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Sabotage!

Survey Evidence on When it is Acceptable

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Abstract: When is sabotage acceptable? We use a quasi-experimental design to study the acceptability of several forms of rule-breaking at work. We find retaliation is perceived as more acceptable if it is an act of omission instead of an act commission and if it is in the same “domain” as the employer’s bad act. Pilfering goods and services is more acceptable than taking money, while damaging property is least acceptable. Respondents who are older, female, politically conservative, and managers typically show less tolerance for acts of sabotage, while union members are a bit more accepting than average.

Keywords: Perceived fairness, Sabotage, Retaliation, Omission, Commission, Domains of reciprocity, Labor relations

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In 1811 there were multiple attacks on mechanized factories by Luddites, perhaps the most famous case of sabotage in the history of the industrialized world. In recent years an enormous literature has arisen concerning when employees choose to help their employer (“organizational citizenship behavior,” Organ 1988) or colleagues (“pro-social behavior”). Relatively little organizational literature has examined the complement: discretionary behavior that harms the organization or its members -- what we call sabotage.

This lack of research is not because sabotage is unimportant. While no high-quality data exists, the following rough estimates suggest the magnitude of sabotage: “Between one-half and one-quarter of the typical work force is involved in taking company money or property sometime during their employment” (Hollinger and Clark 1983). “Overall, in the United States, the losses from employee fraud and abuse cost more than \$400 billion annually, costing organizations 6 percent of their annual revenue” (Laabs, 1999; this claim may be on the high side).

Sabotage is sometimes thought of as the purposeful destruction of company equipment. We broaden that definition to examine sabotage against groups other than the employer: a manager, in some cases, or the customer for an independent contractor. We analyze sabotage broadly as illegal rule-breaking behavior that the employee believes harms the intended victim. As such, our definition encompasses a wide array of behavior. While “sabotage” is an evocative term, we do not mean to prejudge the goodness or badness of employee actions – we are simply studying when people think that it is more or less acceptable for employees to harm others at work.

Because sabotage breaks rules it is difficult to study in the field. Some of the most insightful accounts of sabotage come from newspaper reports and collections of anecdotes (e.g., Dubois 1976). Sprouse (1992) documents dozens of stories about people from all walks of life “getting back” at employers perceived to be unfair. These include stories about the computer industry, hotels, food processing, newspapers, offices, retail stores, the military, and the government. Some stories are largely entertaining (jamming machinery to create a few minutes of downtime), while others are fairly shocking (a waitress serving spoiled food to ruin her employer’s business).

We use quasi-experimental survey questions that examine attitudes toward different potential acts of sabotage. Our focus is on when a retaliatory action or taking items from work is not too unacceptable, from a neutral party’s perspective. This paper is at the intersection of

behavioral decision theory and perceptions of the fair employment contract. As such, we build on the seminal work of Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986).

We examine a number of dimensions of potential acts of sabotage. Given an egregious action by the employer, one important consideration is whether the negative response by the employee is an act of omission or commission. We expect that negative acts of commission are considered less acceptable than achieving the same outcome with a passive act of omission (Baron 1994).

A second consideration is the degree of damage inflicted by the act. While our intuition is that more damaging acts are less acceptable, some ethical theories emphasize ethical “bright lines” and pay less attention to the quantitative consequences.

A third issue is that of “domains” of reciprocity: Punitive actions are fairer if the punishment fits the crime not in terms just of *level* of retaliation, but also in terms of *domain* – that is, a participant’s view of what is related to the cause of harm.¹ That is, we hypothesize that sometimes people look for “poetic justice” (Tripp, Bies, and Aquino 2000). This principle of retaliating in the same domain is related to Walzer's (1983) spheres of justice and Thaler’s (1985) mental accounts in savings and consumption behavior. Walzer points out that we cannot (usually) buy babies or love, and that one cannot reciprocate a dinner invitation with a gift certificate for one’s hosts to dine at a restaurant. This approach is distinct from most reciprocity-based theories of justice, as expressed for example in the Kahneman, Knetsch & Thaler (1986) notion of dual entitlement, and in the Rabin (1993) and Charness and Rabin (2002) models of reciprocity. Related to the idea that the domain of misbehavior matters, not just its economic consequences, is the hypothesis that it is more acceptable to pilfer items for their use value than for resale.

A second focus of our study concerns how the perceptions of the fairness of a punitive response vary across one’s role and degree of identification with an organization. One important issue is the extent to which management and employees share a common vision of the implicit contract and the fairness of corresponding policies. Results from Gorman and Kerr (1992) imply that top managers are much more likely to accept pay cuts as being fair than does a random sample of citizens. In fact, this may be a case of “where you stand depends on where

you sit,” because perceptions of justice may vary according to one’s own position or internal reference point (the “self-serving bias,” e.g., Babcock *et al.* 1995). Differences in perception across roles are critical, since these can lead to major breakdowns in cooperation and management-labor disputes.

There may also be differences in perceptions of the fairness of sabotage across other demographic dimensions, such as race, gender, and age. Males are consistently found to be more directly aggressive than females (Fry 1998), and we therefore expect males to have a higher tolerance for sabotage. At the same time, there is mixed evidence on whether women are more aggressive in less direct ways (*ibid.*); thus, these main effects of gender on sabotage may not show up when we examine passive means of retaliating (for example, by not assisting a misbehaving boss). In addition, we expect younger respondents to be more accepting of sabotage. First, most crimes are committed by the young. Second, there may be a cohort effect if the social contract is weakening (a case made in Putnam 2000).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

What is sabotage? In Appendix 1 we outline the boundaries of our definition: “illegal rule-breaking behavior that the employee believes harms the intended victim.” Using a related definition, Dubois (1976) distinguishes three sets of employee acts.

His first category is breaking or stealing capital or output. We add stealing services, raw materials and work in process to this list.

His second category involves going slow – what economists refer to as providing low effort or shirking. In extreme cases, employees can run entire businesses from their cubicles while being on the payroll of an employer. At the collective level, “work to rule” (when workers work slowly by following every conceivable regulation and company policy) and other forms of collective slowdown are classic ways for employees to punish employers.²

Dubois’ third category of employee action involves reducing hours at work. As such these actions often combine “exit” (using Hirschman’s [1970] classic typology) with “voice”

² Because these acts and some in the next paragraph are usually legal, they are at the border of our definition of “sabotage.” In any case, any theory of sabotage will presumably help predict work to rule as well.

(that is, sending a message to management). At the individual level there is absenteeism due to dislike of work or of the manager. At the collective level we see groups of employees agreeing to call in sick (“sickout,” known as the “blue flu” when practiced by police officers).

Our theory of when sabotage is more or less acceptable starts with the long tradition of studying fairness and the implicit employment contract. As Akerlof and Yellen (1990, p. 261) note, “If people do not get what they think they deserve, they get angry.” In such cases, the saboteur feels moral or personal outrage and may go out of his or her way to hurt the malefactor, or may simply refrain from helpful behavior that would normally be routine. Motives for such punishment may include revenge, sending a message to the employer, and providing incentives for the employer to perform better in the future.

Hundreds of experimental studies demonstrate that people will sometimes sacrifice money to lower the payoff of another person by an even greater amount. Typically this retaliation follows an action that is readily interpretable as being selfish. At the same time, in most experiments the absence of the rich nuances present in the field environment makes the use of the strong term “sabotage” a bit questionable. The experiments in Brandts and Charness (2003) are an example that adds some context. They find that management lying about whether they will pay for performance justifies employee sabotage, while an honest statement to the same effect provokes a more muted response. The large literatures on prosocial behavior in organizations emphasize the converse result: Employees are more likely go out of their way to help organizations that treat them within the parameters of the employment contract employees perceive as fair (e.g, Organ 1988).

Greenberg (1990) uses a natural quasi-experiment to examine the prevalence of employee theft in relation to a pay cut that might often lead to perceptions of inequity. In one workplace the theft rate doubled when a temporary 15% pay reduction was instituted. In a second workplace management provided a convincing explanation for the pay cut and there was no increase in theft. In this framework, acts of theft can be seen as a manifestation of feelings of mistreatment. However, it is also possible to interpret these thefts as attempts to correct the unfair underpayment.

Many motives for sabotage have nothing to do with restoring equity. For example, some workers commit theft or sabotage merely to enrich themselves, have something to do, or feel empowered (Mars, 1982, Dubois 1976 and Sprouse 1992). Our design separates out these two

sets of motives, as some scenarios have no reason to retaliate, some have no enrichment by the employee, while others combine motive for retaliation with opportunity for self-enrichment.

When is sabotage fair?

Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler (1986) use a quasi-experimental survey to study how neutral observers perceive the fairness of various actions by firms, and how perceived fairness is moderated by a number of factors. We adapt this methodology to investigate the characteristics of the employee action and of the respondent that determine when respondents feel that employee sabotage is more or less acceptable.

Characteristics of the Employees' Action

We examine three dimensions of the employees' actions: whether it is an act of omission versus commission, the magnitude of the damage, and whether the "domain" of the retaliation matches the domain of harm.

Acts of omission versus commission

One dimension of interest with respect to sabotage is omission versus commission. It may be perceived to be fair to refuse to help a nasty person or firm; is it also fair to deliberately inflict damage? St. Thomas Aquinas is the classic reference on how acts of commission are worse than those of omission (Delaney, 1911). Others disagree. Most obviously, omission and commission can be difficult to define. In the extreme, some analysts claim that any ethical value given to the distinction reflects a failure to understand the consequences of decisions (Baron 1994). Bennett (1981) argues that the only difference is that there are more ways to bring about harm through omission than through commission.

We will introduce some of the philosophy underlying the omission/commission distinction with mini-scenarios beloved of ethicists. In all of the following scenarios we assume the people are apparently equally blameless and equally deserving of life. (These scenarios draw on the contributions to Steinbock and Norcross, 1994.)

The "trolley car" problem is:

- A) A trolley is about to take the right turn on a "Y" intersection. The driver sees two people to the right and one to the left. Should the driver do nothing and have the

trolley continue to the right so that two people die or switch the car to the left and save a life, at the expense of performing an act of commission to kill someone?

Related problems identify the boundaries of each respondent's concern for consequences versus responsibility. Consider the related and equally morbid scenarios:

B1) Can a rescue worker drive past one person who will die without help to save two others?

B2) Can a rescue worker drive over and kill one person trapped in the road to save two others?

and

C1) Can a doctor withhold 2 doses of medicine from a patient who arrived 10 minutes ago (thereby dooming that patient) if that action saves two later-arriving patients otherwise about to die?

C2) Can a doctor unplug the respirator from a comatose patient who might otherwise recover so he dies and his organs can save 2 patients otherwise about to die?

The consequences of all the scenarios are either one death or two; thus, consequentialist reasoning suggests choosing the path of a single death. Importantly, almost all theories used by economists for positive purposes (predicting people's actions) and for normative purposes (prescribing good policies) are consequentialist. Psychologists' theories of distributive justice such as equity theory, relative deprivation, and related hypotheses also assume people respond largely to consequences; in contrast, theories of procedural justice leave more room for the distinction of responsibility (Lind and Tyler 1988; see also Rabin 1993 who creates an economic model of when responsibility and intentions matter).

In the trolley car case (A) the focus on consequences appears unproblematic; many philosophers (and we suspect most common citizens) defend the action of turning to the left to reduce harm. In contrast, most people (and perhaps most philosophers; again, see the contributors to Steinbock and Norcross, 1994) are more comfortable with scenarios that have harm by omission in B1 and C1 than the more active harms in B2 and especially C2. To take the

³ Intermediate cases exist such as:

C3) Can a doctor withhold medicine from a patient who will die without ever recovering from a coma so the patient dies 2 days earlier and his organs can save 2 patients otherwise about to die?

C4) Can a doctor unplug the respirator from a patient who will die without ever recovering from a coma so the patient dies 2 days earlier and his organs can save 2 patients otherwise about to die?

extreme case, murdering a patient to harvest his organs for others (a rephrasing of C2) is illegal and we suspect grossly offends the morality of most Americans.

Few studies have examined attitudes toward acts of omission and commission empirically. Spranca, Minsk, and Baron (1991) elicit third-party attitudes towards harmful acts of omission and commission, holding constant intentions, motives, and consequences. Students judged either the morality of the “bad actor” in a scenario or rated the “goodness” of decision options. Participants often rated harmful omissions as less egregious than harmful commissions, and this pattern is associated with the (naïve) view that omissions do not cause outcomes. However, their study uses a within-subject design that can lead to a “demand effect” where subjects figure out what the experimenter wants and provide the pattern in question. In addition, their procedure examines the views of students in psychology classes, rather than the overall population. (Baron [1994] reviews the evidence on the importance of omission versus commission.)

In a related finding, Charness and Rabin (2002) find that perceived misbehavior by one player often leads the other player to refuse to sacrifice to help when help is normally given. At the same time, the same misbehavior rarely leads the second player actively to sacrifice to hurt the first player.

Severity of Sabotage

Our intuition was that sabotage with fairly minor consequences – for example, wasting a couple of hours of a seriously misbehaving manager’s time – would be seen as more acceptable than sabotage with more severe consequences – in our scenario, wasting a couple of weeks of the manager’s time.

Other ethical theories need not lead to this result. If stealing, for example, is wrong, then stealing a little bit may be judged as just as unacceptable as stealing a lot. Moreover, there can be interactions: for serious managerial misbehavior a serious retaliation is appropriate to make “the punishment fit the crime.”

“Domains” of Sabotage

A harmful action may seem fairer if the punishment fits the crime not in terms just of level of retaliation, but also in terms of “domain.” The domain is a socially-constructed vision of what is related to the cause of harm. As an example, we hypothesize that it is more acceptable if a plumber who has been cheated causes damage to the deadbeat’s pipes rather than similar amount of damage to the deadbeat’s car.

Interestingly, primers on negotiations stress the importance of looking at opportunities to logroll. People's inability to identify trade-offs (Bazerman, et al., 2001) may be related to their perceptions that there are domains of fairness and trade-offs that are not legitimate (“taboo tradeoffs”, in the language of Tetlock, et al. 2000). That is, many people may be uncomfortable with some potential Pareto improvements in material-based utilities that lead to failures of domain-specific justice. For example, it may be difficult for union negotiators to give up the 8-hour day for higher wages even if most members and the employer prefer an alternative schedule (four 10-hour days, for example), because the 8-hour day is a principle, not a commodity. A key lesson negotiators learn is to cost out benefits to themselves and the other side; the fact that they do not do this intuitively (as economic theory suggests) hints incommensurability problems may loom large not just for cognitive reasons but perhaps also due to violations of folk ethics.

Walzer’s (1983) discussion of spheres of justice emphasized the importance of not selling votes, babies, and a few other goods. It appears that some taboo tradeoffs are particularly severe when transactions involve money. For example, Walzer points out you cannot reciprocate a dinner invitation with a gift certificate for your hosts to eat out. You can invite them out to dinner, but that requires an explanation about kitchen remodels, etc.

Our hypothesis on monetizing sabotage is that taking a small value of goods or services is more acceptable than taking cash.⁴ The former is often called “pilfering” (or “grazing” in grocery stores and restaurants) and is often considered a perk of the job, while the latter is clearly “theft.” One folk-ethical intuition is that people who take goods or services are more often those who can use them. Interestingly, this intuition directly opposes economists’ theorem that money is the most efficient form of transfer.

⁴ Seth Fragomen suggested this hypothesis.

Individual differences

People differ in many ways, among them their respect for property and laws concerning property versus their appreciation of the importance of retaliating after an injustice (where retaliation may both create retributive justice and create incentives for better future behavior). This dichotomy appears strongly in thinking about attitudes toward civil disobedience: for example, was it justifiable to throw tea into the Boston Harbor? Thus, in examining attitudes toward rule-breaking at work, we are also examining who respects employees' ability to stand up for and defend themselves.

We first examine whether managers and employees have different views on employee rule-breaking. We are unaware of any previous studies that directly compare fairness perceptions across employment roles. It is problematic to compare results across studies, as the methodology employed often varies. For example, Gorman and Kerr (1992) used a within-subject design of top managers (where responders read comparison questions in sequence) and contrasted results with Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler's between-subject design (1986).

There are a number of plausible reasons why managers might see management actions in a more favorable light than do employees. For example, managers may be more prone to believe that the market system or organizations in general are fair. Second, managers may envision themselves as the implementer of unpopular policies (for example, sexual harassment), rather than the victim. Third, managers may see employee retaliation and pilfering as costly to their career prospects; in the short run, managers may receive profit-sharing or stock option benefits, and their long-term promotion opportunities (either inside or outside the organization) may be tied to workplace. We ask about some of these attitudes to decompose any changes by occupational role we uncover.

Another dimension of labor roles concerns union membership. We expect union members to consider management actions more unfair than similar non-union members for several related reasons. First, union members' familiarity with a high level of collectively-bargained protection will make them less agreeable to management discretion concerning pay and layoffs than most Americans. Second, union socialization of members to be suspicious of management will reinforce the familiarity effect. In addition, prospective employees know the policies of unions. Thus, when possible, people who value due process will disproportionately

self-select into union jobs. Finally, unions are based on employees' rights to collectively fight for their rights; as such, they may also select for and/or inculcate respect for individual worker's ability to fight for their rights.

Other responder circumstances that could influence attitudes include one's gender, political views, feelings about personnel decisions, and age. As mentioned above, we might expect that females are less tolerant of sabotage. Similarly, since political conservatives typically respect the rule of law and do not favor redistribution; perhaps they are less happy about sabotage.

If the social contract is on the wane, or if it just seems less important to younger respondents, we might also expect the willingness to see sabotage as acceptable to be inversely correlated with one's age. On the other hand, non-laboratory experimental studies such as Holm & Nystedt (2002) and Güth, Schmidt & Sutter (2003) find that fairness seems to be more important to older people; if so, the trend could instead go in the opposite direction.

METHOD

We conducted surveys in the San Francisco Bay Area in the summer of 2002.⁵ These surveys were distributed in person on BART trains, on the UC Berkeley campus, and to various social and work groups. Each survey contained a mix of questions, with different scenarios involving a particular action or inaction, as well as demographic questions. In each survey we presented respondents with four scenarios of sabotage and asked them to express approval or disapproval of the actions.

As different respondents received different versions of four scenarios, we have a between-subjects comparison of how altering the version altered respondents' choices. For three of the scenarios (hiding a file, underpaying a plumber, and taking cards) there was then a

⁵ An earlier stage of the research involved reading existing case studies and anecdotes of sabotage and carrying over 30 unstructured interviews. Interviews typically discussed examples of sabotage at work and why it was or was not acceptable. The goal from that stage was to identify heuristics respondents used in judging the acceptability of sabotage.

follow-up question (the within-subjects data collection). Our survey design is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Survey design

Survey form	File 1	File 2 changes	Marketing Plan	Plumber 1	Plumber 2 changes	Cards 1	Cards 2 changes
1	Denies knowing, hours	Doesn't tell	No default & choice to ignore	Scratches driving home	Scratches a week later	30 winners, major, CD, everyone does it	Small employer
2	Doesn't tell, hours	Hides,	No default	Scratches a week later	Finds ring	30 winners, small employer, CD	Major record company
3	Hides, hours	Weeks	Default plan 1	Finds ring	Finds \$100 bill	30 winners, major, CD	Cash
4	Doesn't tell, weeks	Hides	Default plan 2	Finds \$100 bill	Nails	30 winners, major, cash	300 winners
5	Hides, weeks	Denies knowing,	Default plan 1 & choice to ignore	Nails	Scratches driving home	300 winners, major, CD	30 winners

Note: The second version of each question shows the within-subjects comparison on that scenario. For example, in Survey form 1 respondents were first told the employee denies knowing where the file is and were then asked their views if instead the employee was not asked and did not tell.

RESULTS

We find evidence that the perceived fairness of harmful worker acts is mediated by factors surrounding the circumstance of the act and the characteristics of the respondent.

Acts of Omission versus Commission

Our first few scenarios largely examine the effects of acts of omission versus commission. The first question also addresses issues of the scale of the sabotage.

Hiding versus Letting Remain Lost

All scenarios began:

A male manager in your company told Ann that if she did not sleep with him, he would fire her. Ann quit the next day and has been both unemployed and depressed ever since. Now this manager needs some information from a file that he has misplaced. Bob, a good friend of Ann's, knows where this file is.

Each survey continued with one of five scenarios, such as this one:

When the manager starts looking for the file, Bob hides the file. It will take the manager a couple of weeks of his own overtime to re-create the information in the file. The manager will have to put in a couple of weeks of his own overtime to recreate the information in the file.

While this version had an act of commission (hiding the file), another version has a harmful act of omission: the employee tell the manager the location of the file. In some of both the omission and commission scenarios, it would only take management a couple of hours to replace the file (instead of a couple of weeks).

In each case, we asked people for their views on whether the employee action in question was completely acceptable to completely unacceptable (a 1 to 7 scale). We expected that not telling would be seen as most fair, followed by denying knowledge, and then hiding the file. The degree of fairness should be lower when damage was higher.

We present a regression analysis of our results Table 1. More complete tabulations of all responses are in Appendix 2.

Table 1: Regressions about Hiding a File

Dependent variable: 1 = Completely acceptable, 7 = Completely unacceptable

OLS regression results	
Intentionally misplacing the file (instead of saying nothing)	0.964 [0.088]**
Denies knowing where the file is (instead of saying nothing)	0.289 [0.119]*
Takes two hours of manager overtime to replace (instead of w hours)	0.126 [0.121]
Baseline: The employee chooses not to tell the manager the file's location, with two weeks of manger overtime required.	3.52 ** [0.105]
R ²	.039
N	1793

Notes: Standard errors [brackets] and level of statistical significance (* < .05, ** < .01. Standard errors are clustered to account for two observations per

respondent. Results with an ordered logit regression were almost identical. In results not shown, the interaction of intentionally misplacing the file with weeks versus hours to replace is not statistically significantly different.

Generally, misplacing the file is considered substantially worse than refraining from telling management where the file is; in addition, actively denying knowledge is significantly worse than simply choosing not to tell. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that “sins of omission” are less objectionable than “sins of commission.”

In contrast, the degree of damage (whether replacing the file takes hours or weeks) has no meaningful effect on the acceptability of the employee’s action.

Choosing a Marketing Plan

The second base question on omission and commission involves receiving an unfairly small bonus:

Assume that you have the highest performance of anyone in your work group. Nevertheless, your boss has just chosen to allocate more of his bonus budget to his best friend among the group and less to you. Now your boss must pick one of two marketing plans to sell the output you produced. Although both will be equally effective, the first plan will end up making another division look good while the second plan will make your boss look good. Your boss is extremely unlikely to ever figure out this feature of the two plans (and probably never will) and asks your advice on which plan to implement.

We then vary the options available and the default action that would be taken by the boss. In the base case (a):

Your boss is under extreme time pressure and sends you an e-mail asking you which plan you recommend. He notes that if he does not hear from you he will probably choose the first plan. Check the box for the action you would take.

- i) Recommend the first plan (where another division looks good)
- ii) Recommend the second plan (where your boss looks good)

In two other conditions the participant could ignore the email. In (b) there is no default mentioned for what the boss could choose while in (c) the boss will choose the plan that made him look bad if he hears nothing. In the final two conditions a recommendation is mandatory; in case (d) the boss is leaning toward the option where he will look good while in (e) he is leaning

toward the option where he looks bad. In cases (c) and (with some probability) (b), employee inaction leads the boss to take an action that harms him.

We expected that people would be less likely to recommend the second plan (where the boss looks good) when given the option to ignore the e-mail, under the principle that direct action of recommending a plan that harms the boss is less acceptable than doing nothing and letting the boss choose that plan.⁶

Table 2: Marketing Plan Results

Default option boss will take & <i>Is there an option to ignore the email?</i>	Number Choosing each Action			Total	% recommending Plan 2, where boss looks good
	Recommend Plan 1	Recommend Plan 2	Ignore		
a. No default stated	80	93	-	173	53.8%
b. No default & <i>have choice to ignore the email</i>	71	88	50	209	42.1%
c. Plan 1, where other division looks good & <i>have choice to ignore the email</i>	58	66	45	169	39.1%
d. Plan 1, where other division looks good	84	68	-	152	44.7%
e. Plan 2, where boss looks good	81	93	-	174	53.4%
Total	374	408	95	877	46.5%

When there is no choice to be silent about 54% of respondents recommend plan 2, where the boss looks good (Table 2, row a). About 40 percent are silent when given that choice (rows b and c, difference in recommending plan 2 from row a significant at the 5% level, significance levels from a probit equation). There is no meaningful difference if there is no default decision of the boss versus the boss is leaning toward the plan where he looks bad (comparing rows b and

c). Apparently about 15% of the population (and over a fourth of all those who would otherwise have helped their boss) prefer to commit acts of omission that retaliate against an unfair boss, even if they are unwilling to take an explicitly harmful action.

“Domains” of Sabotage

The next set of questions focus on “domains” of sabotage and other forms of framing, while also touching on whether “everyone does it” and “hot” versus “cold” emotions.

Keeping Winning Cards

Our next question does not involve misbehavior by the employer, but the harm caused by the employee is relatively minor:

James has been hired to distribute 1000 game cards at a mall, 30 of which are “winners.” James knows which cards are the winners.

The company is a major music company and the game cards are for a free CD worth \$10. James keeps 3 winners and gives them as gifts for Christmas.

Variations on this theme included the employer being a small independent music company instead of a major company; removing 3 winners when 300 of the 1000 cards are winners instead of 30; winners being worth \$10 cash (not a CD worth \$10); and James being told by the other card distributors that they each kept about 3 cards from a batch of 1000. We expected that taking winners would be considered less reprehensible when the employer was a major music company, when there were 300 winners, or when James was told everyone else did it, but worse when the winners were worth actual cash.

⁶ The action of harming one’s misbehaving boss are not precisely within our definition of sabotage that emphasizes lowering profits, not career success. The theories relevant to sabotaging a boss overlap those of sabotaging an employer.

Table 3: Regressions on Acceptability of Taking Winning Cards

Dependent variable: 1 = Completely acceptable, 7 = Completely unacceptable

OLS regression results	
Employer is a small (not major) music company	.242 [.078] **
Employee told “everyone does it”	.042 [.147]
Cards are worth \$10 (not a CD)	.241 [.121] *
300 of the 1000 cards are winners (not 30)	-.212 [.090] *
Baseline: 30 cards of 1000 are “winners,” major music company, and the cards are for a free CD worth \$10.	5.51 [.084] **
R ²	.007
N	1791

Notes: Standard errors [brackets], and level of statistical significance (< .05, ** < .01). Standard errors are clustered to account for two observations per respondents. Results with an ordered logit regression were almost identical. Interactions of small firm times “everyone does it” and between taking cash times 300 cards are winners were small and not statistically significant*

Complete results are presented in Appendix Table A3. Respondents did not view taking winning cards as favorably as retaliating against a boss who has sexually harassed and devastated a victim (table 3 row 1, mean acceptable = 5.5, 1 to 2 points on a 7-point scale less acceptable than intentionally misplacing the file in Table 1).

Consistent with our hypotheses, it is less acceptable to take winners if the firm is the small independent than a large company. This result is consistent with ethical intuitions that large institutions have higher ability to absorb losses and/or are less deserving of profits.

It is also less acceptable if the winners are worth cash, not CDs. This result supports the hypothesis of “domains” of fairness, where pilfering goods is more acceptable than stealing cash.

Consistent with the importance of framing, it is more acceptable if the employee takes 3 out of 300 winners instead of 30. No ethical theory suggests relative share of theft matters, but substantial evidence suggests people routinely examine proportions, not absolute levels (the Power Law of psychophysics).

Many theorists have posited that actions are more acceptable if they are common. Kohlberg, for example, describes an ethical stage (the third of six, in his system) where conformity helps define right actions (1981).

In contrast to our hypotheses, the employee being told that everyone else does it was not a justification in the eyes of the respondents. “Everyone does it” is one of Kohlberg's ethical stages.

Plumber response to underpayment

The next base question involved a slightly different employment relationship, between an independent contractor and a homeowner. What sort of retaliation is justified when the customer just refuses to pay part of a market-rate service charge for good work?

A plumber has just finished work on a pipe when the homeowner he is working for walks in. The homeowner says that he will not be paying the plumber his full payment because: “You don’t deserve that kind of money for this job.” In fact, the plumber charges standard market rates and has done a good job. The homeowner leaves the room.

The plumber then drops a few nails down the pipe, knowing that they will eventually cause about \$100 worth of damage (equal to about half the unpaid money). Please rate the plumber’s action.

Our variants replace the “drops a few nails” with one of following: the plumber keeping a \$100 bill he finds behind a drawer; finds a ring in the pipe worth about \$100 (the half the unpaid money). He takes the ring home and gives it to his wife; seeing the homeowner’s parked car shortly thereafter and scratching it to cause \$100 damage; and seeing the car a week later and scratching it.

The concept of domains of reciprocity suggests that scratching a car should be considered less fair than dropping nails down the pipe. In the language of Tripp, et al. (2002), an underpaid plumber who retaliates against pipes creates poetic justice, while retaliation against a car lacks that important feature.

We also expected that retaliation in ‘cold blood’ a week later is perceived to be less acceptable than immediate retaliation. That is, we expect the “hot” emotion of anger to justify retaliation that is less acceptable when more calculating.

The monetization principle suggests that keeping the money is less fair than doing overt damage. At the same time, taking money is more efficient socially than doing damage because no waste is involved. Thus, taking money may be more acceptable.

Table 4: Regressions on Acceptability of Plumber Retaliation

Dependent variable are 1 = Completely acceptable, 7 = Completely unacceptable

OLS regression results	
Scratches car now	.217 [.101] *
Scratches car a week later	.488 [.131] **
Finds and keeps ring	-.531 [.157] **
Finds and keeps \$100	-.621 [.128] **
Constant: The baseline scenario is the plumber drops nails down a pipe.	5.51 [.104] **
R ²	.053
N	1796

Notes: Standard errors [brackets] and level of statistical significance (< .05, ** < .01). Standard errors are clustered to account for two observations per respondents. Results with an ordered logit regression were almost identical.*

It was rather unacceptable to retaliate for non-payment, with a mean score of 5.5 on scale where 7 is completely unacceptable. Our main interest is how that score varies with the form of retaliation.

Compared with dropping nails down a pipe, harming a car is somewhat less acceptable (about .2 points on a 7-point scale). This result supports the hypothesis of the importance of retaliating “in kind.” Even more important was the timing of retaliation: scratching a car a week later is overwhelmingly unacceptable, with 65% of respondents placing this in the worst class (P < .01 that scratching now is not as acceptable as scratching a week later).

Finding and keeping either a \$100 bill or a ring receive similar scores, both substantially and significantly more acceptable than taking an action that causes physical damage (Table 4, difference between ring and \$100 bill not statistically significant). Apparently, respondents value the efficiency gain of taking compensation rather than committing destructive acts.

Comparing across questions, as expected, taking cash is more acceptable when it is retaliating for patently unfair behavior. When the plumber took \$100 from an under-paying client the mean response was 4.9 (acceptable), almost a point better than an employee taking 3 \$10 winning cards (5.7).

Within- versus Between-Subjects Results

We asked each respondent two versions of some of our questions. Our results so far have pooled our results within versus between subjects (with appropriate adjustment of the standard errors to account for the two non-independent responses). In fact, the assumption that the data can be pooled is testable. In results not shown the data sometimes reject the assumption of pooling.

Specifically, when discussing hiding versus denying knowing where a file was, respondents comparing hiding a file (act of commission) versus silence (act of omission) showed large and statistically significant effects. The same comparison between subjects had half the point estimate and lost statistical significance. In addition, in the case of the underpaid plumber, within-subject comparisons had about 50% larger effect for the comparison of dropping nails versus scratching a car than between-subjects. Dropping nails down a pipe is equally acceptable as taking money when comparing between subjects, but 1.2 points *worse* within subject.

These results show that either within- and between-subjects approaches are not similarly mapping people's fairness models into "acceptability" scales or that respondents' ethical views vary by phrasing and framing.

Each estimate has methodological concerns. A within-subject design may lead to spurious effects when respondents attempt to provide answers to satisfy their perceptions of the experimenter's expectations.⁷ While reducing that risk, the between-subjects design has no natural anchors. Thus, respondents may have differed in their interpretation of "completely acceptable" versus "somewhat acceptable." This problem is avoided in the within-subjects design where a respondent's answer to the first question provides an anchor to the second

⁷ Some studies in economics have found substantial differences between with-subject and between-subject designs, as in the survey data in Gneezy (forthcoming) and the experimental data in the working-paper version of Charness, Haruvy, and Sonsino (forthcoming).

question. Thus, between-subjects results inherently have substantial noise, and may miss important patterns.

Real-world problems about whether to make a particular decision are often posed as between subjects; choices about which decision to make may be considered to be within subjects. Thus, neither analysis is “correct” -- they answer somewhat different questions about reality. Further research must be sensitive to how different study designs generalize to different types of decisions.

Individual Differences

We consider three forms of individual differences: demographics (age, sex and race/ethnicity), occupational status (union member, supervisor/manager, or neither), and attitudes toward markets and politics. To analyze individual differences we run regressions predicting fairness of employee sabotage as a function of these characteristics (Table 5). In results not shown we ran the technically more correct ordered logit regressions that account for the ordinal nature of the responses. Results were almost identical; we present the OLS results as easier to read. We present results with both the demographics and several attitude questions. Results on demographics were almost identical if we did not condition on the attitudes.

Table 5: Regression of Fairness Replies on Personal Characteristics.

	1 OLS	2 OLS	3 OLS	4 Probit
	Misplaces vs. Doesn't Tell (File)	Pilfer Cards 1 to 7, 7 = completely unacceptable	Plumber Retaliation	Marketing Plan 1 = harm boss
Female	0.116 [0.134]	0.253 [0.116]*	0.16 [0.121]	0.051 [0.036]
Age	0.028 [0.006]**	0.016 [0.005]**	0.03 [0.005]**	0 [0.002]
Black	0.139 [0.247]	-0.27 [0.223]	-0.12 [0.227]	-0.045 [0.063]
Hispanic	0.884 [0.255]**	0.295 [0.206]	-0.254 [0.254]	0.058 [0.072]
Asian	-0.408 [0.149]**	-0.326 [0.133]*	-0.171 [0.131]	-0.065 [0.041]
Other race	-0.392 [0.311]	0.216 [0.245]	-0.411 [0.320]	-0.012 [0.084]
Supervise	0.315 [0.141]*	0.34 [0.119]**	0.121 [0.125]	-0.015 [0.037]
Union	-0.465 [0.251]	-0.161 [0.214]	-0.439 [0.254]	0.054 [0.062]
“Organizations are fair.” (This and next 2 questions: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)	-0.012 [0.041]	0.131 [0.035]**	0.078 [0.038]*	0.029 [0.011]**
“I am comfortable with a competitive market economy.”	0.05 [0.037]	0.008 [0.031]	0.01 [0.033]	0.004 [0.010]
“Society should take more care of its weaker members.”	0.107 [0.046]*	-0.04 [0.039]	-0.123 [0.041]**	0.012 [0.012]
Extremely Liberal (1) to Extremely Conservative (7)	0.141 [0.050]**	0.113 [0.045]*	0.124 [0.042]**	-0.03 [0.013]*
N	1716	1717	1713	858
R ²	0.12	0.07	0.12	

*Notes: * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%. Omitted race/ethnicity is white. Probit coefficients are dP/dX, showing the change in predicted probability when the independent variable moves one point. Standard errors in columns 2-4 are clustered to account for two observations per respondents. Each regression contains control variables for the several cases possible for each column; for example, whether the file took two hours versus 2 weeks to replace in column 1. In col. 4, harming the boss is defined as recommending the plan where the other department looks good or refraining from making a recommendation when the boss is likely or sure to pick that plan.*

Demographics

For three of the four questions (hiding or misplacing a file, pilfering cards, or retaliating for unpaid plumbing work), older workers are less accepting of worker sabotage ($p < .05$ for each effect). Moving the respondent age from 20 to 55, for example, reduces acceptance of hiding or misplacing a file by about 1 point on a seven-point scale. Results were near zero for recommending a bad marketing plan (Table 5, col. 4).

Women were also .12 to .25 points less accepting of employee sabotage for those three scenarios ($p < .05$ only for pilfering cards). That lower acceptance is perhaps most surprising in the case of retaliating against sexual harassment (the hidden file, Table 2). In contrast, women were slightly less likely to recommend the marketing plan that would make the boss look best (Table 5, col. 4, difference not significant).

The lower female acceptance of sabotage is not present for all forms of retaliation. There is some evidence that women prefer passive means to harm others – consistent with the research cited above on gender and aggression (Fry 1998). For example, the same share of men will harm the boss if the choices are to recommend a plan that makes others look good or that either recommends that plan or is silent (51%). In contrast, if the only choice is active harm, only 39% of women will harm the boss actively – fewer than the rate of aggression by men (gender gap $P < .05$). In contrast, 68% of women choose either active or passive means to harm the boss when given those 2 choices – a total rate of aggression above the male rate. The double difference is statistically significant ($P < .01$).

In contrast, there were no consistent differences among whites, Hispanics, and blacks. Asians showed consistently lower approval of sabotage than whites, although the effect is only statistically significant for two of the four items.

Occupational status

As expected managers and supervisors were less accepting of worker sabotage, with statistically significant effects of about .3 points on the first two questions (hiding or misplacing a file and pilfering a card, $p < .05$).

Union members, in contrast, were more accepting of worker sabotage. Apparently due to small sample size, the differences were not statistically significant.

Attitudes

Most of the economic and political attitude questions did not have a strong relationship with predicting acceptance of worker sabotage. Respondents who agreed one point more (on a 7-point scale) with “I wish our society would take more care of its weaker and more vulnerable members” were about a tenth of a point less accepting of sabotage that retaliated against a sexual harassing boss (col. 1) but were slightly more accepting of sabotage against a nonpaying customer (col. 3). In contrast, respondents who agreed 1 point more that “Most organizations make human resource decisions fairly” were a bit less accepting of taking cards or retaliation against a non-paying customer (col. 2 and 3), but a bit more accepting of harming a boss who had acted unfairly (col. 4). These sign changes suggest attitudes are not in general important.

The most consistent relation is being a conservative versus a liberal. Moving from the most liberal to the most conservative reduces the acceptance of sabotage by about one point on a 7-point scale – a large effect.

We expected much of the effect of occupational differences would be mediated by attitudinal differences. Although managers and union members differed in the expected direction on the attitude questions (results not shown), the main effects of being a supervisor/manager and of being a union member were unaffected by whether we did or did not control for attitudes (results not shown).

SUMMARY, CAVEATS AND DISCUSSION

We first summarize what we have learned, warn about what we have not, and then discuss the implications.

Summary

Our hypotheses about the difference between acts of omission and of commission are strongly supported. Respondents are more accepting of retaliating against an unfair act by inaction (not telling where a file is, not replying to a manager’s request for advice) than by action (hiding a file, lying about knowing a file’s location, or providing a manager poor advice).

Our hypothesis that less severe sabotage was more acceptable received no support. In that scenario the harm done was very large (sexual harassment with devastating consequences).

Apparently respondents' decisions about whether retaliation was acceptable or not did not distinguish between wasting two hours versus two weeks of the offending managers' time was a problem.

Our hypotheses on domains of retaliation receive some support. It is more acceptable for a plumber to retaliate for underpayment by damaging pipes than by causing the same dollar value of damage to a car. Cash also has a special role in theft; it was somewhat more acceptable to pilfer winning cards worth CDs than winning cards worth cash.

Finally, individual differences matter. Older respondents, women, supervisors and managers, and conservatives tended to be less accepting of sabotage while union members were a bit more accepting.

Caveats

The primary concern about studies such as this one is that attitudes are not behaviors. Some people may be more accepting of sabotage when they see it than they report here because people assume employee retaliation is usually well deserved. Other may over-report disapproval so as to conform with their expectations of social norms. Conversely, some people may be less accepting of sabotage when they see it than they report here, reacting viscerally to troublemakers or assuming employers usually act with benign motives.

Our sample is a sensible cross-section primarily of northern Californians. At the same time, it is not a representative sample even of this region, and it is unclear how northern California represents the nation.

Finally, we document variation in responses according to the respondent characteristics as well as to rather subtle changes in the scenarios. Thus, generalizations can be dangerous.

Discussion

Interestingly, most of the characteristics that predict acceptance of sabotage also correlate with arrest rates: young men, for example, are the bulk of those arrested and are more accepting of worker sabotage. While we have no data, we suspect those arrested are also rarely supervisors or managers.

One important exception is that blacks have much higher arrest rates than other races but do not report higher acceptance of sabotage. We have no evidence if that fact is due to blacks'

under-reporting their acceptance of sabotage, blacks having above-average arrest rates given their rate of criminal offenses, having a non-random selection of blacks in our sample, or a true difference in attitudes toward sabotage conditional on attitudes and behaviors concerning crime.

Implication for organizational theory

Fairness theories already had a good track record in predicting retaliation (Charness and Rabin 2002) and theft (Greenberg 1990). Consistent with those theories, our results support the idea that people are fairly accepting of retaliating against vicious managerial acts such as sexual harassment.

Behavioral science theories have not emphasized the distinction between acts of omission and commission, although the distinction looms large in both philosophy and in our results. It is important to identify other domains where this distinction may explain both human behavior and observers' evaluation of others' behavior.

While our findings are not dramatic in size, the results on “domains” of retaliation and pilfering are novel. The phrase “The punishment fits the crime” is usually considered to hold in some sense with commensurable punishments. Our results are consistent with the ancient aphorism of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” While “domains” of savings are important in the work of Thaler (what he calls “mental accounts,” 1985) we are unaware of research extending this idea into interpersonal relations.

Implications for managers

In general, respondents did not look favorably on sabotage. At the same time, a devastating sexual harassment greatly increased approval for sabotage. The management implication is to design management systems that strongly discourage abusive management actions.

The more controversial implication for managers is to hire Maggie Thatcher: A conservative, female, older, and long-time (former) manager sounds like a good bet to avoid sabotage. In fact, most of our demographic effects are not large. At the same time, they largely go in the expected direction. The challenge for research and managers is to find ways to minimize actions employees feel are unfair – thus, reducing the effects of any differential acceptance of sabotage.

Next steps

Future studies might examine more dimensions of sabotage: One could study the role of the saboteur (for example: Is it worse when trusted employees misbehave?); the demographics of the saboteur (Is it perceived as less acceptable when women misbehave than men?); and many others.

It is important to validate these attitude surveys. While some research can be done in the lab, ultimately scholars face the challenge of moving research on sabotage into field settings.

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Appendix 1: What is Not “Sabotage”?

To understand our definition of sabotage as “illegal rule-breaking behavior that the employee expects to harm its victim” it is helpful to examine what it leaves out.

We emphasize acts intended to harm the employer. Thus, we do not count as sabotage an employee who breaks company rules to improve customer service if the employee expects the resulting goodwill will raise profits, while we do count the identical act as sabotage if the employee expects it to lower profits.

We do not count as sabotage legal actions such as forming a union, telling the truth to a Congressional hearing, strikes, quits, or omitting most organizational citizenship behaviors (that is, actions that are not part of an employee’s job but help the organization) -- even if the action breaks company policy and reduces profitability. Nevertheless, all of these actions can harm the employer. Not surprisingly, theories of sabotage overlap with theories of unionization (Bronfenbrenner 1997; Freeman and Medoff 1984), work to rule, whistleblowing (Near, Dworkin, and Miceli 1993), strikes (Gouldner 1965; Karsh, 1982), quits (Mowday, Porter, Steers 1982) and OCB (Organ 1988). A somewhat different set of theories examine sabotage of colleagues, particularly when relative performance affects rewards (Lazear 1989).

Some actions and omissions are violations of the legal obligation of an employee to act in good faith, but it is implausible that an employee would be successfully sued for failing to uphold such obligations. We define these actions as sabotage because they are illegal and reduce profits. Some of these actions may also be omitted organizational citizenship behaviors (Organ, 1988); that is, acts that are not part of an employees’ job but help the organization. As with OCB there are no penalties for failing to uphold the obligations, but unlike OCB they are legally part of the job – at least in the sense that a court would probably agree employers can sue employees who omit the acts. Employment law in this area is murky and poorly understood by employees; nevertheless, our definition holds such acts of omission are sabotage.

Future research might extend our analyses to these related cases. We hypothesize that employee actions that break company rules have much higher approval if they are either profitable (such as helping customers) or legal (even if harmful to profits). Conversely, we suspect respondents would be less accepting of sins of omission if it were clear that courts would find such actions to be breaches of the employment contract.

Appendix 2: Supplementary Tables

Table A1: Scenarios of Hiding a File

Employee Act, Time to replace	# who say act is:*							Total	Mean response
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Hide, weeks	47	45	49	36	38	47	94	356	4.376
Hide, hours	43	29	31	26	45	54	103	331	4.737
Don't tell, weeks	73	52	32	35	29	40	71	332	3.901
Don't tell, hours	115	61	36	67	30	34	45	388	3.304
Deny, weeks	32	32	23	15	14	26	35	177	3.932
Deny, hours	45	31	25	26	19	25	39	210	3.829
Total	355	250	196	205	175	226	387	1794	4.015

*Scale is from 1 to 7, with higher numbers meaning less fair.

Table A2: Plumber Question Results

Condition	# who say act is:*							Total	Mean response
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Scratches car now	12	23	26	25	34	55	210	385	5.730
Scratches car later	12	10	14	22	28	50	252	388	6.098
Finds and keeps ring	34	26	31	33	37	38	132	331	4.979
Finds and keeps \$100	38	31	29	29	35	47	124	333	4.889
Nails in pipe	19	23	34	20	28	48	183	355	5.510
Total	115	113	134	129	162	238	901	1792	5.471

*Scale is from 1 to 7, with higher numbers meaning less acceptable. Baseline: The employee chooses not to tell the manager the file’s location, with two weeks of manger overtime required.

Table A3: Winning Card Results

Condition	# who say act is:*							Total	Mean response
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Baseline: 30 winners, major company, worth CD	18	31	47	39	48	91	234	505	5.51
30 winners, <i>small music company</i> (not major), worth CD	7	12	8	6	18	35	92	178	5.75
30 winners, major company, worth CD, <i>Employee told “everyone does it”</i>	11	14	11	10	32	31	102	211	5.56
30 winners, <i>small company</i> (not major), worth CD, <i>Employee told “everyone does it”</i>	7	11	9	10	24	42	107	210	5.80
30 winners, major company, <i>cards worth \$10</i> (not a CD)	12	19	22	18	26	58	178	333	5.74
<i>300 of the cards are winners</i> (not 30), major company, worth CD	6	19	11	13	24	42	62	177	5.28
<i>300 of the cards are winners</i> (not 30), major company, <i>cards worth \$10</i> (not a CD)	6	15	12	16	13	28	90	180	5.55
Total	67	121	120	112	185	327	865	1797	5.60

*Scale is from 1 to 7, with higher numbers meaning less fair.

Note: The baseline scenario (row 1) is: James has been hired to distribute 1000 game cards at a mall, 30 of which are “winners.” James knows which cards are the winners. The company is a major music company and the game cards are for a free CD worth \$10. James keeps 3 winners and gives them as gifts for Christmas. Alternative versions of the case are in *italics*.