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A Comprehensive Approach to Empowering Victims and Understanding Perpetrators

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We unequivocally agree with the root of Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland's (2018) argument about the danger in focusing mostly on the victim in situations of workplace aggression. Workplace aggression is indeed initiated by the perpetrator (or perpetrators if there are two equally responsible parties in enacting the aggression). Where we believe Cortina et al.'s arguments are lacking is the hard-drawn line that the perpetrator should be the *only* subject of study. No, the victim should not hold any blame nor insinuations of blame. However, we hold the premise that both sides (i.e., perpetrator and

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victim) must be *considered*, and thus both are inherently subjects of interest in order to thoroughly capture the essence of these scenarios. Therefore, our position is that a focus on the victim is not only important, but it is actually an essential component when contemplating workplace aggression. Furthering research in this area will only be successful if we have candid conversations around the inappropriate nature of a solely victim-focused approach to workplace aggression and discuss the explicit differences (or nuanced ones) that may exist across varying perspectives on workplace aggression in order to more fully understand it. Therefore Cortina et al. have rightly initiated an important conversation within industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology.

Comprehensive Empowerment Approach

We suggest that a focus on the victim must occur alongside an examination of the perpetrator (i.e., their motivations, patterns of behavior, intentions, and personality issues), as well as the overarching context (e.g., organizational culture, power hierarchies in the organization). Because of this, we strongly encourage the consideration of the empowerment approach to victimization. This approach does focus a great deal on victims (although there is also a focus on external issues, such as the oppressors and power structures), but the purpose is what matters; it aims to empower victims versus blame them. The victim-focused approach is not wholly inappropriate according to this perspective, as it does speak to concerns and issues aligned to the victim's experiences. Directing all our attention on the problem, not the victimized party as Cortina et al. (2018) suggest, sounds like an admirable goal, and certainly their intent is well-meaning. However, this is a little like a teacher giving all their attention to the naughty kid in class while other students do not receive direct support. Our resources, and therefore attention, must be shared as equally as possible across the three goals of (a) empowering victims or potential victims, (b) disciplining perpetrators or ideally proactively investing in valid ways to weed out applicants with perpetrator-like patterns before they enter our organization, and (c) paying attention to the broader contexts (e.g., power structures, organizational culture) and their role in workplace aggression.

Research in social psychology and the field of social work may be useful to consider in regard to the multifaceted and serious issue of workplace aggression. The empowerment approach in social work started in the late 1970s and has continued to grow both within and outside of the United States to this day. This viewpoint suggests a person–environment approach is necessary to most deeply understand issues of aggression, oppression, and injustice. If an individual is known to have patterns of workplace aggression against others, the approach most relevant may be that of a perpetrator focus

with some aspects of empowerment added in order to support the victim. If no patterns of aggression exist by those involved, and/or it is clear that there was indeed one coercer/perpetrator, then perhaps the greater context should be examined as well, not simply ignored. As Lee and Hudson (2017) have stated, "the problems caused by oppression almost always necessitate a dual focus on the environment and strengthening the self" (p. 150).

Empowerment is similar to the self-determination construct examined by Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, and Allen's (1999) study, which did focus solely on victim precipitation, as noted by Cortina et al. (2018). Again, this *sole* victim focus is not what we are suggesting nor deem appropriate. Self-determination refers to the extent of control one feels he or she has over the environment. Empowerment refers to the process of enabling opportunities for employees to become confident by allowing them to feel control over themselves and their work environment. These two constructs are not equivalent, however, as self-determination is thought to be only one aspect of empowerment. For example, Spreitzer (1995) found support that the employee empowerment construct consists of four facets: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Additionally, in their study of empowerment climates, Wallace and Johnson (2011) explain that these four facets (which collectively comprise a psychological empowerment climate) are linked to higher performance because empowerment improves task engagement as well as persistence. Therefore, empowerment seems to be useful for building up victims of aggression and may be beneficial for encouraging better performance, demonstrating its multifaceted importance in the workplace.

The empowerment approach also views the victim as someone who may benefit from direction regarding taking action, reflecting on this action, and developing awareness in order to negate either personal reasons (such as personality, abilities, etc.) or external reasons (the work environment, power structures, perpetrators), which result in his or her oppression (Lee, 2001). The victim is not excluded from examination because empowerment at the individual level early in the victimization process could be useful and appreciated by victims themselves, although of course transparency around disciplinary actions against the perpetrator (including the potential removal of the perpetrator) is also essential to progress the empowerment of victims (Lee & Hudson, 2017). This perspective is not one of acceptance or conceding to endure workplace aggression but instead one of empowerment through the route of awareness. Lee (2001) states the aim is to help those who are oppressed by empowering them at the personal, interpersonal, and political levels. It is a critical perspective of oppression in all forms, and the intention is to build people up, not subjugate them to learned helplessness as a continuing victim (Lee, 2001). Employees should not learn to be afraid

or feel unsafe in their workplace environment but instead be empowered to stand against workplace aggression.

Learned Helplessness

Seligman's (1975) original study of learned helplessness can also help illuminate the need for an empowerment approach to workplace victimization regarding aggression, harassment, or violence, as it refers to a concept that results from the uncontrollability of an environment or situation and has emotional, motivational, and cognitive concerns. The theory of learned helplessness suggests victims of workplace aggression could unfortunately learn to accept the aggression and become helpless if there is no empowerment. For example, employees who are repeatedly victims of workplace aggression may believe they will likely be targeted again. If the organizational culture of their workplace implies views related to the victim-focused approach, this may compound their feelings of learned helplessness because they feel a lack of support. Shifting the paradigm away from the victim and onto the comprehensive approach of considering both the victim and the perpetrator as well as the broader context in regard to any workplace aggression incident may aid victims through the combination of building awareness, skills development, creating support systems for victims, and enacting strict disciplinary actions against perpetrators. Often, organizations' policies, training programs, and mission statements include the word "empowerment," but failing to properly put it into practice, including within the contexts of workplace aggression, makes its inclusion in such company statements irrelevant. Lee and Hudson (2017) reason "we need grounded approaches to empowerment-oriented practice that specify meanings, and engender knowledge, values, and especially skills to make the concept of empowerment operable and useful" (p. 143).

Alternate Reality of Workplace Aggression?

As we have argued, we do believe there should be a focus on the perpetrator in cases of workplace aggression as part of the approach. However, it is possible that the victim-based focus is an attempt to understand the reality that often exists in which mutually responsible aggressive acts occur between both employees involved in a workplace aggression incident. Workplace aggression can unfold in this manner, with two people at fault, indicating two true perpetrators (and two victims in a sense). In actual workplace aggression scenarios, there may be small incidents that add up over time across both parties involved, eventually leading to more explicit expressions of aggression. We do not at all believe we should place blame on the victim of workplace aggression, but we must also acknowledge a potential reality that exists in the world: that sometimes, especially in workplace scenarios, there is

not an absolutely innocent person versus a totally deranged sadistic person. Sometimes two people who both have aggressive tendencies both make rude comments that escalate to harsher words, followed by both people getting out of control (e.g., someone throws something in the other person's direction and the other retaliates). As I-O psychologists, we must be cautious to jump to assumptions that there is only one perpetrator or that a focus *only* on the perpetrator is the most useful viewpoint in fully understanding workplace violence; we need holistic *and* ethical approaches.

Big Picture

We lose something if we are hesitant to pay attention to the victims or if we are unwilling to accept that some workplace aggression incidents involve situations in which each party is both a victim and a perpetrator. In line with our viewpoint, Lee (2001) also argues both the aggressor and their target have to be addressed in order to enact any change. Thus, the victim is not taken out of the equation because self-awareness is still useful in developing safeguards against perpetrators. Paying attention to these aspects is practical and realistic for victims of workplace aggression. Theoretically, yes, focusing solely on the perpetrator is ideal because it allows for an examination of their motivations, and arguably this paradigm can be practical in that it reminds *us* to treat perpetrators as the problem. Yet, a more comprehensive approach to crimes in general, or to workplace aggression more specifically, could be beneficial as long as the purpose for considering the victims is to support them and offer a route to empowerment, not to blame them, in addition to genuinely wanting to understand the history of incidents between two employees. This perspective is lacking in Cortina et al.'s (2018) contemplation of workplace aggression paradigms. There is no excuse for aggression, but if our goal as I-O professionals is to understand why it occurs as well as how to ameliorate it, we must keep our perspectives broad initially and then narrow down our focus only after understanding the facts of a given workplace aggression case. For this reason, a comprehensive approach to empowering victims, understanding perpetrators, and examining the environment may be most effective.

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Research Framing, Victim Blaming: Toward an Empirical Examination of Victim Precipitation and Perpetrator Predation Paradigms

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Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland (2018) make a compelling case for shifting away from a victim precipitation perspective in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology. In addition to noting that victim precipitation potentially violates ethical principles, the authors suggest that such paradigms shape attributions of blame and implications for practice within organizations. This commentary builds upon the ideas discussed in the focal article by encouraging I-O psychologists to collect data on the extent to which victim precipitation appears in the field and experimentally examine how and why the paradigms we use to explain workplace mistreatment might affect attitudes and behavior.

Central to this proposal is a consideration of research on framing effects. The literature on framing spans a number of disciplines, including psychology (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), mass communication (Entman, 1993), and political science (Druckman, 2001), and results tend to show that variations in framing and semantics—even if slight and subtle—can shift thinking, attitudes, and decisions. Reflecting upon such work can assist I-O psychologists in understanding how the framing of research on workplace mistreatment can similarly shape reactions and responses to victims and perpetrators. I-O psychologists are ultimately communicators of their

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