

EDITORIAL

Social and situational dynamics surrounding workplace mistreatment: Context matters

Summary

In our introduction to this special issue, we explain why understanding the social and situational context around workplace mistreatment is important. We then provide summaries of the six articles in this special issue and conclude by identifying three key themes—social interpretation, recursive nature of mistreatment, and beyond the dyad—and some important directions for future research.

KEYWORDS

injustice, workplace aggression, workplace context, workplace incivility, workplace, workplace mistreatment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Workplace mistreatment, an overarching term capturing myriad harmful social interactions in organizations, has been the subject of scientific study for several decades. Most of this research has focused on specific manifestations of mistreatment, such as abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), incivility (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), interpersonal conflict (Jehn, 1995), workplace ostracism (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013), sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1988), and interpersonal injustice (Bies & Moag, 1986) to name a few (for a review see Hershcovis, 2011).

Despite great strides in our understanding of workplace mistreatment, it continues to be a serious problem for employees and their organizations. One survey of employees found that 90% reported experiencing psychological aggression, 76% witnessed acts of aggression, and 40% experienced some form of physical aggression on the job in the prior year (Pacheco, Cunha, & Duarte, 2016). These experiences result in millions of dollars in costs due to reduced physical and psychological health, injury compensation, and lawsuits (Dunlop & Lee, 2004; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). Given that workplace mistreatment is happening across various work contexts and has substantial negative effects for individuals and institutions alike (Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006), it is important to understand when, why, and where workplace mistreatment emerges

in organizational life. Equally important, we must determine how to mitigate or prevent its detrimental consequences.

To date, we have a plethora of studies on the antecedents and consequences of workplace mistreatment but relatively limited research on the role of the work and interpersonal context in influencing the enactment, experience, and consequences of workplace mistreatment (for critiques, see Hershcovis & Reich, 2013; Robinson & Schabram, 2017). This lack of attention to contextualizing workplace mistreatment is surprising for several reasons. Most broadly, we already know that context really matters in most areas of organizational behavior (Johns, 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). More specifically, context should play a role throughout the process of workplace mistreatment. First, context can influence the occurrence of mistreatment. For example, Salin (2003) proposed a taxonomy of contextual factors that allow workplace mistreatment to thrive, including enabling, motivating, and precipitating processes. Enabling factors, such as power imbalances, make it possible for mistreatment to occur. Motivating factors address the rewards for engaging in mistreatment, such as competitive work environments that reward goal achievement irrespective of the costs involved. Precipitating processes reflect triggers for mistreatment, such as major organizational changes or threats to the status quo. Similarly, Hershcovis and Reich (2013) emphasized the importance of the relational context of workplace mistreatment, arguing that workplace relationships and social contexts play a large role in the enactment of workplace mistreatment.

Second, the work context likely influences not only the occurrence of mistreatment but also, as importantly, *how* it is experienced. People hold normative scripts regarding who interacts with whom and in what way (Goffman, 1959). This serves as the theoretical underpinning of most workplace mistreatment constructs. Context itself may determine the recognition and interpretation of the mistreatment, such as abuse that is already occurring or accepted in the workplace, and what avenues exist for responses to it. Likewise, the social environment may provide mechanisms that enable one to cope with mistreatment. For example, the social context of a work environment can help meet the fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and can form an important source of social and emotional support (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Therefore, the reactions of others in the work context, such as coworkers and managers, to incidents of workplace mistreatment can influence how victims and perpetrators experience and interpret the behavior (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013).

Finally, contextual variables may be critical to the consequences of mistreatment, influencing outcomes for the actor and the target. Climates and reward systems, for example, can influence what happens to those who engage in mistreatment of others. Similarly, supportive (or nonsupportive) bystanders can influence perpetrator and target outcomes. Those who experience mistreatment may respond in a variety of ways depending upon the availability of options as determined by factors such as the power structure, social support, or climate of psychological safety.

Understanding the role of myriad contextual factors through the whole of the mistreatment experience is crucial to predicting, managing, and preventing its negative impact and occurrence. This Special Issue seeks to highlight some of the ways that we can contextualize workplace mistreatment, to answer questions about why and when mistreatment occurs, how it is experienced, and what impact it has on people and their places of work. Given that organizations have more control over context in comparison with intrapsychic variables or individual differences, understanding the contextual factors involved in workplace mistreatment has significant practical implications for prevention and coping.

2 | PAPER SUMMARIES

The victim precipitation model has gained traction in the field of workplace mistreatment over the last two decades (e.g., Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009; Sliter, Withrow, & Jex, 2015) despite the critiques leveled against it (see Cortina, 2017 for a review). Dhanani, Main, & Pueschel (2020) set out to investigate meta-analytically the empirical evidence that supports (or fails to support) the victim precipitation model. They examine the extent to which negative affectivity, Big Five personality traits, and situational factors predict workplace mistreatment. They find that three out of six personality traits and all of the situational factors relate to experienced workplace mistreatment. Furthermore, a relative weights analysis reveals that situational factors account for a far greater proportion of the variance in experienced mistreatment than do dispositional factors. Only negative affectivity has a relatively robust relationship with experienced mistreatment, though the majority of situational factors account for greater variance. This study also attempts to test some of the mechanisms that could explain why victim precipitation might lead to experienced mistreatment. The authors find little evidence to support the central tenet of victim precipitation ideology: that certain targets are too sensitive or that they are provocative and thus invite mistreatment. Overall, this study suggests that research going forward should focus on the situational factors that relate to experienced mistreatment.

Bendersky & Brockner (2020) examine the extent to which interpersonal treatment from authorities and peers can offset each other. In particular, they examine whether inconsistent treatment from authorities and peers (e.g., authorities treat employees fairly and peers do not or vice versa) can attenuate the influence of the treatment from the other party. Across three experimental studies,

they find that when authorities (e.g., supervisors) treat employees fairly, if peers simultaneously treat them unfairly, then the benefits from the authorities' fair treatment is diminished. Similarly, when authorities are unfair towards subordinates, but peers engage in fair interpersonal treatment, the fair treatment from peers can positively offset the negative influence of unfair treatment from authorities. These authors show that a focal explanatory mechanism for these relationships is the employee's sense of standing. Drawing on the relational model (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), they theorize and find that employees use the treatment by both peers and authorities as cues about their own social standing. In turn, social standing mediated the relationship between both supervisor and peer social standing and organizational commitment. This study identifies the importance of a multi-foci perspective on workplace mistreatment (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010) and identifies that it is not only the supervisor but also one's peers who can send cues about one's social standing at work. Research that examines workplace mistreatment tends to focus on one source of mistreatment without recognizing that employees form perceptions about their belongingness within the organization based on treatment from multiple sources.

Ambrose & Ganegoda (2020) examine the role of two kinds of contextual factors, hierarchical organizational structure, and aggressive climate, on the observations and interpretations of abusive supervision. More specifically, they look at abusive supervision from the differing vantage points of the manager and the subordinates of the abusive supervisor, across work contexts that varied in terms of aggressiveness. Conducting two field survey studies, they report a variety of thought-provoking findings. Consistent with role theory, managers and subordinates of a focal supervisor tend to hold different evaluations of the degree of abusive supervision. Superiors of abusive supervisors see them as more abusive than do subordinates who were subject to it, possibly because superiors have a different reference point as to the variance of behavior across supervisors. Superiors' ratings, but not subordinates' ratings, of abusive supervision, are associated with abusive supervisors receiving lower performance ratings. In contrast, subordinates' ratings, but not superiors' ratings, of abusive supervision, are associated with lower evaluations of workgroup performance. Finally, they find that aggressive climate moderates the relationship between a supervisor's abusive supervision and his or her manager's evaluation of their in-role and extra-role performance such that the more aggressive the climate, the weaker this relationship. This suggests that in climates characterized by aggression, abusive supervision is likely perceived as less noteworthy and more tolerable. This study raises interesting questions about the future study of abusive supervision in light of context. In particular, it suggests we need to consider the perspective from which abusive supervision, or other forms of mistreatment, is observed and interpreted in the organizational hierarchy. In addition, as research grows on consequences to actors for engaging in mistreatment (Zhong & Robinson, forthcoming), it will be important to account for the largely neglected role of organizational climate and other contextual factors that influence how mistreatment is perceived.

Also focusing on supervisory (mis)behavior, Smallfield, Hoobler, & Kluemper (2020) offer a new, team-centric explanation for abusive supervision. Power relationships are often assumed to follow a path of “downward influence,” with leader behavior fueling follower behavior. This paper demonstrates an opposite pattern of “upward influence,” documenting how action and affect within teams can feed into leadership abuse, especially when leaders perceive those teams to perform poorly. To frame these affects, the authors draw on emotion-as-social-information theory (Van Kleef, van den Berg, & Heerdink, 2015) and the perpetrator predation model (Cortina, 2017). They explain how team-level characteristics (such as low helping, negative mood, and poor performance) can be sources of irritation and stress for leaders, prompting them to behave badly. Smallfield and colleagues' paper is a methodological tour de force, involving two text-based experiments, a video-based experiment, and a multisource field study of firefighters.

Zheng & van Dijke (2020) also take a mixed-method approach to the study of workplace mistreatment, conducting two laboratory experiments and two field surveys, across two national contexts (the Netherlands and the United States). Considering how interpersonal mistreatment can take a toll on relationships in organizations, they investigate what might mitigate (or exacerbate) that relational damage. Following episodes of mistreatment, when victims make interpersonal gestures indicating that they forgive the transgressor, under what conditions does the transgressor take steps to restore the relationship? Building on social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964) and the social perception literature (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011), the authors point to the critical role of the social hierarchy that exists between victim and transgressor. Specifically, they propose and find that transgressors are less likely to work towards relationship restoration when their victim-forgivers have high power but low status, because the transgressors perceive those victims' forgiveness to be less sincere. This underscores social-contextual conditions that affect relationship restoration following interpersonal mistreatment.

Also focusing on what happens following workplace mistreatment, Robertson & O'Reilly (2020) investigate service employee reactions to rude customers. Using in-depth interview methods, they capture richly detailed narratives from 64 employees in a range of customer-service contexts (e.g., food service, retail, and call center). What emerges is a fascinating typology of employee responses to customer incivility, consisting of four categories: (1) reactive incivility (reciprocating rudeness back to the customer), (2) submissive civility (pacifying rude customers through inauthentic polite behavior), (3) subversive incivility (engaging in subtle and creative incivility to disrupt the encounter covertly), and (4) resolute civility (proactively rising above customer rudeness to preserve a sense of dignity). Importantly, employees derive positive intrapersonal outcomes (e.g., relief, pride, sense of justice, and self-respect) only from the last two categories of response, which relate to feelings of agency or empowerment to choose their course of action. This work demonstrates the importance of cultivating a psychological sense of empowerment among employees (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005), which can help protect against the harms of workplace mistreatment.

3 | KEY CONTEXTUAL THEMES

In reading these papers, three key themes emerged that we think merit further examination. The first theme, social interpretation, suggests that context influences how employees interpret or react to the mistreatment interaction. The second theme, recursive nature of workplace mistreatment, highlights an interesting interplay between perpetrators and targets of mistreatment. The third theme, beyond the dyad, moves beyond the perpetrator-target relationship to consider the role of other parties (e.g., customers, managers, witnesses, and teams) in the workplace mistreatment experience. We expand on each theme below.

3.1 | Social interpretation

One recurring theme across this set of papers is a focus on the subjective social interpretation of factors involved in the process of mistreatment. Ganegoda and Ambrose's paper focused on the role of context in influencing the frequency and interpretation of abusive supervision. They find that those in different positions of the hierarchy perceive different degrees of abusive supervision by the same supervisor and that a given level of abusive supervision is judged differently depending on whether it occurs in a climate characterized by aggression. Generalizing these findings, it is likely that other forms of mistreatment are likewise perceived to occur in differing degrees and lead to differing outcomes depending upon where someone resides in the social context and the nature of that social context.

Several other papers place importance on the subjective *meaning* attached to the mistreatment. Robertson and O'Reilly, for example, highlight how employees' interpretation of the meaning of customer incivility influences their reactions to it. Along similar lines, the Benderskey and Brockner paper is theoretically based on the group value model, which posits that unfair treatment, in this case from peers or supervisors, has meaning and impact because it signals one's social value in the group. Zheng and Dijke also emphasize the interpretation of the meaning of behavior but, in their case, the meaning behind offering forgiveness after mistreatment. That forgiveness, and ones' reaction to it, depends on the interpretation associated with it, which varies according to the forgiver's status and power. These papers raise interesting questions about the extent to which the dynamics of mistreatment can be assumed to have an objective reality or impact, such as physical harm or exclusion from important information, or whether the primary impact is a psychological one, borne of its interpreted meaning, such as beliefs about why it occurred and what it represents or portends.

The paper by Smallfield, Hoobler, and Kluemper also emphasizes the role of subjective interpretation but with regards to a trigger of mistreatment. They find that it is leaders' perception of the affective tone of their team that influences the likelihood of the leader directing abusive supervision towards the team. Once again, it appears that not only mistreatment-relevant behaviors themselves are subject to

interpretation but so too is the context that may motivate their occurrence or moderate their impact.

Some of this focus on subjective social interpretation may be due in part to methodology: Given many studies focus on self-report surveys, it is important to recognize and align our papers with the fact that we are often limited to respondents' perceptions and not necessarily an objective reality. It is important to note, however, that beyond being simply artifacts of methodology, subjective social interpretation plays a key role in the theories used here. And while this is to a degree inevitable for variables that are by definition social constructions, such as climate or power, there is much to be gained from taking a social interpretation perspective for even more concrete forms of context, such as reward systems and job designs (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). In essence, though a degree of "objective reality" anchors the phenomena, there is huge latitude in how it is filtered through the minds of key actors in the experience of workplace mistreatment. This makes for interesting and nuanced research but may also pose a challenge for managers hoping to identify objective means of managing and controlling mistreatment and its effects.

3.2 | Recursive nature of mistreatment

A second focal theme that emerged across several of the papers is the recursive nature of actor responses to a workplace mistreatment interaction. Several of the papers highlight an interesting interplay between the perpetrator and target in the mistreatment experience and how a focal actor's behavior or perception influences the reaction of the other actor(s). Robertson and O'Reilly examined how employees respond when customers mistreat them. A notable finding from their study was that employee responses to mistreatment influenced their subsequent dynamic with the customer. Employee response strategies either maintained the customer's level of mistreatment, escalated customer mistreatment, or deescalated the customer's aggressive actions. Zheng and Van Dijke similarly highlights this recursive theme; however, these researchers examine the boundary conditions around the interplay between perpetrator and victim. In particular, this study examines whether perpetrators are likely to restore their relationship with forgivers (victims) and finds that they are but only when the forgiver has low power and high status. Forgivers who have high power but low status are seen as less sincere, and perpetrators are then less likely to restore those relationships. Expanding this recursive theme to the team context, Smallfield, Hoobler, and Kluemper examine how the behavior of team members (the victims) influences leader abusive behavior. This study finds that team helping behavior serves as a positive affective cue to leaders, who in turn are less likely to engage in abusive supervision towards these helpful teams. The implication of this finding is that positive behavior exhibited by team members reduces negative behaviors by supervisors and vice versa; if teams are unhelpful, the implication is that this may send negative affective cues to leaders, who in turn may be more likely to engage in abusive behavior in return.

Interestingly, the recursive theme that emerged in this set of papers implies that victims can have influence on prevention of mistreatment and restoration of damaged relationships. In Robertson and O'Reilly, how the victim responds has implications for their further mistreatment. In Zheng and Van Dijke, the power and status of the victim-forgiver has implications for whether or not the transgressor will restore the relationship. And in Smallfield et al., team behavior has implications for whether supervisors mistreat the team. These three papers might be read as holding victims responsible for intervening in mistreatment or lessening its harms. This gives rise to an important and understudied question: Whose responsibility is it to prevent or correct workplace mistreatment? By examining victim behavior (whether or not they forgive, whether or not they help, whether or not they respond politely to rude customers), this research may implicitly suggest that management of wrongdoing is the job of those who are wronged. Is it victims' responsibility to prevent their own mistreatment, or is it instead the role of the perpetrator to stop behaving badly and, if they do make a mistake, to restore the relationship? Cortina (2017) highlights that our field has lost its way by focusing too much on victim precipitation, instead of turning the lens on perpetrators to examine perpetrator predation. Dhanani and Wolcott's meta-analysis supports the notion that there is little merit in focusing on the role of the victim in contributing to workplace mistreatment. Their study finds minimal support for the notion that target attributes play a substantive role in predicting workplace mistreatment. Instead of asking what victims do to cause abuse, or how they can behave in ways that help restore relationships, future research can instead ask what perpetrators do to cause abuse and corrode relationships. Turning the focus of prediction and de-escalation from victims to perpetrators places the burden of intervention on perpetrators instead of victims and opens up a broad avenue of investigation. What factors can help perpetrators recognize when they have mistreated employees and what actions can they then take to de-escalate their behavior? What perpetrator and contextual factors will encourage perpetrators to restore relationships with victims? How does perpetrator position, power, and status influence whether or not perpetrators seek forgiveness for their poor behavior? What can leaders do to identify triggers for their own misbehavior, and how can they take constructive action to redirect mistreatment behavior towards more constructive and developmental behavior? This shift in perspective on the same research questions has the potential to yield powerful findings that place responsibility on the perpetrator, and not the victim, for stopping or de-escalating mistreatment and initiating relationship restoration efforts.

3.3 | Beyond the dyad

Moving beyond the dyad of individual victim and individual perpetrator, several papers in this special issue investigated influences of multiple actors in different locations of the workplace context. For instance, Ganegoda and Ambrose recognize the broader organizational hierarchy in which abusive supervision occurs, focusing on the

manager-supervisor-subordinate triad. In mistreatment terms, the supervisor is the “perpetrator,” the subordinate is the “victim,” and the manager is a “third-party observer” who is above the other two in rank. Managers, they find, observe more supervisory abuse than do subordinates (the direct victims of that abuse). Further, managers' perceptions of abuse relate to supervisors' in-role performance, whereas subordinates' perceptions of abuse relate to supervisors' workgroup performance. This paper takes a rarely considered perspective by examining manager responses and in doing so has implications for the outcomes of mistreatment for the *perpetrator*. Namely, understanding how managers respond to a subordinate's enacted mistreatment sheds light on ways in which organizations can discourage such behavior. This study finds that managers negatively evaluate the performance of abusive supervisors, which has negative implications for the supervisor's career progression and may help to deter supervisors from engaging in such behavior.

Bendersky and Brockner also take a triadic and hierarchical perspective on workplace mistreatment, considering employee experiences of interpersonal (un)fairness coming from those above them (authority figures) and those at the same level (peers). Unfair treatment from peers, they find, can reduce the benefits of fair treatment from authorities, whereas high peer fairness can lessen the harms of authority unfairness (effects that are all mediated through the employee's sense of standing in the organization). Whereas the literature on interpersonal injustice has focused primarily on injustice from supervisors, this study highlights the powerful role that peers can play, for good or for ill, in the outcomes for targets. The mistreatment literature to date has shown that mistreatment from supervisors exerts the strongest negative effects on targets (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010). This study suggests, however, that peers can help mitigate the negative influence of supervisor mistreatment by engaging in fair and supportive actions towards the target.

Smallfield, Hoobler, and Kluemper also move beyond simple models by considering what happens in abusive situations involving teams, rather than individuals, as targets. Most research on abusive supervision conceptualizes the misbehaving supervisor as the subject and the victimized subordinate as the object of the supervisor's actions. Instead, Smallfield et al. investigate effects flowing in the opposite direction, from subordinates to supervisors. Moreover, they consider the team context, recognizing the reality that “work” for many people involves acting as a group rather than an individual. Their findings are a compelling illustration of effects flowing upwards, from teams to leaders, rather than the other way around.

Future workplace mistreatment research, pushing even farther beyond the dyad, should consider how organizational behavior operates within networks of social relationships. A social network perspective could open up new and important questions about workplace abuse, as recommended by Hershcovis, Vranjes, Berdahl, and Cortina (in press). In particular, it may help us track which individuals within a network are “senders” of mistreatment (behaving badly towards others), “receivers” (being targeted), or “reciprocators” (exchanging similar acts of abuse; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Network analysis would also enable group-level investigation, for instance

allowing researchers to consider the role of cliques in supporting or stopping workplace mistreatment. Groups may be organized around social identities, occupational roles, ranks, or any number of different characteristics. These groups may be difficult to detect for organizational members, as well as researchers, but could come to light through social network analysis (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Nelson & Magley, 2017). This will be a fruitful direction for future research.

4 | CLOSING THOUGHTS

This special issue includes six insightful papers that take our field forward in substantive ways. Collectively, these papers identify how context, especially interpersonal context, influences the meaning, interpretation, and dynamics surrounding workplace mistreatment. Further, they demonstrate the recursive nature of workplace mistreatment and, in particular, point to the role researchers play in framing questions about preventing or mitigating mistreatment effects as the target's rather than the perpetrator's responsibility. Finally, these papers shine a light on other players beyond those at the center of mistreatment episodes who are involved in the experience of mistreatment (witnesses, managers, and teams) and demonstrates the critical role that these third parties play in the dynamic.

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