

Managing Workplace Deviance in Maritime Organizations: A Critical Narrative Review and Integrative Framework

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Abstract: Workplace deviance is commonly defined as voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization, its members, or both. In maritime organizations, this topic is especially important because shipboard life combines operational risk, confined living conditions, hierarchy, multicultural crews, and limited possibilities for withdrawal from conflict. A substantial part of the workplace-deviance literature has treated deviance primarily as a breach of organizational rules and as a negative form of conduct. This paper argues that such a view is insufficient. It therefore develops an integrative normative-critical-maritime framework that distinguishes between: (1) harmful conduct that undermines safety, dignity, and organizational functioning; (2) constructive or positive deviance that challenges ineffective routines in the interest of safety and learning; and (3) socially constructed labelling processes through which some behaviors or identities may be problematically defined as “deviant” by institutional power relations. Based on a targeted narrative review of organizational behavior, sociology of deviance, critical and queer organization studies, and maritime-sector literature, the paper clarifies the concept of deviance, synthesizes key theoretical approaches, and identifies practical implications for maritime leadership, reporting systems, crew training, and organizational culture. The central contribution is to move the discussion beyond a descriptive list of misconduct toward a more analytically precise account of how deviance is produced, evaluated, and managed in maritime workplaces.

Keywords: Workplace deviance, Maritime organizations, Positive deviance, Labelling theory, Bullying and harassment, Crew performance.

1. Introduction

Organizations depend on shared rules, trust, and predictable cooperation. At the same time, organizational life also produces tensions: employees may resist rules they perceive as unjust, managers may use rules selectively, and informal group norms may contradict formal standards. For this reason, workplace deviance should not be understood only as a catalogue of undesirable employee acts. It is also a question of how organizations define normality, how power is exercised through rules, and how some departures from routine may damage or, in specific circumstances, improve organizational functioning.

The dominant organizational-behavior definition describes workplace deviance as voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and threatens the well-being of the organization, its members, or both [1, 2]. This definition remains useful because it links deviance to norms, intentionality, and consequences. However, the definition also creates two conceptual challenges. First, not every rule violation is equally harmful. A worker who falsifies documents, steals property, or harasses a colleague does not occupy the same analytical category as a worker who questions an unsafe procedure or refuses to follow an instruction that would create danger. Second, organizational norms themselves may be biased, exclusionary, or historically contingent. Critical sociology, labelling theory, and queer theory therefore remind us that deviance is not simply discovered; it is also produced through processes of rule-making, labelling, and enforcement [10, 15-18].

These conceptual tensions are particularly relevant in maritime organizations. Ships are workplaces, homes, and safety-critical systems at the same time. Crews often work under a strong hierarchy, time pressure, isolation from family, multinational and multilingual conditions, and limited privacy. In such a setting, harmful interpersonal conduct, discrimination, bullying, harassment, substance abuse, disregard for safety procedures, or deliberate sabotage can rapidly affect morale, mental health, communication, and operational safety. Conversely, constructive questioning of inadequate routines can be essential for safe operations when formal procedures do not fit the immediate situation.

The research gap addressed in this paper is therefore twofold. Much of the basic workplace-deviance literature offers useful typologies but remains normatively narrow; it tends to classify behavior from the standpoint of organizational rules without sufficiently examining how those rules are socially constructed. At the same time, maritime discussions of misconduct, bullying, or non-compliance often remain practical and policy-oriented,

without integrating broader sociological and critical insights. This paper responds to that gap by proposing an integrative normative-critical-maritime framework for analyzing workplace deviance in maritime organizations.

The paper has four objectives: first, to clarify the concept of workplace deviance; second, to problematize deviance through sociological, critical, and queer theoretical perspectives; third, to synthesize organizational and maritime literature on harmful and constructive deviance; and fourth, to identify implications for leadership, training, and preventive organizational practices in maritime settings.

2. Methodological Approach: Targeted Narrative Review

This paper is a conceptual, non-systematic narrative review rather than an empirical study. Its purpose is not to estimate prevalence or test hypotheses, but to synthesize theoretical and applied literature in order to refine the conceptual understanding of workplace deviance in maritime organizations. A targeted narrative review was selected because the aim is conceptual integration across disciplines rather than exhaustive quantitative aggregation of findings.

The review was organized through four linked bodies of literature: (1) organizational-behavior research on workplace deviance and counterproductive work behavior; (2) sociological theories of deviance, especially labelling, strain, control, routine activity, and neutralization perspectives; (3) critical and queer theoretical literature on normativity, institutional power, and the social production of deviance; and (4) maritime-sector literature and guidance on psychosocial risks, bullying, harassment, safety culture, and shipboard work. Seminal sources were retained where they remain foundational, while more recent studies and sector-specific reports were prioritized where they directly informed maritime implications.

The literature was identified through targeted searches and reference-chaining using combinations of “workplace deviance”, “counterproductive work behavior”, “positive deviance”, “organizational norms”, “labelling theory”, “queer theory organization studies”, “heteronormativity at work”, “maritime workplace bullying”, “shipboard harassment”, “seafarer mental health”, “safety culture”, and “crew performance”. Sources were included when they contributed directly to concept definition, theoretical explanation, maritime relevance, or practical implications for organizations. Sources were excluded when they were not scholarly or policy-relevant,

when they only repeated general definitions without analytical value, or when the connection with workplace or maritime settings was too remote.

The analytical strategy consisted of comparative thematic synthesis. First, definitions and typologies were compared. Second, theoretical assumptions about norms and rule-breaking were examined. Third, maritime-specific risks were mapped against the organizational literature. Finally, the findings were integrated into a three-layer framework that distinguishes harmful deviance, constructive deviance, and contested labelling processes. This procedure was used to increase transparency and rigour while remaining consistent with the conceptual nature of the paper.

3. Conceptualizing Deviance: From Rule Violation to Social Construction

The most influential organizational typology distinguishes deviance according to two dimensions: the target of the behavior and the seriousness of its consequences. Deviance may be directed toward the organization, as in theft, sabotage, deliberate slowing of work, or misuse of resources; or toward individuals, as in harassment, verbal aggression, ridicule, or interpersonal hostility. It may also range from relatively minor to severe forms [1, 2]. This typology remains valuable because it prevents the concept from becoming too vague and allows researchers to distinguish interpersonal and organizational forms of harm.

However, conceptual clarity requires more than classification. Deviance is not identical to illegality, illness, difference, nonconformity, or conflict. Some illegal behaviors are clearly deviant within organizations, but some deviant behaviors are not illegal. Likewise, mental health difficulties should not be treated as deviance. Conflict is not automatically deviant; it becomes organizationally relevant when it involves harm, coercion, discrimination, abuse, deliberate rule-breaking, unsafe practice, or sustained disruption of work. This distinction is important in maritime settings, where fatigue, stress, cultural misunderstanding, and isolation may influence behavior but do not by themselves justify moral labelling of individuals.

A critical distinction must also be made between destructive and constructive deviance. Destructive deviance violates legitimate norms and produces harm. Constructive or positive deviance departs from a reference-group norm in a way that is honorable, pro-social, or beneficial [8, 9]. In organizations, this may include speaking up against unsafe routines, challenging discriminatory customs, refusing an instruction that would endanger others, or proposing innovations that initially depart from established practice. The same formal act – non-compliance – can therefore

have different meanings depending on motive, context, power relations, and consequences. Table 1 summarizes the conceptual distinctions used in this paper.

Table 1 - *Conceptual distinctions in analysing workplace deviance*

Analytical category	Core question	Typical examples	Management implication
Destructive organizational deviance	Does the act harm the organization or safety system?	Theft, fraud, sabotage, falsification, deliberate rule violations, misuse of resources	Prevention, investigation, fair discipline, safety management
Destructive interpersonal deviance	Does the act harm dignity, relationships, or psychosocial safety?	Bullying, harassment, humiliation, threats, discrimination, targeted exclusion	Zero tolerance, reporting channels, protection from retaliation, training
Constructive positive deviance	Does the act depart from routine for legitimate safety, ethical, or learning reasons?	Speaking up, challenging unsafe instructions, adaptive problem solving, whistleblowing	Psychological safety, just culture, empowerment, learning-oriented review
Contested or labelled deviance	Who defines the behavior or identity as deviant, and whose interests are served?	Stigmatized difference, minority identities treated as "abnormal", selective rule enforcement	Critical review of norms, inclusion, anti-discrimination, transparent procedures

4. Theoretical Perspectives on Deviance

A stronger account of workplace deviance requires multiple theoretical lenses. Psychological and organizational approaches are useful for explaining individual stress, perceived injustice, anger, moral disengagement, and counterproductive work behavior. The stressor-emotion model, for example, links workplace stressors and perceived injustice with negative emotions that may increase the likelihood of counterproductive work behavior [4]. Meta-analytic research also shows that unethical decisions at work can be associated with individual factors,

moral-issue characteristics, and organizational environments, often described as “bad apples”, “bad cases”, and “bad barrels” [7].

Strain theory explains deviance as a response to pressure created by a gap between culturally valued goals and legitimate means of achieving them [12]. In organizations, this may be visible when employees face unrealistic performance demands, insecure contracts, inequitable promotion opportunities, or contradictory expectations. Routine activity theory highlights the situational conditions under which harmful conduct becomes more likely: a motivated actor, a suitable target, and weak guardianship [14]. In maritime environments, weak supervision during certain operations, isolated spaces, dependence on senior officers, and fear of reporting may create conditions in which interpersonal or organizational deviance can persist.

Neutralization theory adds another important element. Individuals may justify harmful conduct by denying injury, denying responsibility, blaming the victim, appealing to higher loyalties, or condemning those who enforce rules [13]. In shipboard cultures, such rationalizations may appear in statements such as “this is how it has always been done”, “new crew must toughen up”, or “reporting would damage the vessel’s reputation”. These rationalizations are not merely individual excuses; they can become embedded in informal group norms.

Labelling theory shifts the analysis from the act itself to the social reaction to the act. Becker’s classic argument is that deviance is not a quality inherent in behavior alone, but a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions by others [10, 11]. This does not mean that harmful conduct is unreal or should be excused. Rather, it means that scholars and managers must ask who has the authority to define deviance, which behaviors are punished, which are tolerated, and whether enforcement is consistent across rank, nationality, gender, contract status, or other social positions.

Critical theory extends this point by examining the relationship between norms, knowledge, and power. Foucault’s work on discipline shows how institutions produce normality through surveillance, classification, and correction [15]. In organizational settings, this invites attention to how compliance systems can support safety and fairness, but can also become instruments of control if they silence legitimate voice, protect reputation over people, or individualize problems that are structurally produced.

Queer theory is relevant not because workplace deviance should be reduced to sexuality, but because queer theory offers a sophisticated critique of normativity. Butler’s account of performativity shows how identities are constituted through repeated norms rather than simply

expressing natural categories [16]. In management and organization studies, queer approaches have been used to examine how heteronormativity and other taken-for-granted norms shape what is considered normal, professional, or acceptable at work [17]. Ahmed's work on diversity and institutional life further shows that institutions may present themselves as inclusive while reproducing exclusion through everyday procedures and reputational management [18]. These perspectives are important for this paper because they prevent the category of deviance from being used uncritically against those who differ from dominant expectations.

The theoretical implication is clear: workplace deviance should be analysed through both normative and critical questions. The normative question asks whether conduct violates legitimate standards and causes harm. The critical question asks how the standards themselves were produced, whose interests they serve, and whether the label of deviance is being applied fairly.

5. Workplace Deviance in Organizational Behavior Research

Organizational behavior research usually links workplace deviance to counterproductive work behavior, unethical decision-making, abusive supervision, organizational injustice, frustration, lack of control, weak ethical climate, and poor leadership. Bennett and Robinson developed measures of organizational and interpersonal deviance, while later research broadened the behavioral domain to include misuse of information, misuse of time and resources, unsafe behavior, poor attendance, poor-quality work, inappropriate verbal actions, and physical aggression [2, 5]. A scoping review by Zappalà and colleagues confirms that recent research continues to examine both interpersonal and organizational forms of deviant work behavior and their predictors at individual, group, and organizational levels [3].

This literature makes two contributions. First, it shows that deviance is not only a personal moral failure. Organizational conditions matter. Job stressors, perceived injustice, abusive supervision, poor ethical climate, and lack of voice can create conditions in which harmful behavior becomes more likely [4, 6, 7]. Second, it shows that deviance should be managed through systems, not only punishment. Clear standards, credible reporting channels, fair investigation, consistent discipline, ethical leadership, and supportive supervision are central to prevention.

Nevertheless, organizational behavior literature can become too managerial if it treats organizational norms as automatically legitimate. A critical approach does not reject rules; safety-critical organizations need

clear rules. However, it insists that rules should be evaluated ethically and empirically. A rule that protects safety, dignity, and fairness deserves enforcement. A rule that protects hierarchy, silence, or discrimination deserves revision. Therefore, the central managerial task is not simply to suppress deviance, but to distinguish harmful conduct from constructive challenge and from unfair labelling.

Positive deviance is especially important in safety-critical work. Warren's typology distinguishes constructive and destructive deviance according to whether behavior departs from norms in ways that support or undermine broader ethical standards [8]. Spreitzer and Sonenshein similarly conceptualize positive deviance as intentional behavior that departs from norms in honorable ways [9]. Earlier work also distinguishes positive and negative deviant workplace behaviors and their organizational consequences [19]. In maritime work, this distinction is practical: a crew member who challenges an unsafe order may technically depart from hierarchy, yet such speaking up can prevent accidents. Conversely, a crew member who ignores a safety procedure for convenience engages in destructive deviance even if the behavior is informally normalized.

6. Maritime Specificity: Why Shipboard Deviance Requires Special Attention

The maritime sector intensifies the relevance of workplace deviance for four reasons. First, ships are safety-critical systems. Deviations from safe procedures can have immediate consequences for human life, property, and the marine environment. Second, shipboard work is socially enclosed. Crew members live and work together for long periods, and harmful behavior cannot easily be avoided after working hours. Third, maritime hierarchy may make reporting difficult, particularly when the alleged perpetrator is a superior officer or when the victim is a cadet, junior officer, woman seafarer, migrant worker, or employee with insecure contractual status. Fourth, multicultural and multilingual crews require strong communication norms; misunderstandings or stereotypes can escalate quickly if not managed professionally. These risk factors are consistent with maritime literature and sectoral frameworks addressing seafarers' mental health and wellbeing, working and living conditions, safety management, and workplace bullying and harassment at sea [23, 26, 27, 31].

Recent maritime evidence supports the need to treat psychosocial misconduct as a serious organizational and safety issue. A 2023 Danish study of bullying and harassment in the merchant fleet reported a substantial number of cases and concluded that the problem could not be reduced to

isolated individuals or single companies; the report described a deeply rooted culture of bullying with adverse mental-health consequences for many seafarers [20]. The Norwegian Maritime Authority similarly reported, from its 2023 Maritime Safety survey, that 27% of respondents stated they had been bullied and/or harassed in the previous 12 months [21]. Guidance developed by the International Chamber of Shipping and the International Transport Workers' Federation emphasizes that companies should develop policies and plans to eliminate harassment and bullying on board, while seafarers should be able to recognize incidents, use grievance procedures, report observed or experienced misconduct, and seek support [22].

These sources show why deviance at sea cannot be analysed only as individual misconduct. Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and intimidation are interpersonal forms of destructive deviance, but they are also organizational signals. They may indicate weak leadership, poor reporting systems, normalized abuse, lack of training, fear of retaliation, or unequal power relations. If such conditions persist, they can undermine mental health, crew cohesion, and safety communication. Evidence from the COVID-19 period also shows that supportive measures for seafarers' mental health are relevant but may vary in their perceived effectiveness [25].

At the same time, maritime organizations must preserve the possibility of constructive deviance. Good seamanship often requires judgment under uncertainty. Procedures are essential, but procedures cannot anticipate every operational condition. The aim should therefore be a just and learning-oriented culture: harmful violations are addressed firmly, but good-faith reporting, questioning, and adaptive safety-oriented behavior are encouraged rather than punished.

7. An Integrative Normative-critical-maritime Framework

Based on the synthesis above, this paper proposes an integrative normative-critical-maritime framework. The framework is built on three analytical layers that should be applied together.

The first layer is normative-operational. It asks whether the behavior violates legitimate organizational or professional standards and whether it creates harm for safety, dignity, property, performance, or the marine environment. This layer is necessary because maritime organizations cannot function without discipline, rule clarity, and safety compliance.

The second layer is critical-constructivist. It asks how the relevant norm was created, who enforces it, whether enforcement is consistent, and whether the label of deviance protects legitimate interests or reproduces inequality. This layer is necessary because organizations may label

difference, dissent, or minority identities as problematic while tolerating harmful practices by powerful actors.

The third layer is maritime-contextual. It asks how shipboard conditions – hierarchy, isolation, fatigue, mixed crews, rank, contract status, reporting barriers, and operational risk – shape both the behavior and the organizational response. This layer is necessary because land-based models do not fully capture the social and safety consequences of deviance in confined maritime workplaces. Table 2 presents the practical application of the framework.

Table 2 - *Normative-critical-maritime framework for analysing workplace deviance*

Layer	Key diagnostic question	Maritime relevance	Recommended organizational response
Normative-operational	Does the conduct violate legitimate safety, ethical, or professional standards?	Non-compliance, falsification, harassment, sabotage, and unsafe acts may affect crew performance and safety.	Clear rules, fair investigation, proportionate discipline, safety management, and documentation.
Critical-constructivist	Who defines the conduct as deviant, and is the label applied fairly?	Rank, nationality, gender, sexuality, culture, or contract status may influence whose behavior is reported or tolerated.	Anti-discrimination safeguards, independent reporting, review of informal norms, protection against retaliation.
Maritime-contextual	How do shipboard conditions shape behavior and reporting?	Isolation, hierarchy, fatigue, multilingual crews, and limited privacy can amplify interpersonal harm.	Leadership training, psychosocial risk assessment, crew-resource-management integration, confidential support.
Learning-oriented	Can a departure from routine reveal a weakness in the system?	Good-faith challenge to unsafe practice may prevent incidents.	Just culture, debriefing, near-miss learning, empowerment, and psychological safety.

8. Implications for Maritime Leadership and Organizational Practice

The first implication is conceptual. Maritime organizations should avoid using “deviance” as a vague moral label. Policies should distinguish misconduct, error, conflict, difference, constructive dissent, and psychosocial harm. This distinction improves fairness and helps managers respond proportionately.

The second implication concerns reporting. Reporting systems must be accessible, confidential where appropriate, and credible. A reporting procedure that formally exists but is not trusted will not prevent harmful deviance. Special attention is needed where hierarchy discourages junior crew members from reporting senior officers, or where migrant workers fear contract-related consequences.

The third implication concerns training. Maritime education and in-company training should include not only rules and sanctions but also bystander responsibility, harassment recognition, communication across hierarchy, cultural humility, mental-health awareness, ethical decision-making, and constructive challenge. These topics are not secondary to safety; they are a part of safety because crews depend on trust, communication, and coordinated action. This is especially relevant because maritime training must also respond to changing technologies and working conditions rather than remain narrowly technical [24].

The fourth implication concerns leadership. Leaders should model respectful behavior, respond consistently to early warning signs, prevent retaliation, and create conditions for psychological safety [28]. A crew member who reports bullying, questions an unsafe routine, or raises concerns about discrimination should not be treated as disloyal. In a safety-critical environment, silence may be more dangerous than dissent.

The fifth implication concerns organizational learning. When deviant behavior occurs, the organization should ask not only “who did it?” but also “what conditions made it possible?”, “why was it not reported earlier?”, “were informal norms stronger than formal policies?”, and “what should change in leadership, workload, training, or reporting systems?” This systems approach does not remove individual responsibility; rather, it prevents organizations from repeatedly treating systemic problems as isolated cases [29, 30].

9. Conclusion

This paper has revised the concept of workplace deviance by moving beyond a purely descriptive and normative account. Workplace deviance remains an important organizational behavior concept, particularly in maritime organizations where harmful conduct can affect dignity, cohesion, operational performance, and safety. However, deviance cannot be understood adequately if it is treated simply as behavior that departs from existing rules.

The paper's main contribution is the normative-critical-maritime framework. This framework integrates organizational typologies of workplace deviance with sociological and critical perspectives on labelling, normativity, and institutional power. It clarifies that some forms of deviance are destructive and require prevention, investigation, and sanction. It also clarifies that some departures from routine may be constructive when they are guided by safety, ethical responsibility, and professional judgment. Finally, it warns that organizations may misuse the language of deviance when they label difference, dissent, or minority identities as abnormal while tolerating harmful conduct embedded in hierarchy or informal culture.

In the maritime sector, this distinction is not merely theoretical. Shipboard work combines hierarchy, isolation, multicultural crews, psychosocial pressure, and safety-critical operations. Harmful deviance such as bullying, harassment, discrimination, falsification, theft, sabotage, or unsafe non-compliance can undermine trust and performance. Constructive deviance, such as speaking up about unsafe practice or challenging discriminatory norms, can strengthen safety and organizational learning. Effective management, therefore, requires clear standards, fair enforcement, inclusive culture, credible reporting, leadership accountability, and training that connects psychosocial safety with operational safety.

Future research should empirically test the proposed framework in maritime settings, examine how rank, nationality, gender, age, and contract status influence reporting and labelling processes, and explore how positive deviance can be supported without weakening legitimate safety discipline. Such research would help maritime organizations develop responses that are not only compliant but also ethically robust, psychologically safe, and operationally effective.

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