

ORGANIZATIONAL ANOMIE AS A CAUSE OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR IN THE ORGANIZATION

Jolanta KORKOSZ-GEBSKA

Warsaw University of Technology; jolanta.gebska@pw.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-0793-6253

Purpose: The article concerns the phenomenon of an organizational anomie which can lead to counterproductive or unethical employee behavior. The article was created by the diversity of definitions of anomie, which, as the cause of the occurrence of negative behaviors of employees, is very often confused with its effects, which are counterproductive work behaviors.

Design/methodology/approach: The desk research technique and ChatGPT interview were used to explain the phenomenon of an organizational anomie as well as the relationship between anomie and counterproductive work behavior.

Findings: The phenomenon of an organizational anomie is still the subject of few studies and has not yet been comprehensively discussed from the perspective of management sciences. Anomie is very often confused with counterproductive work behaviors.

Research limitations/implications: Reliable research on the phenomenon of an organizational anomie is difficult to conduct because the use of a survey questionnaire does not guarantee getting true answers. Conducting interviews, on the other hand, requires cooperation with sociologists and psychologists.

Practical implications: There is a need to intensify research on organizational anomie as a state that can lead to counterproductive and unethical employee behavior, which can be also encouraged by the recent popularization of the home-office mode of work. The article is addressed to researchers, but also to employees and managers to make them aware of seemingly harmless unfair behavior that should be eliminated or minimized in the workplace.

Social implications: The phenomenon of organizational anomie is an important and complex problem to be solved in enterprises, especially since it is conducive to other negative pathological phenomena, such as mobbing and discrimination. Diagnosing of the occurrence of an organizational anomie is the first step to eliminate or reduce the effects of it.

Originality/value: The paper draws attention to the need for further research on this phenomenon, especially from the point of view of entering the labor market by a new generation Z, the most stressed and vulnerable to depression and anxiety. The article explains the relationship between anomie and counterproductive work behaviors, with which it is confused.

Keywords: organizational anomie, counterproductive work behaviors, CWB.

Category of the paper: Viewpoint.

1. Introduction

Although research on an anomie has a long history, the phenomenon of organizational anomie in the literature is still the subject of few studies and has not yet been comprehensively discussed from the point of view of management sciences. The ambiguity is visible even in the name, because in the literature there are studies concerning: “employee anomie”, “organizational anomie”, “institutional anomie”, “staff anomie”, “work anomie”, “coworkers’ anomie”, etc. According to the responses generated by the ChatGPT some people confuse anomie with counterproductive work behavior (CWB), because both concepts refer to situations in which there are deviations from expected or normative behavior which can bring many problems to the organization, such as reduced efficiency, chaos or conflicts (OpenAI, 2024). The concept of anomie is more abstract and requires an understanding of the concept of social norms, their impact on the behavior of individuals and groups, as opposed to counterproductive work behaviors, which are concrete actions (OpenAI, 2024). Perhaps the reason for all the terminological confusion is the fact that anomie is a phenomenon and a subject of study by sociologists, while counterproductive work behavior is mainly dealt with by psychologists and managers in the organization. Anomie can occur in an organization for a variety of reasons, i.e. due to a perceived lack of affiliation with the organization, the lack of, non-compliance with, or enforcement of social norms within the organization, inappropriate communication, or unclear standards of conduct, which favors actions that are inconsistent with the interests of the group and the organization. It is worth noting that anomie in a workplace contributes to the occurrence of other pathological phenomena such as mobbing or discrimination.

The aim of the article is to describe examples of behaviors that are symptoms of the phenomenon of organizational anomie, in the context of its possible intensification, resulting from the recently popularized home-office mode of work and the entry into the labor market of a new generation of employees, called “Generation Z”. The goal was achieved by using the desk research technique (analysis of existing data on described employee abuses and definition of anomie and CWB) and ChatGPT interview.

2. Organizational anomie vs. counterproductive work behaviors

The term “anomie” comes from the Greek “á-nomos” and means lawlessness, no rules. The concept of anomie was developed by Emile Durkheim and used to describe a societal condition of normlessness, a lack of solidarity and regulation in the social structure, and a general lack of integration between people and groups (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, Espino-Rodríguez, 2007, p. 847). The theory was expanded by Robert K. Merton who tried to

explain why some people engage in deviant behavior, like crime, suggesting it often arises from a disjunction between societal goals and the legitimate means to achieve them (Nickerson, 2023). It is worth adding that the term anomie has a long history and was used not only in sociology. The biblical usage of anomia was partly influenced by relevant Greek philosophical writings because it entered the biblical tradition when the Old Testament was translated into Greek (Deflem, 2015, p. 718). Initially, the word anomia was used for about 20 Hebrew words, referring to various aspects of wickedness, evil, injustice, ungodliness, wrongdoing, depravity, transgressions, and sin (Deflem, 2015, p. 718). In the latter meaning of sin, anomia was used interchangeably with the Greek term 'hamartia' which refers to a fatal flaw (Deflem, 2015, p. 718). Anomie is a concept that deals with both social and individual mental health, as it deeply shakes the understanding that it is possible for individuals in the society to achieve individual goals together and by looking after each other, isolating the individual from the society by isolating them from the society, or derating and making them reckless (Yarim, Çelik, 2021, p. 163). Within the sociological tradition, different authors have tended to define anomie in different ways, oscillating between a focus on the social system and a focus on individual values and beliefs systems (Teymoori, Bastian, Jetten, 2017, p. 1011). In Polish literature, the most common position is to focus on the individual and define anomie as a phenomenon concerning an employee. Among the definitions of an anomie in a workplace, the most common reference is to the dishonesty of employees towards their employers, exposing them to large financial losses. However, it is worth emphasizing that negative behaviors can also apply to actions taken by and towards co-workers. Because the negative behaviors of employees can be only symptoms of the occurrence of an anomie phenomenon in the workplace, it seems reasonable to use the term "organizational anomie", and the behavior of employees should be classified rather as counterproductive. In one of the few books in Polish, employee anomie is defined as a social phenomenon consisting in the systematic occurrence of behaviors in employees or (more often) in employee groups that lead to financial losses (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 13). A feature of employee anomie is the operation of psychological mechanisms that allow for embezzlement, theft, falsification of documents and other unethical activities without a sense of guilt or remorse on the part of the employee (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 13). The source of this phenomenon is inadequate organizational structure, mismanagement, and systems and processes that force employees to behave in an anomic way, which have become binding norms of behavior in the organization (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 13). According to this approach, employee anomie is a phenomenon that is affected by three powerful forces (Fig. 1) (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 93):

- Environment within which the organization operates.
- Human behavior in the organization.
- Management, i.e. the way the organization's resources are operated.

The phenomenon of employee anomie is the result of the action of these three forces, and each of them has a significant impact on the activation and maintenance of anomic behavior in the organization (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 93).

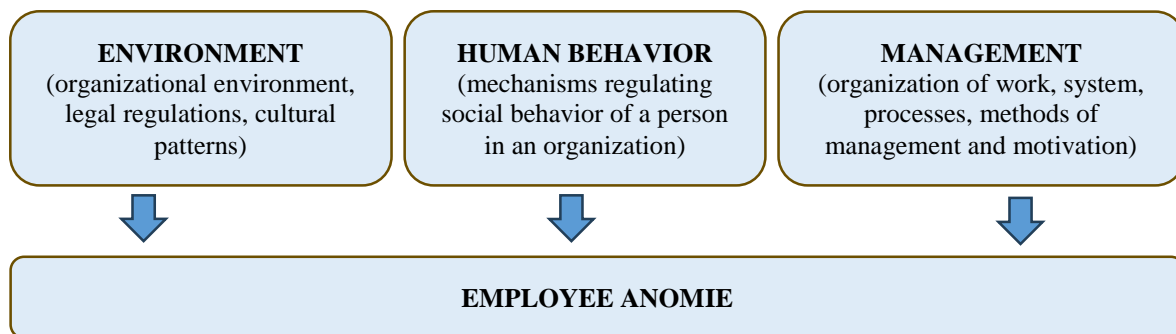


Figure 1. Model of three forces of an organizational anomie.

Source: Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 93.

Diagnosing employee anomie and then controlling it must consider the simultaneous analysis of the three forces and the relationship between them for a specific organization or a specific department (Ambroziak, Maj, 2013, p. 93).

According to Sypniewska (2017, p. 239) anomie at work is an unwritten social agreement based on which it is acceptable to steal from the employees who feel that under some circumstances, one may steal from a company at the same time not calling themselves thieves, but people who use certain available opportunities. Such actions can be classified as counterproductive work behavior. There are various definitions of them. According to one of them, there are voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both (Robinson, Bennett, 1995, p. 556). This kind of behavior (Stepanek, Paul, 2022):

- goes against organizational social norms and harms an organization or its employees,
- is moderately and negatively related to job performance, customer satisfaction, profitability, and productivity,
- is more common among males than females, as well as among those who are young and those who have less work experience,
- is associated with negative personality traits such as neuroticism, negative affectivity, narcissism,
- has a negative impact on the perception of the entire organization,
- increases the risk of the appearance of burnout and turnover of employees.

Anomie is not directly a counterproductive work behavior, but it can create conditions conducive to such behavior. Considering the approach that anomie is a social state in which norms and values are unclear, poorly defined or not followed, the model (Fig. 1) should be modified, in accordance with the relationship that anomie, as a state, can lead to the occurrence of counterproductive work behaviors (Fig. 2).

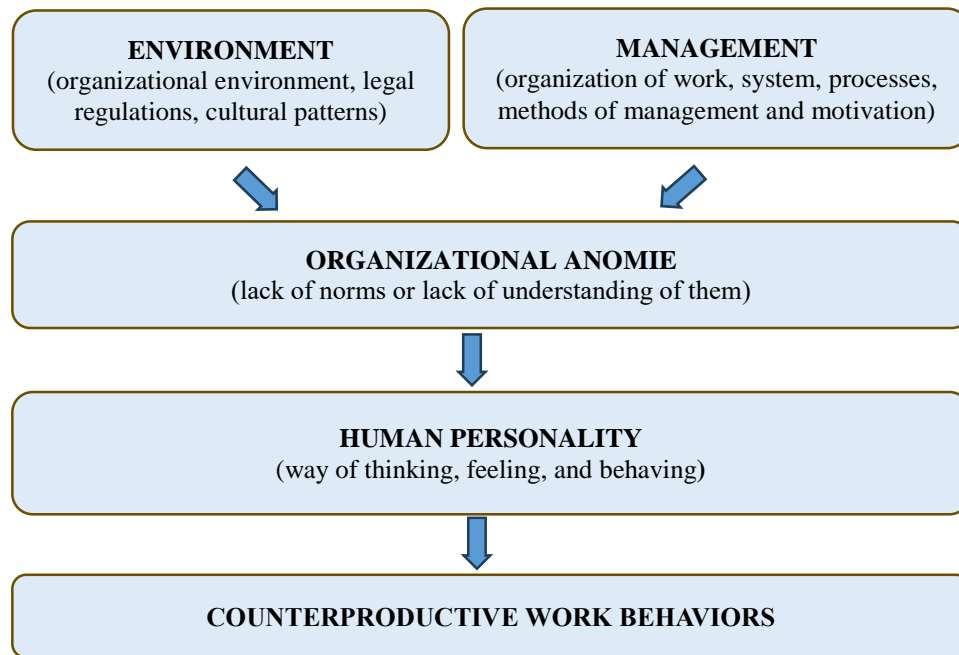


Figure 2. Model of organizational anomie and counterproductive work behavior relationships.

Source: Own elaboration.

The above model is a modification of the previously described model of the three forces of employee anomie, in which it was considered important to take into account the personality of employees, which determines whether counterproductive behavior at work will occur even under conditions of organizational anomie. Anomie is a potential causative factor in the occurrence of CWB rather than its result.

3. Intentionally negative results of organizational anomie

As previously indicated, counterproductive work behaviors can be the result of organizational anomie. Using desk research technique, research reports and other information on counterproductive work behaviors were analyzed, both in scientific sources, press articles and police reports, concerning abuses by employees, which, due to the scale of the phenomenon, have often been recognized as crimes. Examples of these abuse can be divided into three groups:

- theft of money, e.g. charging a normal fee for a transaction, while accruing an undue high discount, and then paying the difference for oneself, making fictitious sales of goods and their returns, and then appropriating money from the operations performed, or issuing false invoices,
- theft of property or improper use of company resources for private purposes, e.g. theft of work tools or office equipment, goods, fictitious purchase with deferred payment, or use of the company telephone and other company equipment for private purposes, etc.

- cheating the employer of working time, e.g. overestimating the permissible break time, simulating illness to take sick leave, performing tasks unrelated to work, deliberately inflating working time to obtain additional remuneration, etc.

The analysis of the identified examples was also considered from the point of view of the growing interest in remote and hybrid work, which create more "opportunities" for unfair settlement of employee working time. This also contributed to the creation of many product innovations aimed at both deceiving the employer and, on the other hand, the ability to verify the employees' commitment to their duties.

According to the results of a survey conducted in Poland by the LiveCareer portal, with the participation of 1374 people, as many as 42% of respondents who do not believe in the meaning of their work and 31% of those who do not like it are considered dishonest (Spadło, 2022). Of the respondents, nearly 28% simulated illness at least once to go on sick leave (young employees under 26 years of age were most often dishonest, and as many as 39% of respondents in this group admitted to cheating). Over 39% of respondents admit that they have left work early, giving a false reason, e.g. a visit to the doctor, illness or malaise, an appointment with a professional, the child's illness, the need to pick up the child from school or kindergarten (Spadło, 2022). Unfair settlement of working time also consists in performing work for another or even several other employers during the work performed for the original employer.

The results of other studies in the area of inappropriate employee behavior indicate unfair practices also used against co-workers, such as seemingly trivial theft of food from the company fridge, to which respondents are reluctant to admit. In a survey conducted by Wirtualna Polska in 2017 entitled "Have you ever stolen food from someone's fridge?", out of 6800 people who participated in it, only 4.2% admitted that they did it frequently, and 3.1% that they stole it, but told the "victim" about it (SmartLunch Blog, 2021). From the point of view of the definition of counterproductive work behavior, although this type of behavior does not expose the employer to losses, it may violate the norms in force in the company. This type of behavior has again contributed to the development of innovative products such as food bags with mold or cockroach prints, food containers with padlocks, padlocks with a 110 dB audible alarm, or a digital bottle lock. The development of artificial intelligence and the possibility of its improper use, combined with the form of remote work, are conducive to dishonest behavior of employees towards the employer or co-workers. Responsible management and care for employees can counteract these phenomena. The implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) gives great hope for the interest of entrepreneurs and leaders of organizations in responsible practices. By implementation of responsible business conduct (RBC), organizations can prevent and address negative impacts of their activities, while contributing to the sustainable development (OECD, 2024). There is certainly still a lot to do in this area, as according to the analysis of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reports on Polish enterprises, the least activity is recorded in the "social" area.

4. Summary and conclusion

The aim of the article was to describe examples of behaviors that are symptoms of the phenomenon of organizational anomie, in the context of its possible intensification, resulting from the recently popularized home-office mode of work and the entry into the labor market of a new generation of employees, called “Generation Z”. To achieve this goal, qualitative research methods were used, such as literature research, content analysis and observational research. The main research techniques used in this article include the secondary research and the ChatGPT interview.

The results of the research indicate that the phenomenon of organizational anomie and its results is a complex issue that is difficult to eliminate. Since most people are motivated to seek justification for their actions, beliefs, and feelings (Aronson, 2005), this can be a daunting task for organizational leaders. However, once again, it is worth emphasizing that the occurrence of anomie can contribute to the appearance of other negative phenomena in the workplace, such as mobbing or discrimination, which is why it is important to prevent its occurrence. The factors that should be eliminated to prevent the appearance of CWB include (OpenAI, 2024):

- excessive stress (can lead to feelings of confusion and lack of meaning),
- lack of career prospects (when employees don't see opportunities for advancement or career advancement in the workplace, they may feel pointless and meaningless),
- interpersonal conflicts (negative relationships with coworkers or superiors can disrupt team cohesion and make it difficult to achieve career goals),
- over-supervision and control (employees who feel over-supervised by their superiors or monitored at their work may feel uncomfortable and deprived of autonomy),
- low job satisfaction (when employees are not satisfied with their own work, they may feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled in their duties),
- poor work-life balance (a lack of work-life balance can lead to a sense of social disintegration as employees don't have time to develop family or social relationships),
- lack of clear goals and values in the organization (when an organization does not have clearly defined goals, missions, and values, employees may feel a lack of consistency and meaning in their work),
- inadequate communication and lack of engagement (when employees don't receive the right information or participate in their company's decision-making process, they can feel isolated and disengaged),
- overload of duties (too many duties and the inability to perform them effectively can lead to lose control of their work),
- lack of social support (collaboration with other employees and social support in the workplace are important for a sense of belonging and cohesion).

Anomie and counterproductive work behavior should be interpreted as separate phenomena, and it is worth noting that organizational anomie may contribute to the occurrence of counterproductive work behavior. Another important issue not covered in this article is unintentional anomic behavior, which precisely because of this “non-intention” cannot be confused with counterproductive work behavior and may result from normative chaos and ambiguity of the applicable rules. In a situation where employees feel disoriented and meaningless at work, they may exhibit counterproductive behaviors, e.g., sabotage the organization's activities, deliberately reduce work efficiency, or ignore responsibilities (OpenAI, 2024). It is worth emphasizing, however, that not every counterproductive behavior is the result of organizational anomie, as they can only result from the personality traits of employees, e.g. personal hostility towards co-workers or the entire organization.

According to the presented model of the relationship between organizational anomie and counterproductive work behavior, the occurrence of this type of negative behavior depends also on individual personality traits. Counterproductive work behaviors, on the other hand, can occur regardless of the anomic work environment. Undoubtedly, however, one cannot equate anomie and consider it as a synonym for counterproductive activities.

References

1. Ambroziak, D., Maj, M. (2013). *Oszustwa i nieuczciwość w organizacjach. Problem anomii pracowniczej- diagnoza, kontrola i przeciwdziałanie*. Warszawa: Oficyna a Wolters Kluwer business.
2. Aronson, E. (2005). *Człowiek istota społeczna*. Warszawa: PWN.
3. Bennett, R.J., Robinson, S.L. (2000). Development of a measure of workplace deviance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(3), 349-360.
4. Deflem, M. (2015). Anomie: History of the Concept. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2 edition, Vol. 2, pp. 718-721, doi: 10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.03067-1.
5. Nickerson, Ch. (2023). *Anomie Theory in Sociology: Definition & Examples*. Retrieved from: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/anomie.html>, 28.11.2024.
6. OECD (2024). *Responsible Business Conduct*. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/responsible-business-conduct.html>, 30.11.2024.
7. OpenAI (2024). Interview with ChatGPT [Large language model]. Retrieved from: <https://openai.com/chatgpt>, 28.11.2024.
8. SmartLunch Blog (2021). *Lodówkowe złodziejaski, czyli firmowe kradzieże gastronomiczne*. Retrieved from: <https://www.smartlunch.pl/blog/lodowkowe-zlodziejaski-czyli-firmowe-kradzieze-gastronomiczne>, 30.11.2024.

9. Spadło, Ż. (2022). *Jak oszukujemy w pracy? Badanie Polaków 2022*. Retrieved from: <https://www.livecareer.pl/porady-zawodowe/lojalnosc-w-pracy-badanie>, 29.11.2024.
10. Stepanek, S., Paul, M. (2022). *Umbrella summary: Counterproductive work behavior*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. Retrieved from: <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summary/counterproductive-work-behavior>, 30.11.2024.
11. Switzer, T.G. (2013). *Measuring Normlessness in the Workplace: A Study of Organizational Anomie in the Academic Setting*. <https://aura.antioch.edu/etds/67>
12. Sypniewska, B.A. (2017). Work Anomie in an Organisation. *International Journal of Contemporary Management, Vol. 16, No. 2*, pp. 235-265. doi: 10.4467/24498939IJCM.17.017.7530.
13. Teymoori, A., Bastian, B., Jetten, J. (2017). Towards a Psychological Analysis of Anomie. *Political Psychology, Vol. 38, No. 6*, pp. 1009-1023, doi: 10.1111/pops.12377.
14. Yarim, M.A., Çelik, S. (2021). Organizational Anomie: A Qualitative Research on Educational Institutions. *Open Journal for Educational Research, Vol. 5(2)*, pp. 161-176, doi: 10.32591/coas.ojer.0502.04161a.
15. Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara, P., Espino-Rodríguez, T.F. (2007). Organizational anomie as moderator of the relationship between an unfavorable attitudinal environment and citizenship behavior (OCB). *Personnel Review, Vol. 36, Iss. 6*, pp. 843-866, doi: 10.1108/00483480710822391.