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Identifying New Organizational Practices by Considering Different Perspectives: An Ethics Management Example

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Scientific knowledge is driven by the research questions we ask. As Bergman and Jean (2016) argue, if wage earners, contract workers, and other workers are underrepresented in our research samples, we're likely to fail to investigate phenomena of importance to these populations. By focusing primarily on salaried and managerial workers, we limit the research questions we ask and fail to consider important caveats to industrial-organizational theories. As Bergman and Jean note, we cannot assume that the experiences observed

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in any group will generalize to other groups. We elaborate on this argument to discuss how failing to take into account the diverse perspectives and needs of the full labor market leads us to fail to ask relevant research questions. Specifically, we discuss how considering unexplored labor market perspectives opens new questions in the area of ethics management.

Although a phenomenon such as economic tenuousness may be applicable to a wide range of workers, it is likely not studied in the first place if the experience of those workers where this phenomenon is acute is not considered. Research questions asked as a result of considering the perspective of underrepresented research samples can lead to scientific knowledge applicable to not just these samples but traditionally studied workers too. For example, Bergman and Jean discuss how economic tenuousness is relevant from the perspective of freelancers but is something experienced by other workers, even if not as acutely. By considering the experiences of underrepresented samples, we identify new research questions to consider; by considering these questions we further our understanding of workplace phenomena that may have broader implications. Considering the experiences of nontraditional workers can help us better understand and manage the ethical behavior of both nontraditional and traditional workers.

Ethics Management and Nontraditional Workers

Behavioral ethics research to date has largely focused on biases, situational factors, and individual characteristics that contribute to unethical behavior (see Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014, for a review). This research has focused on the perspective of traditional employees (e.g., salaried, managerial). From this view, the organization has an obligation and opportunity to promote ethical behavior due in part to a continuous relationship between organization and employee that provides an opportunity for significant organizational influence. As such, existing research and practice have focused on the role of organizational practices for fostering ethical behavior (Schwartz, 2013).

Organizational interventions for promoting ethical conduct are referred to as ethical infrastructures (Tenbrunsel, Smith-Crowe, & Umphress, 2003). Ethical infrastructures include formal elements such as codes of ethics and ethics training, as well as informal elements such as peer sanctioning for unethical behavior and conversations about ethics (Tenbrunsel et al., 2003). Although this knowledge is very important, when one considers how ethics can be managed from the perspective of contingent workers and/or workers holding multiple jobs, it appears that these approaches do not address their unique needs.

Unique Characteristics of Nontraditional Workers

The experience of work can differ greatly as a result of the context in which it is accomplished (Bergman & Jean). Johns (2006) defines context as “situational opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior as well as functional relationships between variables” (p. 386). The context differs for traditional and nontraditional workers. Nonstandard workers have unique needs due to a unique employment relationship where there is less opportunity for organizational influence (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007; George & Ng, 2011). We argue that existing ethics management practices identified from the study of traditional workers are less appropriate for nontraditional workers given their general reliance on organizational influence.

Contingent workers

Contingent work (e.g., freelancing) has become “the new normal” in America with a recent study by the Freelancer’s Union reporting that 53 million American workers identify as freelancers (Horowitz, 2015). Freelancers do work on a contractual basis with a high level of autonomy, using their own methods to complete their work, and are subject to an employer in regards to only final products and/or results (Muhl, 2002). As a result of this autonomy, freelancers often experience high levels of job satisfaction (Kossek & Michel, 2011). However, freelancers also experience job tenuousness because they do not have a long-term relationship with a single organization where they receive predetermined benefits (Hulin & Glomb, 1999). By definition, freelancers experience less long-term support but also less influence from a single organization.

Workers Holding Multiple Jobs

Over 7.1 million people worked multiple jobs simultaneously in 2014 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Workers holding multiple jobs have responsibilities to and experience influence from multiple organizations concurrently. One reason individuals obtain a second job is to gain satisfaction that they don’t gain from their primary job (Dickey, Watson, & Zangelidis, 2011). Just as workers may get differing levels of satisfaction from each organization, organizations have differing levels of influence on the ethical behavior of employees working multiple jobs. Like contingent workers, those holding multiple jobs do not have one single employer that exerts control and support.

New Perspectives Provide New Insights for Ethics Management

The relationship between the worker and organization is unique for nontraditional workers. Nontraditional workers are, by definition, more indepen-

dent and cannot expect the same protections and support from organizations that traditional workers might. This is important given the changing nature of the workplace and work arrangements (Hulin & Glomb, 1999). Although we have focused on contingent workers and those holding multiple jobs, these principles apply to a variety of underrepresented workers including wage earners and low- and medium-skilled workers. Each of these workers accomplishes work in a context that is underrepresented in our research and thus not fully understood.

Given the more independent relationship of nontraditional workers with organizations, ethics management practices need to be considered that do not rely upon sustained organizational influence. Whereas ethical infrastructures may still promote ethical behavior in a limited amount of time, it is likely that their influence will not be as great for contingent workers and those working across organizational settings simultaneously where there is less consistent contact. As a result, practices that can be enacted on an individual basis and therefore appropriate to help nontraditional workers maintain high ethical standards need to be considered.

From this perspective, the research question changes. We no longer focus on what a single organization can do to promote ethical behavior, but rather, we explicitly consider how organizations can support individuals (whether as contingent workers or those working across multiple work contexts) as they promote and facilitate their own ethical behavior. This approach cedes more control and responsibility for ethical behavior to individual workers, as is appropriate from the perspective of nontraditional workers where less organizational control is expected. It may seem unlikely that individuals would be motivated to maintain their own ethical behavior given well publicized ethics lapses, but we note that individuals do want to see themselves as ethical even if they sometimes fall short of their own ethical ideals (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010). In addition, individuals engage in many practices that can benefit organizations such as continuous learning and job crafting (London & Smither, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

We do not address what these practices enacted by individuals for promoting their own ethical behavior may look like here. Instead, we provide this as an example of how asking about ethics management from a new labor market perspective leads to previously unexplored questions that can contribute to new scientific knowledge as they are addressed. By considering underrepresented workers such as contingent workers and those working multiple jobs at one time, we ask how individuals, not organizations, can promote ethical behavior because organizations may not have the level of influence on these workers to make traditional ethics management practices be effective. This provides the opportunity to identify new, previously un-

considered practices that are applicable to a now-permanent and growing part of the workforce.

Practices identified by asking how individuals can promote and support their own ethical behavior would be applicable to a wide range of workers beyond contingent workers and those simultaneously holding multiple jobs. Although we may not be prompted to answer this research question by considering the experience of traditional employees where there is opportunity for significant organizational influence, these practices could still be applicable to this segment of the workforce. Practices particularly relevant for nontraditional workers could easily complement existing ethics management practices and could potentially further strengthen their effectiveness in promoting ethical behavior among traditional workers as well.

Only by exploring organizational practices, such as ethics management practices from all perspectives of the labor force, can we come to fully understand and identify all of the potential practices available for addressing organizational needs. Given the importance of promoting ethical behavior, it could be advantageous to identify additional opportunities for promoting ethical behavior. As such, considering the experiences of underrepresented workers opens up new avenues for research related to ethics management and other organizational practices.

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The Rise of the “Gig Economy” and Implications for Understanding Work and Workers

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Bergman and Jean (2016) include freelancers as one of the categories of workers who are understudied in the industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology literature. This neglect is particularly striking given the attention paid by the popular media and by politicians to the rise of the “gig economy,” comprising primarily short-term independent freelance workers (e.g., Cook, 2015; Kessler, 2014; Scheiber, 2014; Warner, 2015). This may be due in part to challenges involved in accessing and researching this population, as discussed by Bergman and Jean, but it may also arise from complexities in defining and conceptualizing freelance work, as well as from misunder-

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