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Considerations Related to Intentionality and Omissive Acts in the Study of Workplace Aggression and Mistreatment

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We applaud the efforts of Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland (2018) in their development of perpetrator predation as a sensitizing concept (see also Cortina, 2017) for future work in workplace aggression and mistreatment (hereafter workplace mistreatment). The importance of being mindful of the manner in which we frame our arguments is both highly relevant and well-articulated by the authors. We further believe that the transfer of focus from that of blaming victims to placing the onus for workplace mistreatment on the actor him/herself is an important idea as our field continues to develop into the 21st century.

In this commentary, we highlight two points of discussion related to the perpetrator predation paradigm. We propose that the current state of the perpetrator predation framework does not provide adequate conceptual coverage for all constructs under the aegis of workplace mistreatment. Defined as any negative acts that harm targets and which the target is motivated to avoid (Neuman & Baron, 2005), workplace mistreatment is a broad term that includes a variety of constructs (e.g., bullying, incivility, social undermining, violence, and ostracism; Jex & Bayne, 2017). Due in large part to

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the wide range of variables that may be measured under this label, workplace mistreatment has been roundly criticized for conceptual and measurement redundancies and overlap (Hershcovis, 2011). Although discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this commentary, it does raise important questions about whether all aspects of workplace mistreatment are equally served by the perpetrator predation framework.

We believe that this is simply not the case. To demonstrate this, we focus on two points of contention. First, we examine omissive acts of workplace mistreatment and how the proposed framework fails to predict these acts of withdrawal, which in turn may affect the applicability of this paradigm. Second, we argue that the question of intentionality needs to be more explicitly addressed within the paradigm. Given that the term predation implies the targeting of another (though the authors note that actors may not do so consciously; Cortina, 2017; Cortina et al., 2018), it may not fully capture more unintentional or ambiguous forms of mistreatment. Although some forms of mistreatment, such as those that reflect workplace aggression, do operate under the assumption of intentionality (Jex & Bayne, 2017), it is important to note that not all workplace offenses are necessarily deliberate in nature. Examples include workplace ostracism, where intentions are intrinsically uncertain (e.g., Robinson & Schabram, 2017), and workplace incivility, where the intent to harm can be ambiguous (e.g., Tarraf, Hershcovis, & Bowling, 2017).

Omissive Acts of Workplace Mistreatment

Omission, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “The action of omitting, leaving out, or not including a person or thing” or “The non-performance or neglect of an action which one has a moral duty or legal obligation to perform; an instance of this” is a defining facet of workplace ostracism (Robinson, O’Reilly, & Wang, 2013). Building on this definition, Robinson et al. characterize workplace ostracism as situations where “an individual or group omits to take actions that engage another organizational member when it is socially appropriate to do so” (2013, p. 206). At its core, ostracism is differentiated from other aspects of workplace mistreatment by the absence of interaction or acknowledgment with the target (Ferris, Chen, & Lim, 2017; Robinson & Schabram, 2017). This absence of action or social contact creates an ambiguous context whereby victims may not be able to discern why they are being treated in such a way or even “whether it even happened at all” (Robinson et al., 2013, p. 208). As two of the key tenets of the perpetrator predation framework revolve around agency and control, we argue that this does not necessarily fit this important and growing stream of workplace mistreatment research.

To further complicate matters, many of the focal measures of workplace mistreatment integrate omissive acts within their scales. For example, the Workplace Incivility Scale includes the following item: “Have you been in a situation where any of your superiors or coworkers ignored or excluded you from professional camaraderie?” (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). This item clearly reflects the construct of workplace ostracism and the fact that work colleagues have failed to act in an appropriate manner. Due to the formative nature of many of these scales, negative acts of commission are weighted in a similar manner as omission of positive or negative interactions (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013). Recently, researchers have begun to conceptually and theoretically distinguish workplace ostracism from other workplace mistreatment constructs based on this notion of omission (e.g., Ferris et al., 2017; O’Reilly, Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2014). Thus, its low intensity and ambiguous nature (Ferris et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2013) puts into question whether we can use perpetrator predation as a guiding framework for workplace mistreatment in its entirety.

One explanation for why acts of omission and commission have been inserted into the same measures of workplace mistreatment is that workplaces that disregard how individuals treat one another are likely to implicitly or explicitly condone workplace mistreatment (Ferris et al., 2017). This is evidenced in several studies where two conceptually discrete forms of workplace mistreatment were found to be highly related, including Lim and Cortina’s (2005) examination of incivility and sexual harassment and O’Reilly et al.’s (2014) study of general harassment and workplace ostracism. Thus, with obvious differences in how variables under the workplace mistreatment umbrella are conceptualized, the use of a single perpetrator-focused framework to view these acts is problematic.

The Question of Intention

A second issue related to the perpetrator predation paradigm concerns the notion of intent. In her critique of the workplace mistreatment literature, Hershcovis (2011) identified five characteristics, including intent, by which each of the constructs examined could be distinguished. For example, social undermining is a highly intentional set of behaviors that serves to interfere with the social and organizational achievement of victims. On the other hand, workplace incivility and ostracism are acts of ambiguous intent that may cause victim similar levels of distress (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Ferris et al., 2017).

Although Cortina et al. (2018) briefly mention how stereotypes and other forms of implicit biases held by perpetrators may influence their actions, the authors fall short in their attempt to explain how the perpetrator predation framework functions in cases where their actions are ambiguous

in intent and easily dismissed. This is of particular importance, as perceived intent can impact how victims react and make sense of workplace mistreatment, given that alternative explanations, such as ignorance or preoccupation, may play a role in explaining these behaviors (Hershcovis, 2011). Thus, although a lack of intentionality or premeditation in no way absolves the actor of responsibility for any offense committed, we argue that the term “predation” fails to fully represent such instances, due to the connotation inherent in its definition.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset of this commentary, we applaud the authors of the focal article for their work related to the development of the perpetrator predation paradigm. We agree with their position that it is not productive to place the blame for workplace mistreatment on the shoulders of the victims. However, we feel that victim interpretations and reactions to these aversive workplace behaviors nonetheless have an important role to play in our understanding of this construct. In our commentary, we argue that the framework may not fully capture all types of workplace mistreatment, focusing our discussion on both omissive acts of workplace mistreatment and the assumption of intentionality that underlies the use of the term “predation.” We hope that these discussion points will prove useful for future work related to this paradigm.

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Beyond Victims and Perpetrators

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We acknowledge and agree with Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland (2018) that the tendency to focus on victims as precipitators of their own negative workplace experiences (e.g. abusive supervision) presents a problematic theoretical paradigm. Using organizational justice as an illustration, we note that even in fields with an orientation toward victims, similar trends with regard to victim precipitation have still emerged. However, we also argue that although the perpetrator predation approach may help to avoid this tendency and encourage a better understanding of the responsibility for and origins of certain organizational experiences, it may fall short when examining complex phenomena that involve more than the dyad of perpetrator and victim. We suggest that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology scholars

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