Emotional anguish at work: The mediating role of perceived rejection on workgroup mistreatment and affective outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the growing body of literature which examines the mistreatment of employees by fellow organisational members in the workplace. The authors proposed and tested the hypotheses that perceived rejection would mediate the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and affective outcomes. One hundred and forty two part time working participants took part in the study which required them to complete a questionnaire on workplace behaviours. The results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses indicated that perceived rejection mediates the relationship between mistreatment by the workgroup and depression, and mistreatment by the workgroup and self esteem. The practical implications and future research directions of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Choice behaviour, interpersonal behaviour, group dynamics, emotions

In today’s workplace it is not uncommon to hear reports of organisational members directing mistreatment towards one another (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004). In fact, a study of over 300 American workers revealed that at least half of them had reported experiencing some form of mistreatment within a 3 year period at their organisation (Ehrlich, Larcom & Purvis, 1994). Despite its prevalence, it has not been until recently that the organisational psychology literature has begun to examine mistreatment in the workplace. This research has demonstrated that certain events that occur in the organisational setting can trigger reactions and change behaviours in employees (for example, Britt, Dickson, Moore, Castro & Alder, 2007; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Under this rubric, researchers have examined a variety of behaviours. For example, supervisors engage in hostile verbal and nonverbal actions towards their subordinates (Tepper, 2000). They bully employees by treating them as incompetent and blame them for another’s errors (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Organisational members are even reported to engage in long term behaviours with the intent to hinder the work success, interpersonal relationships and reputation of other employees (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002). Not surprisingly, this form of mistreatment can impact negatively on both employees and the
organisation as a whole (Ashforth, 1997; Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994). For the purpose of this paper, the term workplace mistreatment will encompass a variety of workplace behaviours from bullying (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006) and mobbing (Leymann 1996), to social undermining (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002) and abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000).

Despite the negative impact of workplace mistreatment, little research has examined how these outcomes occur. The underlying psychological processes that occur within the employee as a result of the above workplace mistreatment have been neglected. The present study aims to examine one of these psychological processes. A key argument of this paper is that one common factor that underlies mistreatment directed from one employee towards another is the perception of rejection by the receiver of the treatment. This paper aims to demonstrate that this perception of rejection can occur as a result of workplace mistreatment directed by a supervisor towards an employee. This paper will also specifically examine the perception of rejection that occurs when workplace mistreatment is directed by the workgroup. Traditionally, the literature examines the poor treatment of one organisational member to another from the dyadic perspective of a supervisor to an employee (e.g., Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Far less attention has been directed towards the role of the employee’s workgroup (Bruk-Lee & Spector, 2006). The present paper will go beyond this traditionally examined relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate, and examine the impact of mistreatment when it is direction from one employee to another in a workgroup setting.

**Theoretical Background**

*Workplace mistreatment.* The mistreatment of employees in the workplace continues to receive increased attention in the literature (for example, Baron & Neuman, 1996; Bies, Tripp & Kramer, 1997; Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997). The occurrence of such harmful treatment has been demonstrated to decrease organisational effectiveness and harm the organisation and its members (Bennett, 1998; Sheppard, Lewicki & Minot, 1992). Behaviours of this nature impact upon employee stress, increase turnover and absenteeism, and decrease employee morale (Duffy et al., 2002; Kennedy, Homant & Homant, 2004; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). More specifically, the research has demonstrated that employees who are the victim of workplace mistreatment directed from their
supervisor often experience negative affective outcomes as a result of the treatment. Employees who experience this form of mistreatment often report higher levels of psychological distress and depression (Ashforth, 1997; Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994; Spector & Jex, 1998).

As previously noted, a large amount of the literature investigating mistreatment in the workplace tends to focus on the overall behaviours directed by the supervisor towards the employee as a key driver of employees’ affective reactions. There has been little attempt to examine the outcomes that result when an employee is mistreated by a fellow workgroup member. The present study aims to contribute to the emerging literature concerning the significant role of the workgroup in shaping outcomes for the employee. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that individuals define themselves on the basis of membership in groups, so that group membership and acceptance are important determinants of well-being and positivity. The present study theorises that mistreatment from the workgroup will be associated with negative affective outcomes, controlling for mistreatment from a supervisor. Specifically, the present study anticipates that mistreatment that derives from a workgroup member will be associated with higher depression and lower levels of organisational based self esteem in the recipient.

Hypothesis 1a: Workgroup mistreatment will be associated with depression, controlling for supervisory mistreatment.

Hypothesis 1b: Workgroup mistreatment will be associated with lower organisational based self esteem, controlling for supervisory mistreatment.

The Role of Rejection. As well as demonstrating the important role of the workgroup in employee outcomes, the present study also aims to examine the underlying psychological processes that occur within the employee as a result of mistreatment. It is proposed that one of the key processes involved is perceived rejection. A large body of research has investigated the impact of rejection in the social and developmental settings, with rejection defined as being excluded from or devalued by a
desired person, group or relationship (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Research on rejection has consistently demonstrated its association with negative affective outcomes including depression (Coie, Terry, Zakriski & Lochman, 1995), feelings of unworthiness (Craighead, Kimball & Rehak, 1979), loneliness (Jones, 1990) and decreased self esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, to date, only limited research has investigated rejection in the organisational setting.

In the sole study to date, Hitlan, Kelly, Schepman, Schneider and Zarate (2006) demonstrated that participants rejected by their workgroup were less likely to want to remain at the organisation, were less emotionally attached than accepted participants, had lower overall organisational commitment and were less likely to engage in beneficial organisational citizenship behaviours. Whilst this research is promising, it has focused only on the organisational level outcomes of rejection. Further, the study utilised a hypothetical scenario, did not control for supervisor behaviour and did not examine the negative affective outcomes of rejection that have been consistently demonstrated in the social setting. Therefore, there is a continuing need to examine to impact of rejection the organisational context.

Based on the definition that rejection involves being excluded from or devalued by a desired person, group or relationship (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), the present paper argues that the experience of workplace mistreatment may lead an employee to feel devalued by the source of mistreatment. Whether it be a supervisor or a fellow workgroup member, a positive relationship is often desired. An employee who is experiencing mistreatment may not feel valued by the source of the mistreatment, leading to the perception of such behaviour as rejection. The present paper aims to further investigate the role of the workgroup by examining its effect in the context of mistreatment in triggering perceptions of rejection. A key focus of this paper is to test the hypothesis that the perception of rejection when an employee experiences mistreatment is a psychological process that mediates the link between mistreatment and negative affective outcomes.

Hypothesis 2a. Perceived rejection will mediate the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression.
Hypothesis 2b. Perceived rejection will mediate the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and organisational based self esteem.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and forty two part time working participants took part in the study. Participants received either compensation (n = 79), or course credit (n = 63) in exchange for their participation. Ninety six females and 44 males participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 47 years, with a mean age of 19.90 years and a standard deviation of 4.49 years. Participants had worked an average of 17.51 hours with a standard deviation of 9.29 hours per week.

Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional design. The independent variables were workplace mistreatment by the supervisor and workplace mistreatment by the workgroup. The dependent variables were depression and organisational based self esteem. The participants’ perceptions of rejection were also measured as a potential mediator.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via a large Australian university, receiving either course credit or monetary compensation for their participation. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, participants were provided with an introductory sheet informing them of study requirements. Questionnaires were administered, counter balanced either to present measures of workgroup mistreatment followed by supervisory mistreatment or the reverse. Participants were required to read the questionnaire and answer the questions. Participants were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary, they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and that their results were confidential. Participants were then thanked and debriefed by the experimenter.
**Materials**

_Workplace mistreatment._ As previously mentioned, a large amount of research has assessed the outcomes of mistreatment that is directed from a supervisor towards an employee. Previous research and pre established scales were therefore combined to create a measure of workplace mistreatment by the supervisor (Duffy et al., 2002; Einaresen, 2000; Leymann, 1996; Tepper, 2000). Workplace mistreatment by the workgroup was measured on the same 35 item scale as supervisor mistreatment, replacing the word ‘supervisor’ with ‘colleagues’ (for example, “My boss/colleagues make me feel incompetent”). In each case, participants reported how often they experienced the listed behaviours on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very often). The 35 item measure of supervisory mistreatment and the 35 item measure of workgroup mistreatment both yielded high reliabilities of $\alpha = .869$ and $\alpha = .846$ respectively.

_Depression._ Ten items were used to assess depressive symptoms as psychological stressors. These items were adapted from Santor and Coyne’s (1997) depression as a symptom of distress scale (for example, “To what extent did you have trouble keeping your mind on things?”). Participants were required to rate how often they had experienced such depressive symptoms on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very often). The 10 item measure of depression yielded a good reliability of $\alpha = .798$.

_Self esteem._ Seven items (derived from Pierce, Gardner, Cummings and Dunham, 1989) were used to assess organisational based self esteem (for example, “To what extent do I feel I count around others at work?”). Participants were asked to report how often they experienced the feelings described by Pierce and colleagues (1989) on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very often). The 7 item measure of organisational based self esteem yielded a high reliability of $\alpha = .869$.

_Perceived rejection._ Four items were used to assess perceived rejection. These items derived from McDonald and Leary’s (2005) definition of rejection, (for example, “I felt excluded” and “I felt rejected”). Participants were asked to report how often they experienced the feelings on a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very often). The 4 item measure of perceived rejection yielded a high reliability of $\alpha = .852$. 
Social desirability. Eight items were used to assess the social desirability of the participants’ responses as a control variable. The items measuring social desirability derived from the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (for example, “Are you always willing to admit when you make a mistake?”). Participants were required to answer either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to a number of such items. Four items were reverse scored. The 8 items measure yielded a moderate reliability of $\alpha = .672$.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 represents the means, standard deviations and inter-correlations amongst the independent variables, dependent variables and the mediator. All correlations supported the predicted directions. The table also indicates no significant correlations between potential covariates (such as gender, age and work experience) and the outcome variables.

INSERT TABLE 1

Preliminary Diagnostics

Prior to the testing of the mediation relationship, inspection of the data revealed no evidence of violations of the assumptions of hierarchical multiple regression. An assessment of the inter-correlations among the independent variables suggested that they were low to moderate and multicollinearity was not a threat (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Further analyses revealed no evidence of multivariate outliers or suppressor variables.

Effects of Workgroup Mistreatment

Workgroup mistreatment predicts perceived rejection. First, the relationship between workgroup mistreatment (the independent variable) and rejection (the proposed mediator) was tested. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between workgroup mistreatment and rejection, $\beta = .391, p < .001$, controlling for supervisory mistreatment ($\beta = .341, p < .001$) and social desirability ($\beta = .050, p = .466$), $F(3,138) = 25.904, R^2 = .360$. Consistent with predictions, rejection was more likely to be perceived when workplace mistreatment was high.
Workgroup mistreatment predicts depression via perceived rejection. The relationship between workgroup mistreatment (the independent variable) and depression (the dependent variable), controlling for supervisory mistreatment and social desirability, was tested in Block 1 of a hierarchical regression analysis with perceived rejection (the potential mediator) entered in Block 2. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression, $\beta = .351$, $p < .001$, when the effect of supervisory mistreatment ($\beta = .384$, $p < .001$) and social desirability ($\beta = -.052$, $p = .441$) were also entered in Block 1, $F_{ch}(3, 138) = 27.227$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{ch} = .372$, $p < .001$. As predicted, depression was more likely to occur when workgroup mistreatment was high. In Block 2, the inclusion of perceived rejection increased the variance accounted for, $F_{ch}(1, 137) = 113.586$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{ch} = .285$, $p < .001$, and a significant positive relationship between perceived rejection and depression was observed, $\beta = .667$, $p < .001$. As predicted, the reduction in the unique contribution of workgroup mistreatment (from $\beta = .351$, $p < .001$, to $\beta = .090$, $p = .130$) when rejection was entered was significant according to a Sobel Test (Preacher & Leonardelli, 2001), $z = 4.774$, $p < .001$. These results suggest a full mediation by rejection of the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression.

Workgroup mistreatment predicts organisational based self esteem via perceived rejection. The relationship between workgroup mistreatment and organisational-based self-esteem was then assessed controlling for supervisory mistreatment and social desirability in Block 1 of a hierarchical regression analysis and perceived rejection in Block 2. The results revealed a significant negative effect of workgroup mistreatment, $\beta = -.204$, $p = .020$, on esteem in Block 1, $F_{ch}(3, 138) = 5.015$, $p = .002$, $R^2_{ch} = .098$, when supervisory mistreatment ($\beta = -.169$, $p = .052$) and social desirability ($\beta = .042$, $p = .604$) were also controlled. Consistent with predictions, decreased organisational based self esteem was more likely when workgroup mistreatment was high. The addition of rejection increased the variance accounted for in Block 2, $F_{ch}(1, 137) = 50.355$, $p < .001$, $R^2_{ch} = .242$, and a significant negative relationship was observed, $\beta = -.615$, $p < .001$. The reduction in the unique effect of workgroup mistreatment (from $\beta = -.204$, $p = .020$, to $\beta = .036$, $p = .660$) when controlling for rejection was significant, $z = 4.278$, $p < .001$. These results support the hypothesis of full mediation by
perceived rejection of the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and organisational based self esteem.

**DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to the growing body of literature which examines the mistreatment of employees by fellow organisational members in the workplace. This study aimed to demonstrate that perceived rejection mediates the relationship between workplace mistreatment, specifically workgroup mistreatment, and affective outcomes. It was hypothesised that workgroup mistreatment will be associated with depression, controlling for supervisory mistreatment. It was also hypothesised that workgroup mistreatment will be associated with lower organisational based self esteem, controlling for supervisory mistreatment. It was also hypothesised that perceived rejection would mediate the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression. Finally, it was hypothesised that perceived rejection would mediate the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and organisational based self esteem. The results of the study supported the hypotheses in every respect.

The finding that workgroup mistreatment contributes to the experience of the affective outcomes of depression and lower self esteem over and above supervisory mistreatment demonstrates the important role of the workgroup in influencing employee emotions at work. This finding goes beyond previous research which focuses on the negative affective outcomes that can result when a supervisor mistreats their employee (for example, Ashforth, 1997; Duffy et al., 2002; Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994). The present research expands this past research beyond the dyadic relationship between a supervisor and an employee and also demonstrates the affective outcomes that can result when an employee is mistreated by a fellow workgroup members, namely increased depression and decreased organisational based self esteem.

On a theoretical level, the present study is also the first to introduce the study of perceived rejection to the workplace. Further, this study was the first to identify the role of rejection as a mediating variable between workplace mistreatment and affective outcomes. The findings revealed that perceived rejection mediates the relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression, and workgroup mistreatment and organisational based self esteem. This finding supports the
hypothesis that perceived rejection acts as one underlying psychological process that is triggered by
the experience of mistreatment in the workplace. This research therefore can pave the way for the
further investigation of perceived rejection in the workplace.

**Practical Implications**

The findings indicate that there is a strong need to do something about the mistreatment of
employees in the workplace. Not only is it important the certain aggressive mistreatment behaviours
such as yelling at, insulting or physically threatening employees be curbed, but it is also important that
the more subtle acts of mistreatment such as giving employees the silent treatment and not giving
credit for hard work also be addressed. This may be achieved by educating supervisors and
organisational members regarding the damaging nature of mistreatment. In addition, members could
be encouraged to embrace interactional justice behaviours such as treating each other with respect,
dignity, kindness and consideration (Bies & Moag, 1986; Donovan, Drasgow and Munson, 1998).
These may act to increase feelings of inclusiveness in the workplace, thereby reducing the negative
emotional affects of mistreatment and perceived rejection.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations of note to the present study. The study was cross-sectional in
nature, and therefore causal inference cannot be made on the basis of the data. However, the results of
the study are encouraging, and can be used as a basis for future experimental studies in this area. A
further limitation is the self report nature of the data collected. Previous research has suggested that
self report data can be subject to socially desirable responses (Gardner & Martinko, 1988). However in
the present study, the relationships of interest held after controlling for social desirability, thus
strengthening its findings. A further limitation may lie around the possible inflation effects due to
common method variance. Researchers suggest that common method variance may result in inflated
correlations between variables that are measured in the same manner. However, some researchers
suggest that common method variance may not be as problematic as first thought (Spector, 2006). A
final limitation of the study was the nature of the sample used. Participants worked part time in their
organisation of reference. As they were not full time employees, the generalisability of the findings to
the larger workforce may be questioned. However, it is important to note that significant results were obtained for these part time workers who worked an average of 17.51 hours per week. Research has suggested that full time workers and part time workers differ in their attitudes towards work (e.g. Markey, Hodgkinson & Kowalczyk, 2002), therefore, part time workers may not be as strongly committed to their work as full time workers. As a result, we would expect to see stronger, more significant results when full time workers are examined in future research, since time exposure to mistreatment and vulnerability to rejection may be stronger.

**Future Research**

There are a variety of directions that future research may consider. Firstly, future research may wish to establish a causal relationship between the variables identified in the present study. The present study was able to demonstrate a relationship between workgroup mistreatment and depression and organisational based self esteem, and also the mediating role of perceived rejection on workgroup mistreatment and affective outcomes. Future research may employ the use of longitudinal designs to demonstrate a causal relationship between the variables.

Future research may also look to examine other outcomes of workplace mistreatment and perceived rejection, such as behavioural outcomes. Previous research has demonstrated that workplace mistreatment often results in negative behavioural outcomes such as aggression and increases in workplace deviant behaviours (for example, Robinson & Bennett, 1998; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). Furthermore, the social psychological research on rejection has also indicated that a rejection individual often reacts behaviourally to the rejection, for example, by responding by working harder on tasks, or even by aggression (Twenge, Beaumeister, Tice & Stucke, 2001; Williams & Sommer, 1997). Therefore, future research may also look to expand to examine behavioural outcomes (for example, aggression and ingratiation) as well as affective outcomes of workplace mistreatment and perceived rejection.

Finally, future research may look to examine the moderating effect of situational and individual difference variables on workplace mistreatment, perceived rejection and also affective and
behavioural outcomes. Researched based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) suggests that people often look to others as a guide of how to behave in certain situations and environments and model this behaviour (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998). Therefore, when experiencing mistreatment, an employee may look to others in their organisation as a guide of how to respond to the situation. As a result, we would expect organisational norms to moderate the relationships examined in the present study. Furthermore, an individual’s response to mistreatment may be influenced by their individual personality traits. For example, traits such as hostile attribution bias may influence the outcome of mistreatment and perceived rejection. Hostile attribution bias refers to the tendency of a person to interpret events in a hostile light (Dodge & Coie, 1987). Research investigating hostile attribution bias has indicated that people high on this trait tend to interpret events, even neutral events in a hostile way, and therefore often respond in a more negative manner (Douglas & Martinko, 2001). Therefore, we would anticipate a moderating effect of hostile attribution bias on the relationships examined in the present study. These are all areas that may be explored by future research.

**Conclusion**

The mistreatment of employees is becoming common in today’s workforce. However, the majority of research investigating this type of behaviour focuses on the outcomes of the mistreatment, ignoring the underlying psychological processes that occur as a result of the experience. The present research demonstrated that one underlying psychological process that occurs when an employee experiences workplace mistreatment is perceived rejection. Further, the research investigating mistreatment in the workplace tends of focus on the consequences when this mistreatment occurs from a supervisor towards an employee. The role of the workgroup as a source of mistreatment has been largely overlooked. The present researched examined this relationship and demonstrated that workgroup mistreatment results in increased depression and decreased self esteem and that these relationships are mediated by perceived rejection.
REFERENCES


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Table 1.  
*Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations between the covariates and outcomes variables.*

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* p < .05  
** p < .001