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Why Victims of Undermining at Work Become Perpetrators of Undermining: An Integrative Model

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We develop and test an integrative model explaining why victims of workplace social undermining become perpetrators of undermining. Conceptualizing social undermining as a norm-violating and a resource-depleting experience, we theorize that undermining victimization lowers interpersonal justice perceptions and depletes self-regulatory resources, and these 2 mechanisms in tandem trigger a moral disengagement process that influences subsequent undermining behaviors. We further theorize that moral identity functions as a boundary condition: high moral identity attenuates whether interpersonal injustice and resource depletion shape moral disengagement and whether moral disengagement translates to subsequent undermining. A field study of bank employees provides empirical support for the mediating mechanisms, and shows that employees who have high moral identity are less likely to respond to interpersonal injustice by morally disengaging and to translate moral disengagement to undermining.

Keywords: interpersonal justice, moral disengagement, moral identity, resource depletion, social undermining

... many workers called [the Anytime Feedback Tool] a river of intrigue and scheming. They described making quiet pacts with colleagues to bury the same person at once, or to praise one another lavishly. Many others ... described feeling sabotaged by negative comments from unidentified colleagues with whom they could not argue. In some cases, the criticism was copied directly into their performance reviews—a move ... that colleagues called “the full paste.”

(*New York Times*, Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015)

A recent report of Amazon’s workplace practices alleges a brutally competitive environment in which employees intentionally throw colleagues “under the bus” to survive the yearly “rank and yank.” Such social undermining behavior—behavior intended to hinder employees from achieving work success, establishing and maintaining positive relationships, and building favorable reputations over time (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002)—is common in competitive workplace settings, where anyone can be seen as a potential opponent (Edinger, 2014; Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012). Relative to other forms of mistreatment such as bullying, harassment, and physical aggression, undermining behaviors are subtle low-intensity forms of aggression with consequences that are often not immediately obvious (Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012) making it easier for perpetrators to go unpunished (Brodsky, 1976). Unfortunately, victims of mistreatment tend to become perpetrators of mistreatment (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Aquino & Thau, 2009), further spreading undermining toxicity throughout the organization (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Duffy, Shaw, Scott, & Tepper, 2006). Given that social undermining damages employees and organizations in terms of health problems, turnover, and productivity loss (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013), an in-depth examination of workplace undermining is warranted to understand why undermining victims become undermining transgressors themselves, and identify conditions that might weaken the link.

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Building on past research on workplace interpersonal aggression (for reviews, see Barling, Dupré, & Kelloway, 2009; Koopmann, Wang, Liu, & Song, 2015; Robinson, Wang, & Kiewitz, 2014; Tepper, 2007), we argue that social undermining is likely to be experienced as both an unjust violation of norms (i.e., injustice) and a depletion of resources. Past research suggests that victims may aggress others when they perceive that they have suffered injustice (e.g., Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002; Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006; Jones, 2009; Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008), or resource depletion (e.g., Lian et al., 2014; Thau & Mitchell, 2010; van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011). Our framework posits that perceptions of injustice and resource depletion potentially overlap. We argue that *norm violation* (i.e., injustice) and *resource depletion* may be distinct mechanisms but both evoke selfish mindsets in victims so that they can justify becoming perpetrators of undermining. Specifically, (a) a victim's perceptions of injustice and resource depletion form the path to *moral disengagement*—cognitive self-justification that harming is acceptable (Bandura, 1999); (b) a victim's moral disengagement drives the victim to subsequently undermine coworkers. We also assert that people vary in their susceptibility to the moral disengagement impulse. Accordingly, we identify employees' personal standards associated with the moral self—moral identity (Reed & Aquino, 2003)—as a regulator of whether victims morally disengage, and if so, whether their moral disengagement translates to social undermining (cf. Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011).

In sum, we contribute to the workplace aggression literature by developing and testing a more comprehensive and integrated model of the victim-perpetrator link. Our model integrates interpersonal justice and resource depletion, explicates how victims justify their undermining and cross over to the role of perpetrators, and identifies who is more or less susceptible to this process. In so doing, we offer a nuanced and comprehensive approach to understand why toxic, social undermining behavior is frequently reenacted at work, and not merely against the original perpetrators (see Figure 1).

Theoretical Overview

Undermining Victimization and Moral Disengagement: Undermining as a Norm-Violating Experience

A central tenet of our framework is that negative relational experiences at work, such as undermining, can shape employees' moral consideration of others (Opatow, 1995; Tepper, Moss, &

Duffy, 2011). Undermining behaviors such as gossiping, ignoring, or intentionally delaying others' work are perceived as demonstrating lack of respect and consideration, and thus violating norms of social interactions (Miller, 2001). Thus, undermined employees perceive that they are victims of interpersonal injustice (Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006). One way to reduce the cognitive dissonance that occurs from being treated unjustly (Stone & Cooper, 2001), while maintaining morality, is to cognitively rearrange their mindsets and rationalize performing the same harmful behaviors. They may reason that "they have already done their fair share of suffering—as if there were a maximum amount of victimhood that a person can reasonably be expected to endure" (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010, p. 245). We argue that undermined employees, perceiving injustice, then feel selfishly entitled to be less concerned about others (Johnson, Chang, & Rosen, 2010; Poon, Chen, & DeWall, 2013), and feel justified in inflicting harm (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). We suggest that undermining victimization likely invokes moral cognitive processes that enable harmful behaviors.

Moral disengagement is contextually triggered moral justification in which individuals rationalize their norm violations (Bandura, 1991, 1999, 2002). Bandura (1986) proposed eight interrelated tactics categorized under three broad groups. First, individuals can *devalue the target* through dehumanizing and blaming targets; for example, portraying them as "losers." When individuals experience injustice, their individual self-concept becomes more salient (than the interdependent self-concept; Johnson et al., 2010); they feel morally separated and exclude others from their moral considerations (Opatow, 1990) and see them as unworthy of moral treatment. Second, individuals can *reconstrue immoral conduct* through moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and advantageous comparison. People tend to maintain equity in their relationships overall: if they are unfairly treated in one relationship, they want to compensate in other relationships (Zitek et al., 2010). Therefore, undermined employees may sanitize their harmful behavior as "everybody does it." Third, individuals can *obscure or distort harmful consequences* by diffusing and displacing responsibility and disregarding harmful consequences. Undermining behaviors are often ambiguous. For example, failing to defend a gossip target may not cause immediate harm or be directly linked to malicious intention. Thus, as employees perceive injustice and feel entitled to ignore others' well-being, they are likely to obscure the harm that they may cause to others.

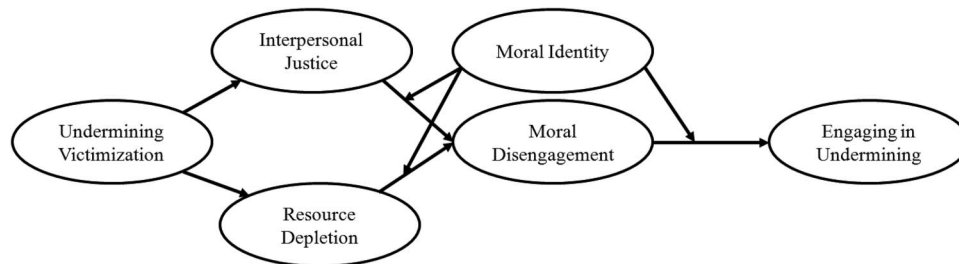


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model.

Hypothesis 1: Interpersonal justice will mediate the relationship between undermining victimization and moral disengagement.

Undermining Victimization and Moral Disengagement: Undermining as a Resource-Depleting Experience

Mistreated employees try to make sense of their experience (Porath & Erez, 2007). For instance, trying to understand the intentions behind undermining, victims may ask, “why did they talk behind my back?” (Crossley, 2009). They may reason counterfactually, thinking that the perpetrators should or could have acted differently (Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006). As victims recall the experience, they may be absorbed in hostile, impulsive, or unwanted thoughts. For example, they may feel tempted to be physically aggressive or to vent their feelings publicly. They may worry excessively about coworkers’ gossiping. Controlling such negative thoughts and responses requires efforts to override short-term temptations for long-term goals such as maintaining good relationships and acceptance (Thau, Aquino, & Poortvliet, 2007). Consequently, undermined employees will exert more mental effort (Denson, Pedersen, Friese, Hahm, & Roberts, 2011) to regulate their thoughts and actions.

Such self-regulation draws from a finite pool of resources (Murraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999). People tend to act in a self-interested manner (Shalvi, Eldar, & Bereby-Meyer, 2012), but self-regulatory resources act as a “moral muscle” allowing them to override selfishness to consider how their actions could affect others (Mead, Baumeister, Gino, Schweitzer, & Ariely, 2009, p. 594). Thus, depleted victims fail to recognize the moral implications of their actions (e.g., Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011). They yield to moral disengagement (e.g., Welsh, Ordóñez, Snyder, & Christian, 2013) and make selfish decisions (e.g., Xu, Bègue, & Bushman, 2012).

The self-control model thus suggests that undermined employees have fewer available resources to draw on, are less able to recognize and systematically process moral issues, and are less able to act in socially desirable ways. Regarding specific moral disengagement mechanisms, resource depletion negatively distorts emotional states (Trouwakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008) inhibiting evaluation of how others should be treated (Tepper et al., 2011), and reduces empathy (Balliet & Joireman, 2010). Thus, undermined employees likely *devalue the target*; they perceive that colleagues deserve mistreatment. Second, lacking resources, they should exhibit “fewer cognitive resources and [perform] less complex reasoning” (Moore, 2008, p. 132), predisposing them to *reconstrue the conduct* through simple rationalizing: “everyone is undermining so I can too!” or “I am just playing the game!” Finally, depleted victims, being less empathetic and less able to fully understand the implications of their behavior (DeWall, Baumeister, Gailliot, & Maner, 2008), become indifferent to the suffering they cause. Thus, they may *obscure or distort the harmful consequences* of undermining.

Hypothesis 2: Resource depletion will mediate the relationship between undermining victimization and moral disengagement.

Moral Disengagement and Engaging in Undermining: Integrating Norm Violation and Resource Depletion Pathways

Thus far, we have proposed interpersonal injustice and resource depletion as parallel processes that trigger victims’ moral disengagement. As we reasoned, undermining violates interpersonal norms and causes victims to perceive *interpersonal injustice*. In parallel, undermining compels victims to exert cognitive effort to regulate their thoughts and actions, which *depletes resources* and leaves fewer resources available for moral self-sanction. The two mechanisms occur in concert to prompt undermined employees to morally disengage.

Although undermining can damage victims’ health and reputation, perpetrators can gain potential status and power benefits. As noted, undermining victims perceive injustice and deplete resources, creating conditions for a predominantly selfish mindset. However, victims still must justify their potential undermining acts. That is, they need to believe that they are “good and moral” (Bandura, 1986). We posit that they avoid self-blame through moral disengagement. For example, undermined employees can reconstrue engaging in undermining as “making things right.” They can rationalize that they caused no harm by failing to defend a coworker. Thus moral disengagement frees undermined employees to harm others without self-censure and to cross from victim to perpetrator. Integrating these arguments with Hypotheses 1 and 2, we predict that interpersonal injustice and resource depletion will be the mediating mechanisms that allow undermined victims to morally disengage, which will be the link to undermining behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Interpersonal justice and moral disengagement will serially mediate the relationship between undermining victimization and engaging in undermining.

Hypothesis 4: Resource depletion and moral disengagement will serially mediate the relationship between undermining victimization and engaging in undermining.

Moral Identity as an Individual Difference Moderator

Although victimization triggers moral disengagement and drives undermining behavior, we suggest some employees are better able to curb disengagement processes. The person and the situation jointly shape moral reasoning and behavior (Bandura, 1990; Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Therefore, situations may trigger moral disengagement, but individual standards associated with the moral self may intervene and shape whether moral disengagement occurs, and whether it translates to harming behavior. We propose that moral identity is a particularly salient individual difference factor. Of the many possible identities individuals may use to characterize themselves, those who internalize moral identity see themselves as having valued moral traits, for example, as being caring, friendly, and compassionate (Aquino & Reed, 2002). By aspiring to moral traits and regarding moral identity to be central to their self-concept, people with high moral identity have readily accessible moral trait associations in working memory, which drives *both* their thinking (moral cognition) and their behavior (moral conation) to be consistent with their moral self (Hannah et al., 2011; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007).

First, moral identity will moderate the relationship between interpersonal injustice perceptions and moral disengagement. As noted, interpersonal injustice triggers cognitive dissonance, providing a sense of entitlement to be selfish. People feel less morally obligated to others who are psychologically distant (Opatow, 1995), but feel morally obligated to others with whom they socially identify (Duffy et al., 2012). Connection with others is central to moral identity (Reed & Aquino, 2003). People with high moral identity tend to value kindness and compassion, to perceive others as similar and close, and to have greater moral regard for others (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Therefore, because their cognitive processes reflect values associated with moral self-concepts, they are less likely to translate their injustice perceptions into moral disengagement; instead, they are more concerned for coworkers' well-being (Reed & Aquino, 2003). In other words, to resolve cognitive dissonance, employees with high moral identity depend more on their internal moral standards even when they perceive injustice because they consider moral values to be more consistent with their self-image. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5: Moral identity will moderate the relationship between interpersonal justice and moral disengagement such that the negative relationship will be weaker when moral identity is high than when moral identity is low.

Second, moral identity will moderate the relationship between resource depletion and moral disengagement. As noted, depleted individuals find it difficult to override their selfish responses and thus are more susceptible to moral disengagement. Individuals with high moral identity can still self-regulate, however, because their moral cognitive processing tends toward caring (Alberts, Martijn, Greb, Merckelbach, & de Vries, 2007), and they are sufficiently motivated to exert moral self-control (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003). Having stronger internalized moral standards, they need fewer resources to weigh moral dilemmas (Gino et al., 2011). With morality defining their core identity, they are strongly motivated to maintain a moral self-image (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 6: Moral identity will moderate the relationship between resource depletion and moral disengagement such that the positive relationship will be weaker when moral identity is high than when moral identity is low.

We contend that moral identity plays a dual buffering role: first, as discussed, moral identity will deter moral disengagement in response to undermining victimization; second, even if moral disengagement occurs, moral identity will keep it from translating to social undermining. Again, people high in moral identity have readily accessible morally relevant trait associations in their working memory. They also value social connections. Therefore, even if moral disengagement occurs, employees with high moral identity will refrain from acting against their moral self and will avoid doing harm. In accordance, an experimental study showed that moral identity neutralized the effect of moral disengagement on hostile reactions toward others (Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). When moral disengagement was triggered with pictures of the 9/11 attacks, those with low moral identity endorsed killing the 9/11 perpetrators. Thus,

Hypothesis 7: Moral identity will moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and engaging in undermining such that the positive relationship will be weaker when moral identity is high than when moral identity is low.

Integrating Hypotheses 1–7, we further predict that moral identity will moderate the serial mediations between undermining victimization and engaging in undermining.

Hypothesis 8: The indirect relationship between undermining victimization and engaging in undermining via interpersonal justice and moral disengagement will be weaker when moral identity is high than when moral identity is low.

Hypothesis 9: The indirect relationship between undermining victimization and engaging in undermining via resource depletion and moral disengagement will be weaker when moral identity is high than when moral identity is low.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Participants were employees working in 25 branches of two Korean banks. Each branch operated similar to teams: employees within branches shared branch-level objectives and worked closely with one another to provide financial services. At Time 1, paper-and-pencil surveys were distributed to 208 employees, and 191 employees participated (92%). The Time 1 survey included measures of undermining victimization, moral identity, interpersonal justice, and control variables. A month after Time 1, all employees who participated in Time 1 surveys completed the second survey. The Time 2 survey included measures of moral disengagement, resource depletion, and engaging in social undermining. Missing data on key variables across two surveys reduced the sample size for analysis to 182 employees. Seventy-three percent of the respondents were women with an average age of 35 and an average organizational tenure of 10 years.

Measures

We followed Brislin's (1990) procedures to translate items from English to Korean. Unless noted, we used a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*).

Undermining victimization. We used a seven-item social undermining scale (Duffy, Shaw, et al., 2006) to assess undermining victimization by team members. We used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often: almost every day*; $\alpha = .92$).

Moral identity. We used a five-item internalization scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002) that presents characteristics such as caring, compassionate, kind, and generous ($\alpha = .66$).

Interpersonal justice. We assessed interpersonal justice with a four-item measure (Colquitt, 2001; $\alpha = .96$).

Resource depletion. We measured resource depletion using the 10-item state self-control scale (Ciarocco, Twenge, Muraven, & Tice, 2013; $\alpha = .85$).

Moral disengagement. We measured moral disengagement using an eight-item scale (Moore et al., 2012; $\alpha = .81$). The scale assesses three broad moral disengagement mechanisms comprising eight subdimensions. In line with previous studies (e.g., Duffy et

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Organization	.25	.43											
2. Age	34.90	6.58	.08										
3. Gender	.73	.44	-.34	-.27									
4. Branch size	8.95	1.94	-.22	.01	.04								
5. Negative affectivity	2.61	.73	-.18	-.08	.19	.09	(.80)	.22	-.11	.34	.05	.13	.17
6. Undermining victimization	1.49	.55	-.14	-.02	.10	-.07	.27	(.92)	-.30	.24	.16	-.07	.30
7. Interpersonal justice	5.60	.96	.30	.09	-.08	.01	-.17	-.36	(.96)	-.16	-.18	.08	-.18
8. Resource depletion	3.76	.91	-.28	-.13	.19	.07	.39	.29	-.26	(.85)	.22	-.10	.18
9. Moral disengagement	2.31	.81	-.08	.09	-.13	.07	.12	.20	-.20	.26	(.81)	.00	.42
10. Moral identity	6.13	.70	.03	.03	-.06	-.02	.10	-.07	.07	-.11	-.02	(.66)	-.20
11. Social undermining	1.74	.57	-.18	.11	-.02	-.05	.22	.34	-.25	.24	.43	-.20	(.91)

Note. $N = 182$. Correlations greater than |.12| are significant at $p < .10$; those greater than |.16| are significant at $p < .05$; those greater than |.19| are significant at $p < .01$. The lower diagonal values represent correlations among raw scores. The upper diagonal values represent correlations between variables centered around the group mean. Two-tailed test. Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal. Gender: female = 1, male = 0.

al., 2012; Moore et al., 2012), we conceptualized moral disengagement as one overarching construct.

Engaging in social undermining. We measured social undermining toward team members using a seven-item scale (Duffy, Shaw, et al., 2006). We used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often: almost every day*; $\alpha = .91$).

Control variables. Age and gender were controlled because they may relate to perceptions of social interactions (Lakey & Cassidy, 1990). Team size was controlled as it may influence incidents of undermining (Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006). We controlled for negative affectivity as it may relate to both undermining victimization and engaging in undermining (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Hershcovis et al., 2007). We averaged responses on four negative feelings (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002): distressed, upset, afraid, and jittery ($\alpha = .80$). We used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often: almost every day*). Analysis of variance showed significant difference on key variables between the two organizations. Thus, we controlled for organizational membership using a dummy.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities for study variables. Given that employees are nested within each branch, we performed clustered structural equation modeling analyses (see Colquitt, LePine, Piccolo, Zapata, & Rich, 2012). We used a partially latent approach where scale composites are used as indicators by fixing error variances to $(1 - \text{coefficient alpha}) \times \text{variance of the scale}$ (Kline, 2005). Specifically, we averaged items and standardized scores to use as single indicators of latent constructs. To account for unmeasured common causes, we allowed disturbance terms for interpersonal justice and resource depletion to covary. To test mediation hypotheses, we allowed four direct paths between our focal constructs. To test moderating Hypotheses 5–7, we followed the procedure for moderated structural equation modeling (Cortina, Chen, & Dunlap, 2001) to create latent constructs for interaction terms, calculate reliability for the interaction terms, and set error variances. We tested the mediation and moderation effects with the bootstrapped confidence intervals on the basis of 1,000 random samples.¹

Figure 2 shows the results of the analyses. As Table 2 shows, undermining victimization had a significant indirect effect on moral disengagement via interpersonal justice (Hypothesis 1: estimate = .05, 95% confidence interval [CI] [.002, .110]) and via resource depletion (Hypothesis 2: estimate = .06, 95% CI [.030, .083]). The indirect effects were also significant for the serial mediation of interpersonal justice and moral disengagement (Hypothesis 3: estimate = .02, 95% CI [.002, .036]), and resource depletion and moral disengagement (Hypothesis 4: estimate = .02, 95% CI [.006, .033]). Therefore, Hypotheses 1–4 were supported.

Hypothesis 5 proposes that moral identity will moderate the relationship between interpersonal justice and moral disengagement. The interaction between interpersonal justice and moral identity was significant at a less stringent p value ($\beta = .19$, $p = .08$). We plotted the interaction pattern at low (-1 SD) and high ($+1$ SD) levels of moral identity. As Figure 3 shows, interpersonal justice was negatively related to moral disengagement (simple slope = $-.36$, $p = .01$) when moral identity was low, but the relationship was not significant when moral identity was high (simple slope = .02, *ns*). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was marginally supported. Hypothesis 6 proposes that moral identity will moderate the relationship between resource depletion and moral disengagement. The interaction between resource depletion and moral identity was not significant ($\beta = .00$, *ns*), and Hypothesis 6 was not supported. Hypothesis 7 proposes that moral identity will moderate the relationship between moral disengagement and engaging in undermining. The interaction between moral disengagement and moral identity was significant ($\beta = -.15$, $p = .00$). As Figure 4 shows, moral disengagement was more positively related to engaging in undermining (simple slope = .50, $p = .01$) when moral identity was low than when moral identity was high (simple slope = .21, $p = .06$). Thus, Hypothesis 7 was supported.

To test Hypotheses 8 and 9, we checked whether the serial mediation effects varied depending on moral identity levels. As Table 2 shows, the serial mediation via interpersonal justice and moral disen-

¹ Robustness checks reveal that the results are consistent when we test our hypotheses using Monte Carlo Simulation with 20,000 replications. These analyses provided additional confidence in our primary findings.

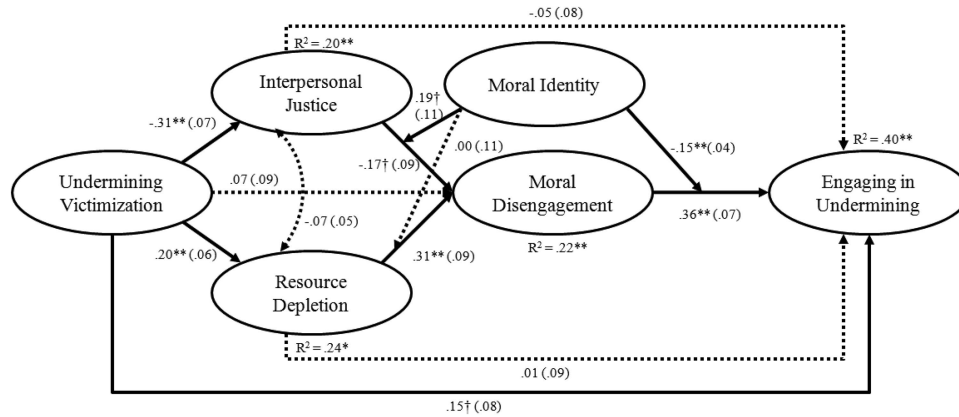


Figure 2. Moderated structural equation modeling results. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. † $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Two-tailed test.

agement was more positive (difference = .05, 95% CI [.015, .096]) when moral identity was low (estimate = .05, 95% CI [.028, .094]) than when moral identity was high (estimate = .00, 95% CI [-.018, .013]). The serial mediation via resource depletion and moral disengagement was also more positive (difference = .02, 95% CI [.004, .042]) under when moral identity was low (estimate = .03, 95% CI [.013, .072]) than when moral identity was high (estimate = .01, 95% CI [.006, .033]). Thus, Hypotheses 8 and 9 were supported.

Discussion

We developed and tested a model elaborating the underlying processes through which undermining victims become undermining perpetrators, and the boundary condition for these processes. Survey data collected from bank tellers supported our hypotheses that undermined employees perceive injustice and deplete resources; consequently, they morally disengage, and subsequently undermine coworkers. Our results also reveal that moral identity weakens the mediating processes. Victims with high moral identity are less likely to respond to

injustice perceptions with moral disengagement and to translate moral disengagement to undermining.

Our findings have several theoretical implications. As a novel contribution, we contribute to the social undermining literature by developing an integrative model of the victim-perpetrator link in coworker undermining. Although prior work has examined coworker-to-coworker mistreatment by focusing on general aggression (e.g., Glomb & Liao, 2003) or, more relevant to our study, social undermining (e.g., Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006; Duffy, Shaw, et al., 2006), prior work has largely focused on moderating factors that may strengthen the victim-perpetrator link such as self-esteem, neuroticism, and being singled out for victimization. This line of research has offered less insight into the processes that undermined victims undergo to become perpetrators. Conceptualizing undermining as both a norm-violating and a resource-depleting experience, we integrate two interrelated processes of interpersonal injustice and resource depletion that aggression research previously considered in isolation, and demonstrate that

Table 2

Path Analytic Results: Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Undermining Victimization on Moral Disengagement and Engaging in Undermining at Low and High Levels of Moral Identity

	Average moral identity	Low moral identity	High moral identity
Effects on moral disengagement			
Direct effect of undermining victimization	.07	.07	.07
Indirect effect via interpersonal justice → moral disengagement (H1)	.05*	.11**	.00
Indirect effect via resource depletion → moral disengagement (H2)	.06**	.06**	.06**
Total effect	.18**	.24**	.13**
Effects on engaging in undermining			
Direct effect of undermining victimization	.15**	.15**	.15**
Indirect effect via interpersonal justice → moral disengagement → engaging in undermining (H3, H8)	.02*	.05**	.00
Indirect effect via resource depletion → moral disengagement → engaging in undermining (H4, H9)	.02**	.03**	.01**
Indirect effect via interpersonal justice → engaging in undermining	.02	.02	.02
Indirect effect via resource depletion → engaging in undermining	.00	.00	.00
Indirect effect via moral disengagement → engaging in undermining	.03	.04	.01
Total effect	.24**	.29**	.20**

Note. $N = 182$. Coefficients in bold are significantly different across levels of moral identity.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

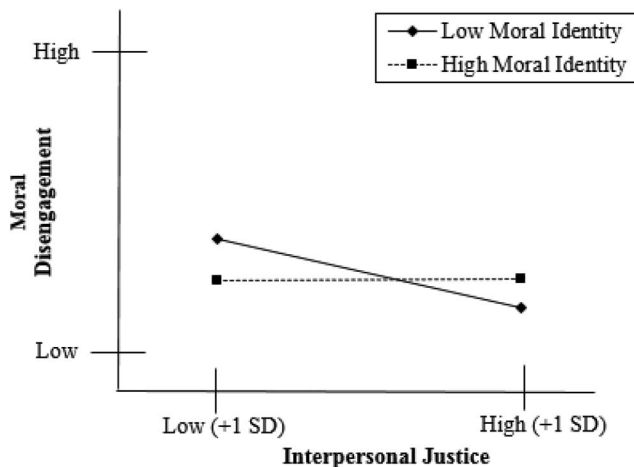


Figure 3. Moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between interpersonal justice and moral disengagement.

they coalesce into moral disengagement, and subsequent undermining. Our framework moves beyond prior undermining research (e.g., Crossley, 2009; Duffy et al., 2002, 2012; Greenbaum et al., 2012), and provides a theoretical elaboration of coworker-to-coworker undermining (Duffy, Ganster, et al., 2006; Duffy, Shaw, et al., 2006) by identifying underlying psychological processes.

We also extend recent research endeavors to understand the nomological network of moral disengagement at work (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008; Moore et al., 2012). Research has mostly focused on the harmful consequences of moral disengagement (e.g., Barsky, 2011; Christian & Ellis, 2014), but has paid relatively less attention to its antecedents (cf. Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011), thus offering little insight into ways to curb moral disengagement. Furthermore, despite Bandura's (1991) conceptualization of moral disengagement as a context-influenced state, most studies have focused on stable individual differences as antecedents. Only recently have researchers begun examining situational triggers such as envy (e.g., Duffy et al., 2012), resource depletion (e.g., Welsh et al., 2013), and justice (e.g., Hystad, Mearns, & Eid, 2014). Our finding that undermining victimization is a situational trigger, and that injustice and resource depletion are dual pathways to moral disengagement, informs our understanding of the forces that shape moral disengagement.

We further enrich understanding of the moral dimensions at play in negative interpersonal interactions by integrating moral identity and moral disengagement. Although we found no support that moral identity plays a moderating role between resource depletion and moral disengagement, our findings may point to the power of resource depletion in making people vulnerable to moral disengagement. That is, consistent with the "bad is stronger than good" principle (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), "negative" experiences such as resource depletion driven by undermining prompt more self-regulation, and may outweigh the buffering role of "good" such as moral identity. Another possibility is that people could be particularly susceptible to moral disengagement when few morally salient cues are available (Shu et al., 2011). In contrast, we found support for the moderating role of moral identity in the interpersonal justice—moral disengagement

link. Interpersonal injustice is a perception of norm violation, which would make employees more conscious of moral issues. As such, employees with high moral identity could use this awareness to curb their moral disengagement impulses.

Subtle but insidious forms of interpersonal aggression are surprisingly common in workplaces. Social undermining along with other interpersonal aggression costs organizations about \$6 billion annually (Duffy et al., 2012), so it is essential to identify ways to curtail undermining (see Hananel, 2013). Our model explains victims' psychological processes that lead to moral disengagement, a critical link that frees victims to become perpetrators. Organizations can develop training programs in workplace ethics that restrain harmful behaviors by enhancing moral self-regulatory processes. Recruiting and hiring employees who value morality would be particularly beneficial. Such employees are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors (e.g., Reed & Aquino, 2003), less likely to morally disengage if they are undermined, and less likely to undermine others even if they morally disengage. Thus, they could help inhibit the vicious cycle of undermining in the workplace.

Our study has limitations. Although theory guided our model, our study design prevents establishing causal links. Some factors, however, may attenuate concerns. First, we measured undermining victimization and engaging in undermining at separate time points. Second, although the reverse direction is plausible; that is, employees might morally disengage after they engage in undermining (see Shu et al., 2011), we also proposed and tested interaction effects associated with moral identity, the results of which are difficult to explain in the other direction. Nevertheless, future studies could replicate our model through a cross-lagged panel design. Other theoretical mechanisms could also inform the victim-perpetrator link. One possible mechanism is an emotion-based process. Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) suggests that when employees experience undermining, they may feel negative emotions such as anger, shame, and guilt. For instance, being ignored in front of coworkers may cause victims to feel shame, which then transmutes to anger, which is then vented through undermining. Victims may also feel guilty for failing to

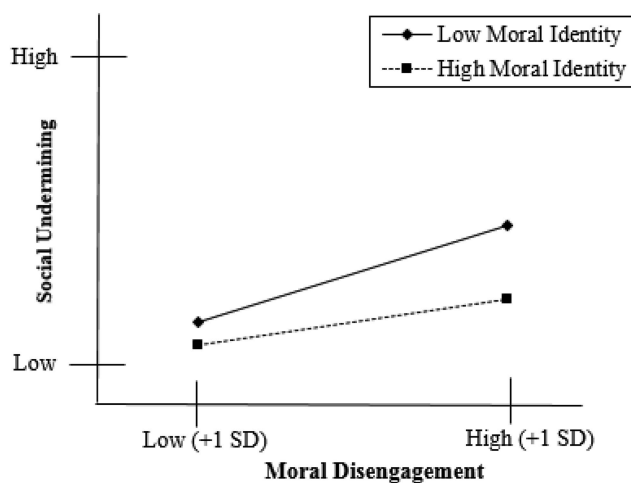


Figure 4. Moderating effect of moral identity on the relationship between moral disengagement and engaging in undermining.

prevent a victimization event (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Future research could investigate this dynamic emotion-based mechanism, particularly through experience sampling methodology at the undermining encounter level.

In conclusion, our study develops and tests an integrative model that encapsulates why and when undermined employees become perpetrators of undermining. In so doing, we provide greater insight into the phenomenon of workplace undermining, and identify ways to counter it.

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