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The Relationship between the social environment of work and workplace mistreatment

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Abstract

While a great deal of research has investigated employee reactions to mistreatment, considerably fewer studies have investigated how the social environment in the workplace contributes to both 1.) the prevalence of mistreatment, and 2.) employee reactions when mistreatment occurs. In the present study we investigate three important components of the social environment of organizations—perceptions of organizational justice, the extent to which people within the organization generally treat each other with respect, and the level of social support with the organization—and show how these relate to the prevalence of both verbal aggression and social undermining. In addition to testing these relations, we test a mediational model whereby these components of the social environment are related to employee strain. More specifically, we propose that workplace mistreatment mediates the relation between these components of the social environment and employee strain. Data from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) supported the proposed relations between all three social environment components and the two forms of mistreatment. Furthermore, mediated regression analyses showed that mistreatment mediated the relation between perceived level of respect and all measures of strain. These results suggest that the social environment of the workplace may play a role in employee mistreatment and contribute, at least indirectly, to employee strain.

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever people are required to interact with others at work, it is possible that interpersonal mistreatment can occur [1]. Workplace mistreatment can range from low-level rudeness and inconsiderate behaviors [2], all the way to aggression and violence [3]. While low-intensity forms of mistreatment are much more prevalent than extreme forms [4], all forms of mistreatment are important due to their negative effects on the targets of mistreatment, as well as those who witness these events [5]. As far as the causes of workplace mistreatment, recent research has indicated that the workplace environment may play an important

role. For instance, a “climate of informality” might contribute to the prevalence of rude and uncivil behavior [6], which could, in turn, result in more intense forms of mistreatment. A climate of informality is reflected in things such as employees’ dress, the décor of offices, the way employees speak (e.g., slang), as well as the general social environment within an organization. While this type of organizational environment may foster free-flowing communication, it also provides employees little guidance as to what is and what is not appropriate behavior toward others.

Despite the recently-theorized importance of a climate of informality, very little research has examined the

relationship between any aspect of the social environment and workplace mistreatment. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to fill this gap in the literature by examining the role that specific features of the social environment in an organization play with regard to employee mistreatment and subsequent strain. More specifically, we seek to determine whether aspects of the work environment might trigger mistreatment, which, in turn, will impact employee strain.

Characteristics of the Social Environment and Workplace Mistreatment

In examining the literature on workplace mistreatment, there is evidence that characteristics of the social environment are related to some forms of workplace mistreatment. For example, research has found that the prevalence of workplace violence was associated with the level of procedural justice—perceptions of workplace fairness [7]. This study also found that social factors outside of the organization, namely the level of violence within the community and characteristics of the local culture, predicted violence within the workplace as well. More recently, research has found that the aggregate level of social undermining that occurred in work groups was positively associated with individuals' reports of social undermining [8].

There is also related research on a number of counterproductive behaviors showing that the social environment at plays a role. For example, absenteeism has been shown to be related to group norms surrounding attendance [9], alcohol and illicit drug use have both been shown to be impacted by permissive substance use norms [10], and accidents tend to be higher when members of groups place a low priority on following safety procedures [11].

These studies indicate the possible importance of the social environment in predicting interpersonal deviance. From a conceptual level, this could be explained by the Job Demands-Resources theory [12]. This theory posits that the characteristics of all jobs can be categorized as either demands or resources. Demands refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require physical, cognitive, or emotional effort, and are associated with physical and psychological costs, while resources are aspects of a job that help employees accomplish work tasks, reduce demands, or enable personal growth. Demands and resources are inversely related to one another—employees with many resources report fewer overall demands. Per the JD-R model, the social environment of work can be considered to be relatively powerful resources [13], and should be inversely related to the experience of demands. More

specifically, interpersonal resources (such as those related to the environment) should be negatively related to the experience of interpersonal demands (conflict, mistreatment, etc). We will now discuss three facets of the social environment that might be considered important resources.

Specific Facets of the Social Environment and Employee Mistreatment

Based on equity theory [14], *organizational justice*—which can be considered to be a job resource—has been shown to play a prominent role in many behaviors in organizational settings. Specifically, low levels of perceived organizational justice have been linked to increases in counterproductive workplace behaviors, such as stealing, sabotage, and withdrawal [15,16], turnover intentions [17], retaliation behavior [18], and aggressive behaviors [3]. Equity theory asserts that when an employee senses that he/she is being treated inequitably this leads to a negative psychological state. As feelings of inequity increase, an employee will try to restore feelings of equity. This restoration of equity can manifest itself with counterproductive behaviors, such as theft, sabotage, and aggression [19].

With respect to employee mistreatment, many theorists essentially define mistreatment as a violation of interpersonal justice or the internal standards that people have regarding treatment from others [6]. Thus, it is possible that a social environment characterized by a low level of fairness would tend to foster higher levels of mistreatment compared to an organization environment where fairness was the norm. Thus, we hypothesized:

Hypothesis 1: Organizational justice will be negatively related to employee mistreatment.

Organizations with highly informal social climates provide employees with few cues as to what is appropriate when interacting with co-workers and thus in this type of environment there is a much higher potential for people to be treated with a *lack of respect* [6]. Social norms can play a powerful role in justifying the mistreatment of others [20], and we expect that norms of disrespect would increase the occurrence of workplace mistreatment. A major precursor of workplace incivility [6] and many other non-physical forms of employee mistreatment such as social undermining [8], bullying [21], and abusive supervisory behaviors [22] may be a lack of respect. Thus, in an organization where it is common for employees to treat each other in a disrespectful manner there is a much higher probability for employee mistreatment. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 2. Level of respect will be negatively related to employee mistreatment.

A third dimension that may be related to employee mistreatment is the general level of social support employees provide each other, which has often been examined as a resource using the JD-R model [13]. Considerable research has shown that social support is negatively related to strain [23]. Furthermore, social support can come in a variety of forms including emotional support and more tangible support with problems [24]. It can stem from a variety of sources such as co-workers, supervisors, and organizational outsiders. Although instances of social support do occur between individuals, social support is also part of the social fabric of organizations [25]. As a result, mistreatment may still occur in such organizations, although it more likely to occur in organizations where social support is not emphasized. Empirical research has in fact shown that bullying is highest in social work environments that are relatively unsupportive [26]. Thus, it is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3. Social support will be negatively related to employee mistreatment.

Modeling the relationship between the social environment, employee mistreatment, and employee strain

It has been relatively well-established that various types of workplace mistreatment result in employee strain [1,26]. However, we propose that this all begins with the social work environment. That is, we propose that components of the social environment such as organizational justice, level of respect, and social support contribute to employee strain because they influence the day-to-day behavior of employees, namely mistreatment. In an organization where employees perceive a low level of organizational justice, where employees often treat each other with a lack of respect, and where there is generally a low level of social support, the potential for a variety of forms of mistreatment is heightened.

Why does an organization's social environment characterized by low organizational justice, lack of respect, and low social support increase the chances of mistreatment? This, again, is consistent with the JD-R model. This model posits that resources and demands are inversely related to one another, which indicate that support, justice, and respect should relate negatively with employee mistreatment. The process by which this occurs is likely stems from the establishment of group norms; When employees view others being treated with a lack respect and see low levels of social support, this signals that such actions are acceptable and in fact considered the norm [27]. The JD-R model further posits that job resources and demands—the social environment and mistreatment—have an energetic effect on employees [28]. Resources provide

energy and motivation, which relate negative to strain, such as health problems and feelings of stress. Demands, on the other hand, drain energy resources, which have been shown to relate higher levels of strain [13,28]. Therefore, we posit:

Hypothesis 4. Employee mistreatment will mediate the relationships between the organizational justice, level of respect, and social support and employee strain.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 1807 individuals who participated in the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey conducted bi-annually by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). This survey was created in 1972 at the Social Science Research Center at the University of Chicago, and is supported by the National Science Foundation. The sample consisted of employed persons (93.8%), mainly women (54.5%), with a mean age of 45 ($SD = 16.8$). Race was coded as White (79.4%), Black (13.4%), or Other (7.1%).

Measures

Several variables were assessed using single-item measures due to limited space allotted for each module on the survey and cost. All items have been used in several previous administrations of the GSS as part of the Quality of Worklife (QWL) module, and have been established as reliable and valid measures [29,30].

Predictor Measures

Organizational Variables. Organizational justice was assessed using the single item: "Some people are held to standards in my workplace that others are not." Workplace respect was also assessed with a single item: "At work, people are treated with respect." Finally, social support was assessed using the single item "People at work can be relied on when someone needs help." Each of these three items was rated along a four point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Employee Mistreatment. Two frequently-reported forms of employee mistreatment were examined in the current study: verbal aggression and undermining behavior. Items for both of these constructs were created by a panel of subject matter experts before the administration of the GSS survey. Two items were created to assess *verbal aggression* in the workplace: "People at work shout or yell at me in a hostile manner," and "heated arguments occur in my workplace." These two items were significantly correlated ($r = .42, p < .01$), and were aggregated to form a composite score. *Undermining behavior* was

assessed using three items: "Other people take credit for my work or ideas," "People at work treat me in a manner that puts me down or address me in unprofessional terms, either publicly or privately," and "People at work fail to give me information that is necessary to do my job." Internal consistency for this measure is .64. These items were aggregated to form a composite score. All mistreatment items were rated along a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "Always". Instructions for each of these items asked participants to reference the last 12 months.

Dependent Measures

Employee strain. Three employee strain outcomes were examined in the current study: workplace stress, physical health (reverse coded), and mental health (reverse coded). Each was assessed using a single item. Workplace stress was measured by asking participants to rate how often they find their work stressful on a five point scale ranging from "never" to "always." Health was measured by asking participants "Would you say that your own health, in general, is poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent?" Mental health was assessed by asking the following open-ended question: "Thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?" The response provided by the participant was categorized as follows: 1, 2, 3, or 4 days, 5-9 days, 10-19 days, and 20 or more days. Finally, intention to quit was assessed using the single item question "how likely are you to find a job within the next year?" The item was rated along a three-point scale ranging from "not at all likely" to "very likely."

Control Variables

Research has demonstrated that women tend to report more experiences of workplace harassment [31], so sex

was added as a control ("1" =male; "2" = female). Age was also used as a control variable since older employees might experience higher incidences of employee mistreatment [21].

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all measures are available in Table 1. In order to test all hypothesis, path modeling, in which composite scores for each measure were treated as manifest variables, was conducted using LISREL [31]. Several models were tested, including a fully-mediated model, partially mediated model, and a version of each model that included a common methods factor. The common methods models were used to determine whether common method variance is a concern [32]. The results of the best-fit model will be presented below.

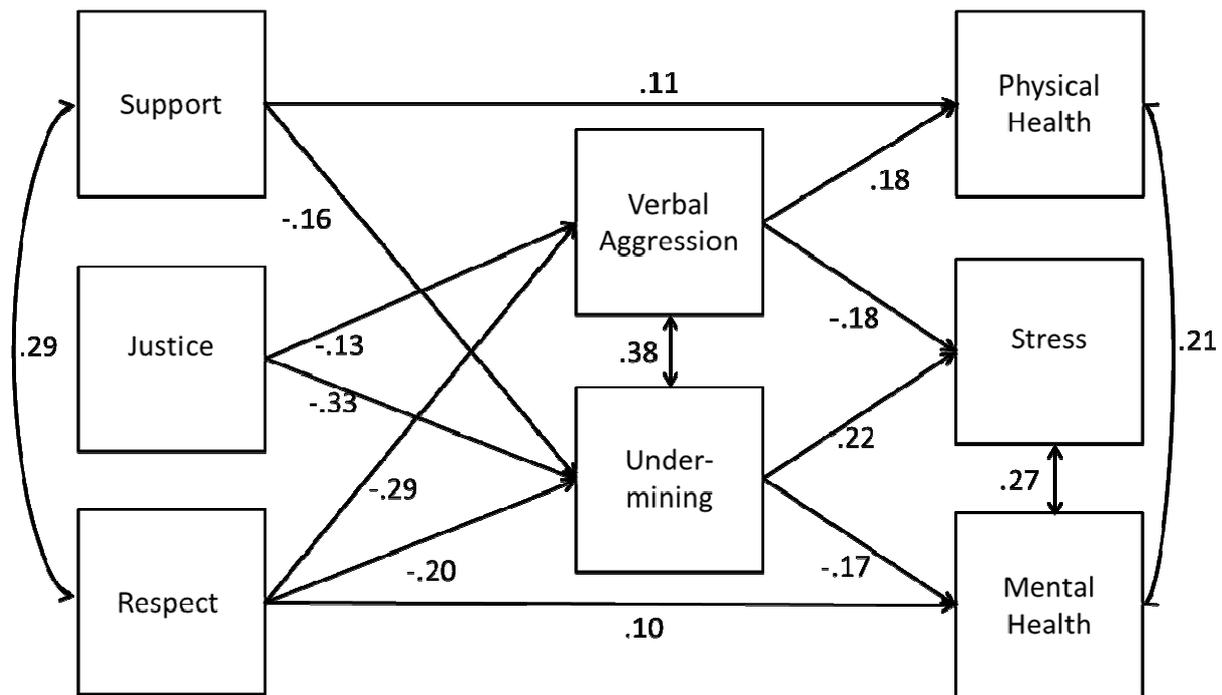
The final model is presented in Figure 1, with non-significant links not depicted. This demonstrated acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 19.2, p = .01; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05; GFI = .90 NFI = .96$). Chi-squared difference tests showed that the final model fit comparatively better than a fully mediated model ($\Delta\chi^2 = 87.62, p < .01$), and both models that included common methods factors ($(\Delta\chi^2 = 96.65, p < .01; (\Delta\chi^2 = 104.23, p < .01)$). As predicted in hypotheses 1-3, most components of workplace climate related significantly to employee mistreatment. Verbal aggression was predicted by justice ($\beta = -.13, p < .01$) and respect ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$), and undermining was significantly predicted by respect ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$) and support ($\beta = -.16, p < .05=1$). Workplace mistreatment, in turn, related to employee strain. Verbal aggression predicted physical health ($\beta = .18, p < .01$) and stress ($\beta = -.18, p < .01$), and undermining predicted stress ($\beta = .22, p < .01$) and mental health ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among all measures

Measure	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Age	45,96	16,80	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. Sex	1,54	0,50	.01	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
3. Org Justice	2,94	0,67	-.12**	.02	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4. Social Support	3,54	0,66	.14**	.00	.05*	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. Respect	3,29	0,65	.09**	.02	-.10**	.35**	-	-	-	-	-
6. Verbal Aggression	2,55	0,66	.11**	.12**	-.17**	-.05**	-.38**	-	-	-	-
7. Undermining	2,64	0,69	.11**	.06*	-.22**	-.25**	-.40**	.48**	-	-	-
8. Job Stress	3,26	1,00	-.07**	.02	.12**	-.07**	-.18**	.28**	.13**	-	-
9. Mental Health	4,4	7,00	-.10**	-.10**	.09**	-.12**	-.18**	-.19**	.15**	.24**	-
10. Physical Health	3,05	0,80	-.18**	.00	.05	.11**	.13**	-.09**	-.06	-.06	-.25**

* Indicates significance at the .05 level

** Indicates significance at the .01 level



Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 19.2$, $p = .01$; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05; GFI = .90 NFI = .96
 The impact of age and sex was partialled out of each of the outcomes

To test the hypothesized mediated effects, the magnitude of the indirect effects was assessed through bootstrapping (N = 5,000) [33]. Unbiased 95% confidence intervals were also estimated for each indirect effect. Several significant indirect effects were found. The respect-mental health relationship ($\alpha\beta = .13$; M = .002, 95% CI = .001 to -.003) and respect-stress relationship ($\alpha\beta = .20$; M = .002, 95% CI = .003 to -.003) were both indirectly affected by undermining. Additionally, the respect-stress relationship ($\alpha\beta = .20$; M = .002, 95% CI = .003 to -.003), justice-stress relationship ($\alpha\beta = .12$; M = .004, 95% CI = .001 to -.004), and justice-mental health relationship ($\alpha\beta = .11$; M = .002, 95% CI = .004 to -.001) were directly affected by verbal aggression. Taken together, these results provide some support that the social environment of work can impact strains through employee mistreatment.

DISCUSSION

Given the increased prevalence of interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace [4,26], it is increasingly important to understand the precursors of this powerful stressor. With respect to the link between the social work environment and workplace mistreatment, we

found that support, justice, and respect predicted undermining, while justice and respect predicted verbal aggression. These findings are consistent with theories of employee mistreatment [5,6], the JD-R model [13], as well as limited empirical research that has explored the connection between the social work environment and mistreatment [26]. An important implication of these results is that organizations can potentially cut down on the amount of mistreatment by fostering a social work environment that emphasizes fairness, respect, and social support among employees. What is perhaps less clear, however, is exactly how this can be done. Although somewhat speculative, we surmise that creating organizational policies and the implementation of organizational policies play a major role in fostering a work environment where employees are treated with fairness and respect, and employees support each other. Training programs emphasizing the importance of treating others in a fair, respectful, and supportive manner may also help. Ultimately, though, more intervention research needs to examine the most effective ways to create a positive social work environment in organizations.

The present study also examined workplace mistreatment as a mediator of the relationship between the social environment and employee strain. The

findings of the present study suggest that some aspects of workplace mistreatment mediated the relationship between the social environment and measures of employee strain while others did not. These findings suggest that when organizations have a social environment in which employees are treated with a lack of respect and that they perceive little justice, this may lead to higher levels of employee mistreatment, which in turn leads to higher levels of employee strain. Viewed in a more positive light, these findings suggest that organizations can potentially improve the health and well-being of employees simply by emphasizing the importance of treating others with respect and equity.

Given that the current results support the assertion that a respectful environment can positively impact employee outcomes through the reduction of certain types of mistreatment, it is logical to assume that a respectful environment might diminish the occurrence of more severe types of mistreatment, such as sexual harassment and workplace bullying. Researchers should therefore continue to examine workplace respect as a possible preventative antecedent to a variety of mistreatment outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite several strengths (e.g., nationally-representative sample; interview data collection method), the results need to be considered in light of the study's limitations. One obvious limitation of this study was that the components of the social work environment we examined in this study were measured only at the individual level. Ideally, we would have liked to have assessed the aggregated perceptions of individuals within a given organization [25] which would have allowed the assessment of inter-rater agreement [32]. In addition, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes making definitive statements regarding causality, and the fact that all variables are self-reported does not allow us to rule out the possibility that the relationships detected in this study were at least partially due to common method effects [34].

Directions for Future Research

The findings of the present study open the door to future research focused on the social work environment. First, as the social work environment was established as an important variable in relation to negative occurrences in the workplace (such as mistreatment), future research might link the social environment to more positive employee behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behaviors or altruism. Additionally, the social work environment might be shown to positively impact the general performance of employees in an organization, with job

satisfaction serving as a mediating variable. Finally, as the social environment might have a powerful impact on employee well-being, researchers should examine the antecedents of workplace respect, such as policies and procedures put in place by an organization that may have some effect on important employee and organizational outcomes, such as performance, absenteeism, and health.

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