are used to explore the relationship between employee characteristics and discipline. For the continuous variables the mean values of the independent variables are compared for disciplined and nondisciplined employees and tested for statistical significance using *t*-tests. For the categorical variables the proportions of disciplined employees in each category are compared and tested for significance using chi-square tests. Second, a multivariate technique is used to examine the simultaneous effect of all of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Although ordinary least squares regression is the most familiar multivariate technique, it could not be used because of the dichotomous dependent variable. Logistic regression is an appropriate technique to use in this case [25].

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the dependent and the independent variables are shown in Table 1. It indicates that 19.3 percent of all employees were disciplined. The average age of the employees is 45.8 years. The standard deviation of 11.3 years indicates there are substantial age differences among employees. Seniority ranges from one to thirty-one years with a mean of 12.1 years and a standard deviation of 8.2 years. The average wage is $10.99. A majority of the employees are female, nonwhite, married, and full-time. Most of the employees work in craft/service jobs, but a substantial number are employed in clerical, professional/technical, or paraprofessional jobs.

The results of the univariate tests suggest a relationship between the employee characteristics and discipline. Table 2 indicates disciplined employees are younger and have less seniority. Table 3 reveals males, single employees, and nonwhites are more likely to be disciplined.

The majority of the control variables that relate to job characteristics are not associated with discipline. Table 3 indicates that full-time/part-time status, occupation, and union membership have no relationship to disciplinary action. Table 2 reveals that the wage of disciplined employees is $.75 per hour less than that of nondisciplined employees. This difference is significant at the 5 percent level.

Table 4 shows the maximum likelihood logit estimates of the regression equation obtained from the SAS statistical package (Version 6.12) [26]. The results indicate the overall model works well. The model chi-square, which is analogous to the *F*-test in linear regression, is 122.375, indicating a statistically significant relationship between the dependent and the independent variables. The R^2_L is .412, suggesting that the relationship is substantively important [27].

The possibility of collinearity was examined by use of tolerance statistics. The tolerance statistic in SAS examines the variance of each independent variable that is explained by the other independent variables. A value less than 0.20 is a cause

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics ($N = 305$)

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Dependent Variable		
Disciplinary Status	59	19.3
Disciplined	246	80.7
Nondisciplined		
Employee Characteristics		
Age	45.8[a]	11.3[b]
Gender		
Female	230	75.4
Male	75	24.6
Marital Status		
Married	176	57.7
Single	129	42.3
Race		
Nonwhite	183	60.0
White	122	40.0
Seniority	12.1[a]	8.2[b]
Job-Related Variables		
Full-time/Part-time		
Full-time	268	87.9
Part-time	37	12.1
Occupation		
Clerical	62	20.3
Craft/Service	123	40.3
Paraprofessional	49	16.1
Professional/Technical	71	23.3
Union Membership		
Member	225	73.8
Nonmember	80	26.2
Wage	10.99[a]	2.66[b]

[a]Mean
[b]Standard Deviation

Table 2. Continuous Variables Results of *T*-Tests ($N = 305$)

Variable	Disciplined	Nondisciplined	*t*-Value
Age	35.08	48.41	9.20**
	(8.48)	(10.31)	
Seniority	5.36	13.75	7.66**
	(5.04)	(8.03)	
Wage	10.39	11.14	1.96*
	(2.57)	(2.66)	

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.
*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Table 3. Categorical Variables Results of Chi-Square Tests ($N = 305$)

Variable	% Disciplined	Chi-Square
Gender		14.79**
Female	14.35	
Male	34.67	
Marital Status		25.02**
Married	9.66	
Single	32.56	
Race		6.48**
Nonwhite	24.04	
White	12.30	
Full-time/Part-time		2.91
Full-time	17.91	
Part-time	29.73	
Occupation		5.30
Clerical	11.29	
Craft/Service	23.58	
Paraprofessional	16.33	
Professional/Technical	21.13	
Union Membership		3.25
Member	21.78	
Nonmember	12.50	

**$p < .01$

Table 4. Maximum Likelihood Estimates
Logistic Regression ($N = 305$)

Variable	Beta	Std. Error	Wald Chi-Square	Odds Ratio
Intercept	2.777	1.614	2.960	
Age	–0.125	0.027	20.998**	0.883
Gender				
Male	1.277	0.503	6.445**	3.584
Marital Status				
Single	1.095	0.406	7.264**	2.990
Race				
Nonwhite	1.440	0.467	9.506**	4.222
Seniority	–0.055	0.036	2.256	0.947
Full-time/Part-time				
Full-time	0.288	0.629	0.211	1.335
Occupation				
Craft/Service	0.739	0.718	1.057	2.093
Paraprofessional	0.766	0.669	1.308	2.150
Professional/Technical	2.187	0.792	7.619**	8.905
Union Membership				
Member	0.656	0.544	1.452	1.927
Wage	–0.002	0.001	2.519	0.998

Notes: Model Chi-Square - 122.375***
% Correctly Classified = 89.8%
$R^2_L = 0.412$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .0001$

for concern, and a value less than 0.10 suggests a serious collinearity problem [27]. In this study the tolerance statistic for each of the independent variables is greater than 0.40. This indicates that collinearity is not a problem.

The regression coefficients for the employee characteristics and the job-related control variables are shown in the first column of Table 4. The Wald statistics for age, gender, marital status, and race indicate all of the coefficients are statistically

significant at the 1 percent level. Although the coefficient for the professional/technical group appears to be statistically significant, the significance of individual design variables should be considered only if the design variables as a group are significant [27]. In this case a comparison of the model containing the occupation variable and the one without that variable indicates occupation as a whole is not statistically significant [27]. Thus, the professional/technical variable should not be considered.

The practical significance of each of the variables is indicated by the odds ratio. The estimated odds ratio for a predictor variable assumes all other predictor variables are held constant [25]. A positive parameter indicates an increase in the odds and a negative parameter shows a decrease. For the continuous variables the odds ratio indicates the increase or decrease in the odds of being disciplined for a one-unit change in the independent variable. For the categorical variables, the odds ratio shows the increase in the odds of being disciplined associated with belonging to one category of the independent variable compared to the omitted category [25].

Four of the employee characteristics have a strong relationship to the likelihood of an employee's being disciplined. The odds ratio of .883 for age means the odds of an employee being disciplined decreases by 11.7 percent with a one-year increase in age. While the impact of a one-year increase may not be of much interest, the impact of a ten-year increase in age may be more meaningful. The estimated odds ratio for an increase of ten years in age is 0.287. This indicates that for every increase of ten years in age, the odds of an employee being disciplined decreases by 71.3 percent, assuming all other variables remain constant.

Gender, marital status, and race are also related to the likelihood of discipline. The odds ratio for gender is 3.584, which means a male employee is 3.5 times more likely to be disciplined than a female employee. A nonwhite employee is more than four times more likely to be disciplined than a white employee, and a single employee is almost three times more likely to be disciplined than a married employee.

DISCUSSION

The hypotheses regarding the relationship between employee characteristics and the likelihood of discipline are generally supported by the results of the univariate tests and logistic regression. Employees who are young, male, nonwhite, or single are more likely to be disciplined than other employees. In each instance the impact on the odds of disciplinary action is substantively important.

These results are generally contrary to the limited earlier research. Mulder found no difference in age, marital status, or seniority of disciplined and nondisciplined employees [1]. The study by Nelson and Uddin revealed no relationship

between discipline and age, gender, or seniority [10]. Larwood, Rand, and Hovanessian indicated women were disciplined more often than men. [9].

The difference between the results of the current study and the other studies is not surprising. Mulder focused mainly on the extent to which differences in personality test scores discriminated between disciplined and nondisciplined employees, rather than on demographic factors [1]. Furthermore, his data covered the period from 1961 through 1964 and were obtained from the Netherlands, making it easy to argue his results do not apply to the United States in the 1990s. Nelson and Uddin examined discipline in a nonunion hospital, where the disciplinary process may function in a different manner than in a unionized setting [10]. In addition, their conclusions are based on a comparison of employee characteristics of separate samples of disciplined and nondisciplined employees. The study by Larwood, Rand, and Hovanessian was limited to managers from federal and state agencies [9].

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the strong association between race and the likelihood of discipline. Table 3 reveals that in 1996, 24 percent of the nonwhite employees were disciplined, compared to 12.3 percent of the white employees. Table 4 indicates that after controlling for other factors nonwhite status increases the likelihood of discipline more than fourfold. This is consistent with the study of Nelson and Uddin, which found white employees were 51.3 percent of the nondisciplined employees versus 40 percent of disciplined employees, while nonwhite employees were 48.7 percent of the nondisciplined employees compared to 60 percent of the disciplined employees [10].

The results of this study raise many questions. As indicated above, discipline involves the violation of a rule or norm by an employee and a decision by a supervisor to impose discipline on the employee. This study provides no clue as to the reason nonwhite employees are more likely to be disciplined than white employees. It could reflect more norm-violating behavior by nonwhite employees, or it could be that nonwhite employees are more likely to be disciplined for a rule violation.

Some researchers have challenged the usefulness of the studies that suggest employee profiles. Gordon and Miller questioned the desirability of research that attempts to identify the demographic characteristics of grievants [28]. They wondered "what practical purposes(s) might be served by identifying the grievant profile" and warned researchers that "the possibilities for jeopardizing the well-being of certain employees because of their proclivities for dissent (a right they enjoy outside of their organization) suggests that researchers bear a special obligation to proceed more cautiously in this line of inquiry" [28, at 131]. Gordon and Miller suggested 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" [28, at 132].

This view must be rejected. The data indicate the discipline rates for nonwhites are higher than for whites, and ignoring that fact will not alter it. If the higher rate of discipline is due to discrimination in the administration of discipline, it is a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment matters. This would dictate the training of supervisors in the proper administration of discipline. If the greater likelihood of nonwhites being disciplined is due to more rule violations by nonwhites, the appropriate course of action would be behavior modification or other interventions to reduce the rule-violating behavior of nonwhites.

CONCLUSIONS

While this study provides evidence that differences in employee characteristics are related to differences in the likelihood of discipline, it has a number of limitations. First, this study does not identify the relationship between employee characteristics and rule-breaking behavior except to the extent to which rule-breaking behavior results in discipline. Second, it does not take into account the characteristics or behavior of supervisors. Clearly, supervisors play a major role in the discipline process [11]. Third, the data for the project are from a single, unionized hospital. The results may reflect circumstances specific to that organization and union.

Given the limitations of this study, the need for further research is clear. An attempt must be made to determine to what extent the greater likelihood of discipline for some groups is due to more frequent violation of organizational rules or to discrimination in the administration of discipline. Future research also needs to focus on the role of the supervisor and the work environment in the disciplinary process.

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