On Observers' Conjunctive Attributions and Blame for Workplace Mistreatment

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ABSTRACT
This essay reflects on the need for more research to address observers' perspectives and reactions when witnessing or hearing about workplace mistreatment. After describing workplace mistreatment with respect to a behavioral spectrum ranging from incivility to violence, this essay focuses on observers' causal attributions and blame for workplace mistreatment. We relate observers' conjunctive causal attributions to multifocus blame that positions the organization as decidedly more blameworthy than typical research in a traditional causal attribution paradigm would suggest. We also offer some suggestions for future research that is more responsive to observers' blame for workplace mistreatment.

Like it or not, the human condition reveals that people are perfectly capable of mistreating one another in practically all settings, including the workplace. Organizational behavior (OB) and management researchers have focused an extraordinary amount of attention on workplace mistreatment; its individual and contextual antecedents; and the numerous personal, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes, mostly dysfunctional, arising from it. This has happened despite appeals for redirecting our research focus to more positive, adaptive, and functional employee behavior (Luthans, 2002), as well as management practices focused less on fixing dysfunction and more on promoting positive outcomes (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Even those appeals, however, have noted that the good and the bad in OB are causally linked. Cameron (2007), for instance, noted that forgiveness in the workplace must follow some manner of initial harm or mistreatment, so we often must first understand the mistreatment (the negative) before we can study and apply positive (and often healing) organizational behaviors and practices.

In addition to understanding that mistreatment occurs in the workplace, we also know that people, even when not direct parties to mistreatment as either perpetrator or target, do observe and often react to how people mistreat one another in practically all settings, including the workplace (Hershcovis et al., 2017; Robinson, Wang, & Kiewitz, 2014). Who and what those observers blame for workplace mistreatment (and its related effects) that they witness firsthand or hear about secondhand is our focus in this essay. This focus is worthwhile because research on workplace mistreatment has been mostly focused on individuals and dyads, not observers and their attributions for observed mistreatment at work (Ferguson & Barry, 2011; Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). The relatively sparse research that has addressed observers' effects and outcomes has been valuable, for uncivil, aggressive employees may be removed from the workplace and victims may quit (or die, in the worst case of lethal workplace violence), but coworkers who witnessed the mistreatment remain in the organization, standing in judgment of what they saw, what the organization does in response, and whom and what they blame (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005).

Furthermore, some of the purported consequences of workplace mistreatment would seem to depend greatly on observers' (e.g., coworkers') perceptions. For instance, when researchers speak of workplace violence's generalized, adverse impact on employee morale, job satisfaction, retention, and productivity (Griffin, O'Leary-Kelly, & Collins, 1998; Mack, Shannon, Quick, & Quick, 1998; Pearson, 1998; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998; Rogers & Kelloway, 1997), it would seem that coworkers' reactions to the violence are more directly influential on those outcomes than the initial violence itself. Likewise, retaliation against, ostracization of, and vilification of a violent employee (Beugré, 1998; Griffin et al., 1998;

Pearson, 1998) must be strongly influenced by coworker perceptions and reactions, especially their attributions (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Observers' blame attributions would also seem to influence their subsequent judgments of the organization's response to workplace violence. For instance, if observers blame a workplace violence incident chiefly on organizational factors, firing the violent employee and tightening prehire selection practices to screen out potentially violent employees may seem misguided and insufficient.

This discussion is relevant in that the whole spectrum of interpersonal mistreatment in the workplace, from extreme aggression (including physical violence) on one end to forms of incivility on the other end, continues to attract researchers' attention (Hershcovis, 2011; Robinson et al., 2014; Schilpzand et al., 2016). Workplace violence research, fueled by some especially shocking instances of workplace violence in the 1980s and even at violence's relatively low base rate of occurrence, occupied many researchers' attention in the 1990s. "Insider" workplace violence committed by an employee or ex-employee (Beugré, 1998; O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998) became especially interesting because of its implications for internal organizational management, policy, employee relations, and even culture. Violence is physical in nature and results in deliberate bodily harm. This distinguishes it from other forms of interpersonal aggression (Berkowitz, 1993). Relatedly, some organizational researchers clearly marked distinctions between violent and nonviolent aggression in the workplace (e.g., LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Neuman & Baron, 1998, 2005). Researchers also recognized that workplace violence occupies an extreme end of a behavioral spectrum. An appreciation of less intense, but far more ubiquitous, forms of mistreatment (see, e.g., research information on how widespread workplace incivility is; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000) then proceeded in the late 1990s and into the 2000s. Workplace sexual harassment research had preceded the 1990s wave of workplace violence and aggression research, so that earlier sexual harassment research did not enjoy the benefit of the subsequent workplace aggression modeling and thought. Workplace aggression research drew on prior sexual harassment research in many instances, and we now can understand related issues all the more, given sexual harassment's prominent place in the spectrum of workplace mistreatment.

Nonviolent aggression in the workplace may stop at intentional psychological harm near one end of the spectrum (Neuman & Baron, 1998), but Andersson and Pearson (1999) advanced the study of workplace mistreatment with a seminal article on workplace incivility that nicely anchored the focal spectrum of negative behavior for our purposes in this essay. Andersson and Pearson aptly described the range of mistreatment from intense, extreme aggression (direct, physical, and active mistreatment) to nonviolent aggression to much less intense forms (sometimes indirect, verbal, and sometimes passive), including incivility. Workplace incivility is low-intensity, rude, discourteous behavior that displays low or no regard for others and for workplace norms for respectful conduct. Such incivility can be ambiguous to both the target and observers as to its intentionality, which distinguishes it from more intense forms of workplace mistreatment in which intentionality is obvious (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina et al., 2001; Pearson et al., 2000). Indeed, incivility can happen accidentally as a function of just poor social skills and insensitive bumbling versus any intentional, malevolent motivation. Incivility also can happen as a function of deliberate malice or hostility, much as Tepper (2000) originally defined abusive supervision, a specific type of workplace incivility, in terms of a supervisor's sustained verbal and nonverbal behaviors (but not physical violence) that subordinates perceive as hostile. Certainly, observers of workplace incivility, including abusive supervision and peer-to-peer mistreatment, may imitate that mistreatment in how they treat coworkers and customers, so workplace mistreatment can be contagious via modeling effects (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson et al., 2000).

In the same way that workplace violence events and related media coverage sparked a wave of research on insider workplace violence, we presently see a climate of incivility in certain aspects of U.S. society and evolving culture that feeds our interest in workplace incivility generally, and its effects on observers specifically. The climate offers many examples of incivility on all sides of politics, religion, social issues, and class, all played out in legislative sessions, online social media exchanges, press interviews, "reality" television shows, local government forums and meetings, sports contests, political campaign rallies, radio talk shows, and so forth. One effect is that interpersonal mistreatment creeps into workplaces despite typical norms for orderly, relatively unemotional workplace conduct and respectful treatment. Christine Porath commented on this climate of incivility in a *New York Times* interview, noting that the appalling incivility we see in the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. federal government is also reflected at home and in the workplace. Porath held that incivility is contagious, specifically noting that people may be affected by incivility

indirectly, simply through seeing it, hearing about it, or reading about it (Baker & Rogers, 2018). It appears that extending the study of workplace mistreatment across the spectrum beyond perpetrators and targets—beyond the dyad—to observers is a worthwhile undertaking (Ferguson & Barry, 2011; Porath & Erez, 2009).

Two criticisms

The research done to date has made great progress in addressing workplace mistreatment at the individual and dyadic levels, and some progress at addressing observers' reactions. This research progress is not without its limitations, however. We briefly describe two limitations in this section and then focus especially on observers' (coworkers' unless otherwise specified) attributional reactions to workplace interpersonal mistreatment. Our aim is to highlight observers' blame attributions and briefly explain why, due to attributional conjunction effects and in addition to blaming uncivil and aggressive actors (and even deserving victims!), the work organization is unlikely to escape blameless from incidents of workplace incivility and aggression.

Whether studying workplace mistreatment through the theoretical lens of cognitive appraisal of stress and coping, interactional justice, or social exchange, researchers have managed to focus on and articulate quite a few mistreatment constructs, including workplace violence, workplace aggression, bullying, revenge, social undermining, sexual harassment, racial and other forms of harassment, incivility, ostracism, profane verbal insults and shouting, abusive supervision, interpersonal deviance, and so forth (Hershcovis, 2011; Robinson et al., 2014). These various forms of workplace aggression and incivility entail not only variable aggression levels, but variable degrees of harmful effects (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010), variable organizational responses, and so forth. This research progression has led some to criticize the proliferation of workplace mistreatment constructs, noting that the academy has somewhat ignored theoretical integration and synthesis as it both articulated a wide variety of theoretical explanations (Martinko, Gundlach, & Douglas, 2002) and waded headlong into empirical studies of constructs and behaviors that overlap significantly in their conceptual content, measurement, and effects (Hershcovis, 2011; Robinson et al., 2014).

When researchers are focusing on a "new" form of interpersonal mistreatment, it is only natural that they start with the focal dyad of the offender and the target or victim. This plays directly into a second criticism of extant research on workplace mistreatment, which is

that it has not sufficiently addressed observers' (third parties') perceptions and reactions. Some researchers have decried this, suggesting that the relative rareness of studying observers' reactions understates the importance of those observers' roles in establishing, or at least being part of, the social context of workplace mistreatment (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015; Schilpzand, Leavitt, & Lim, 2016). Skarlicki and Kulik (2005) noted the relatively sparse research on third-party reactions to workplace mistreatment and described how, in addition to experiencing adverse effects themselves, these observers can shape outcomes for the victim and influence related organizational justice practices. Ferguson and Barry (2011) held that research on observers' reactions to workplace interpersonal mistreatment was "still in its infancy" (p. 81), and Schilpzand et al. (2016) noted that "the topic of witnessed incivility may be classified as a developing area of study with many gaps and opportunities for future research" (p. 69).

Some other researchers have noted the need for paying attention to observers' reactions somewhat indirectly and in passing, whereas relatively few have directly researched observers' reactions. In an early example, Robinson and Kraatz (1998) acknowledged the role of others' perceptions in the context of organizational deviants' efforts to explain and to justify their deviance. Barling (1996) noted the importance of understanding how observers other than the direct victims perceive and respond to workplace violence and appealed specifically for research on observers' subjective experience of workplace violence.

What relatively little research on observers' reactions has ensued has involved observer exposure to nonviolent aggression and incivility much more so than to workplace violence. For instance, Skarlicki and Rupp's (2010) experiment showed that observers' negative emotions experienced when observing a supervisor's nonviolent mistreatment of a subordinate could elicit more retributive motivations. Oh and Farh (2017) suggested that third-party observers' reactions to abusive supervision may influence whether they support the victim (cf. Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Peng, Schaubroeck, & Li, 2014; Shao, Li, & Mawritz, 2018). Observers of workplace incivility were relatively indifferent to victims in Reich and Hershcovis (2015) but did register significant intent to punish the uncivil instigators. Harris, Harvey, Harris, and Cast's (2013) empirical results supported the notion that abusive supervision that is observed or heard about can negatively impact those vicarious observers' feelings, lives, and work relationships just as much as if the abuse had occurred firsthand. Porath and colleagues empirically documented workplace incivility's ill effects on

performance of coworkers who observe it (Porath & Erez, 2009) and even on customers who observe it happening between coworkers (Porath, MacInnis, & Folkes, 2010). Bowes-Sperry and O'Leary-Kelly (2005) expressly addressed observers' reactions to sexual harassment (a relatively rare focus on observers in conceptual workplace aggression research literature), but the reactions they focused on were observers' interventions rather than more immediate blame attributions. Hershcovis et al. (2017) empirically studied observers' interventions in workplace incivility, but the blame attributions that must surely precede intervention were not part of that research.

Spreading blame via observers' conjunctive attributions

The foregoing examples show that some research on observers' reactions to workplace mistreatment has emerged, but we and others note that observers' immediate cognitive reactions, chiefly in the form of attributions, have generally not played a central role in these efforts. For our purposes, attributions are observers' inferences, or judgments, of causes of the workplace mistreatment they see or hear about (Kelley, 1973). Because workplace mistreatment violates workplace norms in a negative way, often surprisingly and even shockingly, observers are more apt to make immediate attributions for the misbehavior as part of their sensemaking and psychological efforts to maintain a sense of control and predictability of their environment (Kelley, 1972; Lagnado & Channon, 2008; Weiner, 1985). Causal locus (i.e., whether the observed misbehavior's cause is internal to the actor [personality, disposition, etc.] or external to the actor [situation, environmental forces, etc.]) is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of a causal attribution and is certainly the most researched (Harvey, Madison, Martinko, Crook, & Crook, 2014; Weiner, 1985). A causal attribution for workplace mistreatment is, in turn, especially likely to trigger immediate responsibility and blame attribution(s) that will be consistent with the locus (or loci) of causal attribution (Lane, 2000; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 1995). Blame signifies the observer's inference of both causal responsibility and intentional, voluntary, controllable mistreatment that is not explained away by mitigating circumstances, excuses, or justifications (Alicke, 2000; Kulik & Brown, 1979; Lagnado & Channon, 2008; Malle, 2011; Shaver, 1985) or by the actor's expressions of remorse (Haggard & Park, 2018). Blame also typically sparks the observer's anger, and Weiner (1995) held that blame is a blend of

angry emotion and attributional cognition (cf. Averill, 1983).

Observers' attributions—both their immediate causal attributions and their related blame attributions—have been too often ignored in organizational research (Harvey et al., 2014; Martinko, Harvey, & Dasborough, 2011). Schilpzand et al. (2016) made this point as well with regard to workplace incivility victims' attributions, but extending their and others' prescriptions to observers' attributions is both logical and important since blame attributions are potent mediators of workplace mistreatment's link to observers' attitudinal, emotional, coping, and behavioral reactions (Becker, Conroy, Djurdjevic, & Gross, 2018; Hershcovis, 2011; Martinko et al., 2002, 2011; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). In addition to being consistent with the engendering causal attribution's locus, blame will also be consistent with the observer's assessment of the cause's (whether a condition or the mistreatment itself) controllability, another key dimension of causal attribution (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005; Weiner, 1995).

Although relatively rare, examples of organizational research involving observers' attributions, even for workplace mistreatment in a few cases, do exist. One study that focused on them was Fragale, Rosen, Xu, and Merideth's (2009) study and finding of how observers attribute more intentionality for wrongdoing when the offender is relatively high in occupational status. Martinko, Douglas, Ford, and Gundlach (2004) theorized that an observer's reaction to a surprising or unexpected award to someone includes forming an impression of whether the awardee is deserving (i.e., has "paid his or her dues"), and that this impression formation is mediated by attributions. Becker et al. (2018) also studied attribution-mediated impression formation, focusing on observers' impressions of a coworker's workplace crying and noting that an external locus of attribution could identify as causal any coworkers who mistreated the crying employee. In another relatively rare treatment of observers' reactions, Geddes and Callister's (2007) dual threshold model of workplace anger expression included observers' attributions. This model holds that anger expressions at work can exceed a threshold of acceptability imposed by a workplace norm for such emotion displays. Observers of such threshold violations will typically deem the anger display as deviant, and this reaction is associated with a dispositional, or internal, attribution of the anger's cause to the angry actor's disposition, personality, and the like.

That Geddes and Callister (2007) and so many others focused on the locus of the observer's attribution is not surprising, nor is a very frequent research focus on internal locus of attribution surprising in light of the correspondence bias, or "fundamental

attribution error" (Gilbert, 1998), that has been so fruitfully and heavily researched for decades. What concerns us and others, however, is how so much attribution theory research has rather simplistically focused on a *single* cause and an "either-or" sort of approach to attributional locus that typically views the attribution as either situational or dispositional, but not both (Abelson, Leddo, & Gross, 1987; Leddo, Abelson, & Gross, 1984; McClure, 1998). Granted, this may accord well with Kelley's (1972) "discounting principle," which holds that "the role of a given cause in producing a given effect is discounted if other plausible causes are also present" (Kelley, 1973, p. 113). Many researchers have interpreted the discounting principle to signify that people often tend toward identifying a single cause in their attributions (Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; Kelley, 1973; Leddo et al., 1984), yet many researchers have also noted that *multiple* causes may be relevant, both independently and jointly, to an observer's attributions for an event or someone's behavior (Abelson et al., 1987; Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2011; Kelley, 1973; Leddo et al., 1984; McClure, 1998; White, 1991).

As Abelson et al. (1987) noted, discounting certainly can occur, but that does not mean that the discounted explanation is rendered meaningless to causal explanation; it may still, in conjunction with a presumably "stronger" cause or causes, be quite relevant to making sense of observed behavior. Furthermore, these conjunctive causes can certainly be of both attributional loci, as empirical evidence has shown that "there is nothing special about the competition between dispositional and situational attributions that creates a trade-off between them" (Abelson et al., 1987, p. 151; McClure, 1998; Nestler & von Collani, 2008). Identifying an internal cause for observed workplace mistreatment does not preclude also identifying an external cause for that same mistreatment incident, and such a jointly causal explanation is by no means self-contradictory or illogical (Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; McClure, 1998; White, 1991). Furthermore, perceiving multiple causes for witnessed workplace aggression is common (Bennett & Lehman, 1996). Although experimental research was certainly appropriate for studying single-cause attributions, we think applications of attribution theory to organizational behavior in uncontrolled (relative to laboratories) workplace settings, replete with simultaneous, interacting influences and effects in both individuals and contexts, must deal with observers' attributions to the multiple causes for workplace mistreatment and other behavioral phenomena.

Research on "the conjunction effect" and multicause "conjunctive explanations" for events and behavior is especially relevant to our sense that multiple causes matter in observers' causal attributions for workplace mistreatment and, thus, also matter in observers' blame for the mistreatment. The conjunction effect in attribution occurs when people show a preference for two or more relevant causes (versus only one) in explaining how and why an event or some observed person's behavior occurred (Abelson et al., 1987; McClure, 1998; McClure, Lalljee, Jaspars, & Abelson, 1989; Nestler & von Collani, 2008; Read, 1988; Zuckerman, Eghrari, & Lambrecht, 1986). Interest in the conjunction effect arose in response to early studies of the "conjunction fallacy," a supposedly erroneous judgment that experimental participants often made in which they estimated the probability of two conjoint causes to be greater than either constituent cause's probability, a mathematical impossibility (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983). Researchers have found conjunction effects to be robust to many combinations of causes, varying by sufficiency and necessity for the observed effect to have occurred. People often show a clear preference for multiple causes (conjunctive explanation) when explaining how and why an event happened, so much so that it is now more often called the "conjunction effect," as "conjunction fallacy" suggests some error in people's thinking, yet multiple, simultaneous causes are quite plausible for many events (Abelson et al., 1987; Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; Leddo et al., 1984). This conjunction effect occurs not only for attributions to two different internal causes (e.g., neuroticism and male sex as the conjunctive explanation for a specific workplace aggression incident) or two different external causes (e.g., rigid workplace rules and an abusive boss as the conjunctive explanation for the incident), but also for combinations of internal and external causes (e.g., neuroticism and male sex and rigid workplace rules and an abusive boss as the conjunctive explanation for the incident; Abelson et al., 1987; McClure et al., 1989).

We note that researchers studying the conjunction effect have described and operationalized observers' causal attributions as causal "explanations." Applying this to observers' reactions to workplace mistreatment, explanations are reflective of the conversational, "storytelling" kind of way an observer would describe subjective reasons, intentions, and enabling factors in a workplace mistreatment incident if asked why the incident happened (Abelson et al., 1987; Malle, 2011). Such explanations signify that observers will infer how the workplace mistreatment incident occurred and, in so doing, make specific attributions across multiple causes (Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; Ahn, Kalish, Medin, & Gelman, 1995; Zuckerman et al., 1986).

Theoretical explanation for conjunctive explanations emphasizes the function of the observer's "knowledge structures," or causal schemata for workplace mistreatment, that the observer matches to facts of the mistreatment incident. The observer infers an explanatory "mechanism" (a feature of the event that has causal force; Ahn et al., 1995) that underlies and links multiple factors in the incident that fit the schematic causes, and then essentially forms a coherent mental account or story explaining the workplace mistreatment (Costello, 2007; Leddo et al., 1984; Nestler & von Collani, 2008; Read, 1988). The explanatory mechanism permits the observer to, as necessary, "read into" the workplace mistreatment incident various causal assumptions, apparent reasons for actors' behaviors, and multicausal processes for the sake of sensemaking and causal inference (Ahn & Bailenson, 1996; Ahn et al., 1995; Costello, 2007; Malle, 2011). Thus, when two or more causal factors or conditions are logically (to the attributor) linked in their covariation with the workplace mistreatment by a schematically supported, underlying mechanism, the observer will prefer and use a conjunctive explanation for the incident.

We stated earlier that who and what the observer blames for workplace mistreatment will be consistent with the observer's causal attributions for the mistreatment. Given that the observer will likely make conjunctive causal attributions, the observer may assign blame of one degree or another to any and all relevant entities (the misbehaving employee, the victimized employee, the supervisor, and the organization in general). This is because the observer's schema for workplace mistreatment and associated explanatory mechanism relevant to a given incident's apparent causal factors may readily include the perpetrator, the victim, and elements of the workplace context (boss, policies, physical working conditions, company culture, and so forth). The observer will judge each causal entity's responsibility, intentionality, volition, control, excuses, and justifications in fixing blame (Shaver, 1985). Although some researchers, in emphasizing the internal/external, either-or aspects of attribution, may have forgotten the fundamental lesson that both situational and individual factors drive motivated behavior (Lewin, 1936), we are confident that most observers' commonsense explanations and blame for workplace mistreatment reflect Lewin's insight.

For instance, suppose the observer has just witnessed incivility between two coworkers who swapped insults. If the observer's underlying explanatory mechanism is demeaning rudeness on the job, then the combination of both the actors' temperaments and the workplace's climate for incivility can be the seemingly best causal explanation to be then subjected to assessments of responsibility, intent, controllability, and so forth. Blame can go to both the employees and the company. Blame labels the mistreatment as socially objectionable or morally wrong (Alicke, 2000), and all parties with an apparent hand in the mistreatment can be deemed blameworthy.

We acknowledge that if the constituent causes are each unlikely relative to the mistreatment event or extremely independent of each other, or if things simply seem very ambiguous, the observer may not be able to form an explanatory mechanism or tap a schema that coherently relates the causes. In that case, a single-cause explanation is more likely (McClure, 1998). The observers we are concerned with in this essay, though, are not simply naive, casual third parties who are only vaguely aware of the mistreatment and its workplace context. They are in and part of the workplace mistreatment context; they are coworkers of both the perpetrator and the victim. Their schemata of workplace features, including mistreatment, are relatively well informed by insider knowledge and *in situ* experience. Thus, these observers are much more likely to sense any organizational, procedural, or supervisory role played in the mistreatment and logically combine that with whatever personalistic truth seems evident about the actors (both perpetrator and target; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005) in conjunctively explaining the mistreatment, analyzing intentionality and controllability, and subsequently assigning blame.

We also stated earlier that the organization is unlikely to escape blameless for workplace mistreatment. In addition to conjunctive causal attributions that may position the organization for blame, we also note that blame processes can expose the organization to blameworthiness. In Weiner's (1995) model of blame, the perpetrator's perceived control over any harm inflicted may be qualified by assessment of mitigating circumstances. In Shaver's (1985) model, even if the perpetrator is deemed to have deliberately and knowingly violated a social norm or moral rule, blame is not fixed until excuses and justifications are assessed. Furthermore, Shaver's (1985) model recognizes that observers may perceive multiple causes for workplace mistreatment and its ill effects (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Research has identified many organizational factors that influence workplace aggression either through failing to remediate situations or through creating pressures on employees that push them toward mistreating someone. These can be precisely the mitigating circumstances and bases used for excuses and justifications that, while perhaps reducing blame for involved employees, focus some of the observer's blame on the organization for the workplace mistreatment.

Most of the research on blame in organizational settings has focused on blame of the person directly doing the harm and essentially reflects the classic actor-observer and correspondence bias paradigms of traditional attribution theory. For instance, Tripp and Bies (2010) described the blame involved when victims of workplace mistreatment get righteously angry and vengeful, but their description of related attributions treats attributional locus as narrow and internal to the harmdoer. Nothing precludes expanding Tripp and Bies's blame, anger, and revenge processes and assessments, including intentionality and selfishness attributions, in accordance with a more conjunctive causal attribution by an observer, however.

Alicke's (2000) culpable control model of blame, while not limited to workplace mistreatment, likewise focuses singly on the harmdoer and an either-or slant on causal attribution's locus. This model may be fruitfully applied to conjunctive explanations for workplace mistreatment, however, as observers may deem the organization both a cause and to have some form of control over its own actions and policies, as well as over the harmdoer's actions. The model regards control in terms of freedom to act deliberately in either creating or avoiding outcomes and holds that constraints on behaviors or related outcomes diminish personal control. Thus, whether the organization is deemed to have actively promoted conditions leading to the mistreatment or to have, for instance, constrained victims from being able to protect themselves, the organization may be blameworthy in observers' eyes for not exercising control under the model's notion of causal control and contributing to harmful, foreseeable outcomes (Alicke, 2000; Lagnado & Channon, 2008).

Assuming that the observer's assessment of culpable control can be directed at the company as well as any human actors in a mistreatment incident, we must acknowledge that the company may be faulted for not exercising control. Observers may understand how losing one's temper may diminish one's self-control and how being weaker in status or power (as subordinates are in abusive supervision incidents) diminishes the target's personal control and ability to avoid the mistreatment. Observers may not agree with the company's claim to uncontrollability, however. Instead, the observers may hold that the company and its supervisors design, run, and control the workplace (Gibson & Schroeder, 2003), so any claims to the contrary can seem disingenuous. Thus, the target may get blamed for being an annoying bother or underperforming slacker who deserved to be mistreated or who did not do enough to avoid being harmed (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). The uncivil or aggressive employee may get blamed for being a jerk or for having lousy manners. The company also may be blamed for operating an environment that brought the focal dyad together, that hired the aggressor in the first place, that ignored past incivility and eventually created an uncivil climate and foreseeable trouble, and so forth. Furthermore, the company's role in the incident may be seen as definitely part of the underlying explanatory mechanism, for anger and abusiveness and deservingness are all more likely animated when the boss and company climate for incivility promote them through both action and inaction.

By now it should be clear that a key implication of conjunctive causal attributions feeding blame attributions is that the organization does not escape some blame by observers unless it is extremely clear in its condemnation of workplace mistreatment and extremely successful at eradicating most mistreatment. Most organizations simply are not that way. Managers almost never can count on simplistic notions of actor-observer biases and fundamental attribution error securing the company a free pass while observers focus only on vilifying aggressive, uncivil actors or, in some cases, castigating targets who just seemed really deserving of some mistreatment. If managers do not want the company blamed by observers and their social networks, they need to ensure that the company cannot be seen as contributing to the common, underlying explanatory mechanism that is the basis for the observer's selection or weighting of plausible causal factors. Two or three plausible factors that map on to the same explanatory mechanism will win out over a single, purely dispositional/internal explanation. Managers cannot bet on observers' discounting one cause in favor of a more salient, actor-based cause when, in fact, both actor-based and situation-based factors may logically combine to explain why the mistreatment occurred and, therefore, what factors deserve blame. Hoping the observers will look in a different direction did not work for the Wizard of Oz, and it will not work for organizational leaders, either. There is plenty of blame to go around, and observers will typically get around to questioning the company's culture, policies, hiring decisions, leadership, and so forth, delivering some of the blame to the firm.

Going forward

The usual prescriptions for countering workplace mistreatment with zero-tolerance policies, training, proper employee selection, and culture management (Estes & Wang, 2008; Mack et al., 1998; Pearson et al., 2000) all still apply, but for a more fundamental reason than

factors most research articles cite, factors that could be addressed if managers better understood how coworkers reason when they first witness workplace mistreatment. Thus, we recommend researchers desist from trying to promulgate the next overlapping construct in the spectrum, get more serious about the "O" in OB (the workplace social context that includes coworkers who observe and react to the ugly behavior), expressly incorporate observers' reactions in models, and consider how observers' conjunctive causal ascription and associated blame attributions fit into those models. We are echoing Martinko et al. (2011) in calling for more research on attribution in organizational science, and we cannot help but wonder how much research that has related workplace mistreatment to interactional justice perceptions, targets' stress and coping reactions, leader–member exchange quality, attributional style's moderating influence, and so forth could be expanded upon by knowing conjunctive causal attribution and blame's roles in those effects.

Future research must be more sensitive to observers' ability to attribute workplace mistreatment to multiple causes, both internal and external in locus. It should test to see whether conjunction effects in causal attribution indeed do translate into blame of multiple entities, to include the organization, as we suspect is likely. It should also compare these effects throughout the spectrum of workplace mistreatment because although responsibility, intentionality, foreseeability of harm, and controllability are readily inferred when workplace violence occurs (Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005), the blame waters are much muddier on the incivility end of the spectrum. What intrigues us greatly is how observers' blaming works when the mistreatment involved is workplace incivility, particularly. If a bumbling oaf with poor social skills insults a coworker, intentionality may certainly be doubted, as the incivility research suggests, but even the oaf's self-control over his or her offensive conduct may be in question, especially over multiple instances of insults. Furthermore, even if coworkers do not blame the offender in this example, should the organization accept no responsibility in the situation and make no effort to reduce the benign, yet disruptive, incivility for the sake of undistracted productivity and smoother employee relations? Observers may well think the organization is obligated to act.

In any case, workplace aggression that is more intense and injurious is more likely to spur attributional reasoning than mere coworker incivility. At the same time, the question arises of when observer attributions are likely, given variable intensity and contexts of workplace mistreatment. More than any other kind of mistreatment in the spectrum of negative behaviors

we described earlier, workplace incivility poses the most likelihood of being blameless due to its ambiguity regarding intentionality. Research that teases apart more benign, unintentional incivility from more deliberate, malevolent incivility would be useful, as would be study of the conditions under which observer perceptions about the incivility change. Does workplace incivility that is initially regarded as unintentional and benign eventually become regarded as intentional and blameworthy after several instances of corrective feedback? Just how patient are coworkers with this? Does a rude or aggressive employee's expression of remorse, excuse, or justification really reduce observers' blaming and promote forgiveness, or are observers comfortable with both fully blaming and forgiving?

We should also mention blame's connection to observer anger, as we applaud the recent increase in research on workplace emotions. Observers' causal attributions and blame attributions for workplace mistreatment are fundamental reactions that tend to be more immediate than, for instance, related stress reactions, attitude formation, and job performance effects, all of which will typically be consistent with blame attributions. Perhaps only observers' emotional reactions may be as immediate as their causal and blame attributions for workplace mistreatment, and Averill (1983) even defined the anger emotion as equivalent to an attribution of blame. Blame has been found to mediate the link between victims' perceptions of the instigator's intentions and anger (Quigley & Tedeschi, 1996). Combining this with long-recognized actor-observer asymmetry effects (Malle, 2006) and "similar to me" effects of defensive attribution suggests that observers' blame attributions may also influence their anger, especially when the observer empathizes with the victim and is similar to the victim, with all the implications holding for both attribution- and emotion-consistent subsequent reactions (Becker et al., 2018; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Defensive attribution may result in less anger toward the perpetrator, however, when the observer and the perpetrator are similar or in the same in-group (Malle, 2006; Skarlicki & Kulik, 2005). Continued research on blame's connection to observers' anger is warranted.

We also think researchers should look more closely at observers' reactions to firsthand versus secondhand information about workplace mistreatment. Points made about contagion, network, and gossip effects (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson et al., 2000) accurately serve to define relevant observers and third parties as both those who are firsthand eyewitnesses and those who secondhand hear or read about workplace mistreatment. We must remember, though,

that the observers who get their information second-hand will be influenced by the ones telling them of the event. They form perceptions of perceptions, whereas observers who see the incident firsthand have a potentially more factual, less filtered basis for causal and blame inference. The secondhand observers may be even more likely to blame the organization because (a) they may deliberate a bit more to consider whether critical causal information or event description, filtered and relayed by the firsthand observer, is complete and accurate (Malle, 2011), and (b) the perpetrator's behavior is not as salient and field-engulfing to them as it is to the firsthand observer.

We mentioned earlier the need to get more serious about the social context of observers' reactions to workplace mistreatment. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, this prescription likewise applies to the broader workplace context that is socially experienced. For instance, consider the influence on firsthand and secondhand observers we just described of workplace factors such as deadline pressures, technology-mediated collaboration requirements across long distances, occupational safety hazards, degree of contact with customers or the general public, layoffs and changes done in response to technology developments or stubborn decline of the firm's industry, reward practices, mergers, firm structure and formalization, and work task complexity, among many others. Such contextual factors must surely moderate the relationship between workplace mistreatment and observers' conjunctive attributions. Future moderator and multilevel research should include these influences.

Finally, if observers' external blame attributions are valid, what does this say for the organization's culture? That is, where is the behavior-shaping norming effect of culture when the organization really needs it most? Is something being lost in the translation when it comes to the culture proscribing and prescribing employee behavior? Or is the societal climate of incivility of which Porath recently spoke inevitably destined to permeate organizational culture and norms? Research addressing these questions would be useful. More ominous is the possibility that the culture, regardless of organizational leaders' pronouncements and core value statements, promotes the very kinds of thoughtless, rude interpersonal incivility and harmful aggression described in research. Certainly, the notion of enacted versus espoused organizational culture and values is not new or fantasy, and we know employees are not clueless about the workplace's enacted culture, climate for cooperative work, deference to abusive supervisors, and so on. Thus, observers' blame for workplace mistreatment may be predictably split in its focus, lighting upon the organization with all the

resulting attribution-consistent behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal dysfunctions and decrements attending this fundamental cognition.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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