NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THIRD PARTY
PERCEPTIONS OF MISTREATMENT

By
WARREN LEE COOK

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Carson College of Business
JULY 2019

© Copyright by WARREN LEE COOK, 2019
All Rights Reserved
To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of WARREN LEE COOK find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

__________________________
Kristine Kuhn, Ph.D., Chair

__________________________
Leah Sheppard, Ph.D.

__________________________
Thomas Tripp, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to begin by acknowledging the support from my committee. Kristine Kuhn, the chair of my committee, has provided me with a wealth of professional advice, guidance in research, and assistance in navigating the job market. Her support has allowed me to develop foundational research skills, reach my professional goals, and start on the career that I entered this program to pursue. Tom Tripp has been my mentor since my time taking his courses as an undergraduate student and has been more influential than anyone else in developing my interest in organizational behavior and encouraging me to pursue a doctoral degree. From lending books to me as an undergraduate, to providing career advice, to sharing his teaching materials, he has deeply informed the way that I approach academia. Leah Sheppard has been an outstanding research collaborator, helping in the development of research ideas that have served as the core of my dissertation, and providing a wealth of valuable feedback that has helped me improve as a researcher. Our work together has produced two papers accepted to the Academy of Management Annual Meeting, two of the three papers in my dissertation, multiple projects in progress, and numerous research ideas that will provide the foundation for future projects. As a whole, my committee has been extremely supportive throughout my time at Washington State University and I could not have asked for a better team of mentors.

Next, I would like to acknowledge the assistance I have received from several other colleagues and faculty I have met at Washington State University: Jerry Goodstein and Joseph Cote, for recommending me to the PhD program at Washington State University and providing advice during my time in the program. Ken Butterfield, for helping me navigate the PhD program and providing me with the opportunity to collaborate on research. Natalie Liberman, for
highly valuable work as a coauthor on the third paper of this dissertation. Ron Moser and Deborah Compeau, for incredibly valuable advice and coaching that has prepared me for my career as an educator. Craig Parks, for challenging my initial assumptions about the social sciences and encouraging me to think more critically about its premises. Don Dillman, for helping me develop advanced knowledge of survey methods. Joyce Ehrlinger, for the opportunity to engage with the field of social psychology and for feedback on research ideas. And finally, Arvin Sahaym, for guidance in the PhD program and professional advice.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous amount of support that my family has provided throughout my education. My mother, Gloria Cook, has provided immeasurable support throughout my time in college, gone far out of her way to help with more than could be reasonably expected, and has provided feedback and proofreading on many of my papers (including this one). My father, Terry Cook, has worked hard to ensure my opportunity to obtain multiple college degrees, and has helped support my career in numerous ways over the years. Rudy Tschernich, my late godfather, was also highly supportive of my education, and it is unfortunate that he unable to witness the completion of my doctoral degree. Finally, I would like to thank my partner Camille for her support throughout my experience in graduate school, and for accompanying me onto the next stage of my career.
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THIRD PARTY
PERCEPTIONS OF MISTREATMENT

Abstract

by Warren Lee Cook, Ph.D.
Washington State University
July 2019

Chair: Kristine Kuhn

This three-essay dissertation investigates how the experience of witnessing workplace mistreatment (e.g. incivility, injustice) influences the perceptions and behaviors of third-party observers. I also explore how the influence of observing mistreatment varies based on individual differences (e.g. social identity, conception of morality) among third parties. To examine this phenomenon, I have developed a theoretical model and conducted two empirical studies.

The first essay is a theoretical work in which I propose that when third parties witness mistreatment and do nothing, the cognitive mechanisms often employed to resolve internal conflict are likely to have lasting effects on the way that third parties perceive future mistreatment in their environment. These effects are likely to be associated with behavioral changes that perpetuate a pattern of mistreatment and potentially allow for mistreatment to intensify. Furthermore, I suggest that rationalization is more likely to take place given a status difference between victim and instigator, and when social identity is shared between the observer and victim.
The second essay examines how third-party evaluation of work-related consequences for off-duty behavior is influenced by the third party’s idiosyncratic prioritization of fundamental moral values. This study finds that when a person is fired for violating a specific moral value, the extent to which the third party is sensitive to the violated value predicts the third party’s perceived fairness of the firing, and their intent to take retributive action against the manager responsible for the firing. Additionally, this study finds that the presence of a pre-existing code of conduct prohibiting off-duty deviance causes observers to see the firing as fairer.

The third essay investigates how third-party observation of incivility between coworkers influences evaluation of the instigator, the victim, and one’s workplace. This study finds that observing incivility is associated with seeing the victim as having less workplace status. I also find that observing incivility is associated with a more pessimistic forecast of one’s own future experience of interpersonal justice in that same workplace.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTERS

1. **INTRODUCTION** .............................................................................................................................. 1

2. **ESSAY ONE** ..................................................................................................................................... 7

   “Not doing nothing: Third parties’ cognitive reactions to mistreatment of others.”

3. **ESSAY TWO** .................................................................................................................................... 43

   “Off-duty deviance in the eye of the beholder: Implications of moral foundations theory in the age of social media.”

4. **ESSAY THREE** .................................................................................................................................... 82


5. **DISSERTATION SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH** .............................................................. 109
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.1</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3.2</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.2</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 4.1 .................................................................................................................................94
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The focus of my dissertation is based on third party perception of workplace mistreatment of others. Evidence suggests that third parties who observe mistreatment experience a variety of negative consequences (Chrobot-Mason, Ragins, & Linnehan, 2013), and that third-party reactions can be shaped by individual differences and beliefs about the involved parties (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015). To extend this literature, I have chosen to investigate the ways in which the experience of observing mistreatment influences how third parties perceive their coworkers and their workplace. I also consider how individual differences (e.g. social identity, moral foundation sensitivity) shape third party reaction to mistreatment and perception of whether mistreatment has taken place.

Across the three essays presented here, I examine how non-intervention as a response to mistreatment can inform future perceptions of mistreatment, how idiosyncratic conceptions of morality and organizational policy influence whether injustice is perceived to have occurred, and how incivility changes third party perception of the victim and the workplace. Together, these essays provide original insight regarding how observing mistreatment influences the way third parties think, and why some third parties perceive mistreatment to have occurred while others do not.

In the first essay, co-authored with Leah Sheppard, I introduce a theoretical model that considers third-party non-intervention from a new perspective, proposing that resolving conflict regarding one’s own inaction can contribute to the perpetuation of mistreatment (Festinger, 1962). Prior theoretical work has considered the third-party response of ‘doing nothing’ to be a
single category (O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011), and extensive work has considered why third parties do not intervene (Moore, 2008; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). I suggest that when third parties appear to be doing nothing, they are engaging in complex sensemaking that informs how they interact with their workplace, and that the cognitive mechanisms third parties rely on when refraining from intervention influences how they respond to future mistreatment incidents (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). This model treats ‘mistreatment’ as a single general construct, which third parties may be exposed to different forms of over time, because different types of mistreatment share common characteristics and often co-occur (Hershcovis, 2011; Crashaw, 2009). This paper also considers how contextual factors such as shared social identity between third party and victim (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tafjel, 1979), and status differences between victim and instigator shape third party perception (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Finally, this paper considers how non-intervening third parties may contribute to mistreatment at the organization level, reinforcing systems through which mistreatment intensifies and is perpetuated (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Robison & O’Leary-Kell, 1998; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), addressing the need for work that connects mistreatment to organization-level outcomes (Schilpzand, Pater, & Erez, 2016).

The second essay, co-authored with Kristine Kuhn, presents a scenario study that examines how third parties react to a coworker being fired for off-duty behavior, and the ways in which idiosyncratic conceptions of morality among third parties influence whether an event is perceived as unjust. Moral foundations theory proposes that people differ in their sensitivity to underlying moral values because of differences in their experience within a culture, which can explain variance in reactions to morally charged issues (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2011; Haidt, 2007). Similar to the proposition in the first essay that experiences within an
organization can inform whether a third party believes a situation constitutes mistreatment, I predicted that differences in moral foundation sensitivity would inform whether a third party believes a situation is unjust. I found support for this prediction, such that when a person is fired for violating a specific moral value, a third party’s sensitivity to that value is positively associated with the tendency to see the situation as just, and negatively associated with intent to take retributive action against the manager responsible for the firing. This suggests that differences in underlying beliefs and values held by third parties can meaningfully influence the extent to which they see a situation as unfair and how likely they are to take corrective action. Additionally, I found that organizational policy can positively influence third party perceptions of justice in this context, such that the presence of a pre-existing policy regarding off-duty deviance increased third party perception of justice (Lyons et al. 2016). This suggests that while third parties differ in how perceive injustice based on personal sensitivity to moral foundations, the role of these individual factors may be reduced by organization-level actions.

Finally, the third paper, co-authored with Natalie Liberman and Leah Sheppard, presents an experiment that investigates how third-party observation of incivility between coworkers influences social evaluation of the victim and the workplace. Following predictions made in the first essay of this dissertation regarding how third parties may rationalize mistreatment in a way that is unfavorable for the victim, I found that victims of incivility were seen by third parties as having less workplace status. This effect illustrates a way in which observing a form of mistreatment shapes third party perceptions and highlights a way in which victims are harmed by incivility that can only be measured by accounting for the perspective of third parties. I also found that witnessing incivility is negatively associated with third-party anticipated interactional
justice, suggesting that the experience of observing incivility influences how third parties expect to be treated in their workplace (Bies, 2001).

In the following chapters (2, 3, and 4) the full essays described above are presented. These chapters include the theoretical arguments for each paper, a thorough description of the academic literature each draws from, the contributions made by each paper, and in the case of chapters 3 and 4, empirical analysis and detailed descriptions of data collection methods. Taken together, these papers offer new insight regarding the experience of third parties who observe workplace mistreatment, suggesting that the reactions of third parties are likely more complex than previous research has considered. In the final chapter of my dissertation (5), I summarize the key contributions made in my dissertation, and conclude with remarks regarding future research directions in this area of study.
REFERENCES


Hershcovis, M. S. (2011) “Incivility, social undermining, bullying… oh my!”: A call to


CHAPTER TWO
ESSAY ONE

NOT DOING NOTHING: HOW THIRD PARTIES JUSTIFY AND CONTRIBUTE TO
CYCLES OF MISTREATMENT

ABSTRACT
In the current work, I open the black box of third-party non-intervention in response to
mistreatment. I propose that the cognitive mechanisms employed by third parties to resolve
internal conflict stemming from inaction have lasting effects that contribute to the perpetuation
and intensification of mistreatment. I also consider the influence of social identity on third-party
experiences, illustrating how third-party justification may reinforce informal social identity
hierarchies within organizations. This theory considers third-party non-intervention from a new
perspective, shedding light on the social mechanisms that contribute toward widespread
mistreatment of marginalized groups, and providing new avenues for future research.

Keywords: Third-party, mistreatment, social identity, status.
INTRODUCTION

The news of film producer Harvey Weinstein’s decades-long history as a sexual predator revealed long-lasting complicity by a network of possibly hundreds of third parties, who either acted explicitly to conceal his behavior, or looked the other way because of personal incentives (Twohey, Kantor, Dominus, Rutenberg, & Eder, 2017). Meanwhile, across Silicon Valley, women have faced widespread gender discrimination, including direct sexual harassment, disproportionate criticism for behaving agentically, exclusion from social networking opportunities, and undermining of their authority (Munday, 2017). Racial minorities face similar challenges, with nearly one in four experiencing prejudice, and men of color being disproportionately likely to leave a tech firm due to perceived unfairness (Scott, Klein, & Onovakpuri, 2017). In these and many other cases, numerous third parties have been aware of widespread mistreatment and have not intervened to either end the mistreatment or support victims. Rather than focus on the previously explored question of why some third parties intervene while others do not (O’Reilly & Aquino, 2011), I examine the ways in which third parties who do not intervene come to terms with their own inaction, and how the cognitive processes they use while coping facilitate future mistreatment.

Prior theoretical modeling of third-party reactions to mistreatment of others considers non-intervention as a homogeneous category of behavior, referred to as “doing nothing” (O’Reilly & Aquino 2011: 258). However, I propose that when a third party appears to be doing nothing, they are engaging in information processing and experiencing meaningful cognitive reactions, which are shaped by the configuration of the social identities and statuses held by the third party, the direct victim of the mistreatment, and the instigator of the mistreatment. These cognitive reactions then influence how the third party behaves in relation to the victim and the
instigator. Because the experience of witnessing mistreatment is typically episodic (Hannah et al., 2013), this process is likely to be repeated over time, resulting in a cycle that leads to substantive changes in the third party’s behavior. Moreover, because non-response to mistreatment is the most common response to witnessing mistreatment in organizations (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005; Chui & Dietz, 2014), and because third parties outnumber both instigators and direct victims (Coyne et al., 2017), I argue that third party cognitive reactions influence organization-level social dynamics that sustain and escalate mistreatment.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the process outlined above. I begin by reviewing prior work on the impact of organizational mistreatment on third parties, highlighting the theoretical gaps in these areas that I aim to address. I then develop a theoretical model that provides a new perspective on third-party cognitive reactions to mistreatment, and how these reactions are part of a cycle that preserves organizational inequality. Finally, I discuss future research opportunities related to reconsidering the role of third parties, the harm of mistreatment, and the development of more effective practical interventions. I emphasize that because of pressures to rationalize the mistreatment of others, leaders must take responsibility for ensuring an unambiguous message against mistreatment is conveyed across the organization, and that conventional bystander training programs are not enough.

My theoretical model focuses on interpersonal mistreatment, defined as “a situation in which at least one organizational member takes counternormative negative actions—or terminates normative positive actions—against another member” (Cortina & Magley 2003: p. 247). My proposed model is intended to apply across a variety of forms of workplace mistreatment, including abusive supervision, bullying, sexual harassment, incivility, interpersonal injustice, and rudeness. Despite significant differences between these constructs,
there is substantial conceptual and empirical overlap across constructs in workplace mistreatment research (Hershcovis, 2011). Because different types of mistreatment frequently co-occur (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007), third parties may observe multiple forms. Therefore, a general theory of third-party cognitive reactions to workplace abuse at the level of a general category, encompassing all forms of mistreatment and not being confined to a specific form (Crashaw, 2009), is theoretically and practically valuable. My theory is intended to apply at this general level, except for arguments made regarding the phenomenon of subtle mistreatment which are described later.

**The Impact of Mistreatment on Third Parties**

Third party observers of mistreatment often suffer a variety of negative consequences that impact both their personal and professional lives. Hostile work environments, characterized by perceived hostility and organizational unresponsiveness, are associated with negative health outcomes and decreased job satisfaction among observers (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). Observing rudeness enacted toward others reduces third parties’ citizenship behavior, their performance on both routine and creative tasks, and increases their dysfunctional ideation (Porath & Erez, 2009). Meanwhile, witnessing unpleasant interactions between coworkers can cause witnesses to experience emotional drain, particularly when the interaction is witnessed directly and the witness considers the target’s perspective (Totterdell et al., 2012). Bullying in a work environment increases turnover intentions similarly for both the direct targets of bullying and third parties (Houshmand, O’Reilly, Robinson, & Wolff, 2012). Moreover, observing abusive supervision is associated with decreased identification with organizational values (Hannah et al., 2013). Third parties may experience vicarious abusive supervision not only by
directly witnessing an incident, but also by hearing from others about mistreatment (Harris, Harvey, Harris, & Cast, 2013).

A review of the literature on the topic of sexual harassment reveals substantial consequences for third parties in addition to those experienced by its direct victims (O’Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Sperry, Bates, & Lean, 2009). Indirect exposure to sexual harassment at work has similar consequences for third parties as those experienced by the direct targets of sexual harassment, although they tend to be less severe (Glomb, Richman, Hulin, Drasgow, Schneider, & Fitzgerald, 1997) and vary by third-party characteristics. For example, ambient hostile sexism (e.g. expressed beliefs that women are less capable or deserving than men) has a more negative impact on the performance-based self-esteem of female third parties relative to male third parties, an effect which is associated with reduced career aspirations (Bradley-Geist, Rivera, & Geringer, 2015). Similar negative effects are associated with observing sexual harassment when a man is the victim, including anger, fear of sexual harassment, and decreased collective self-esteem (Dionisi & Barling, 2018).

Third parties experience more negative consequences when observing general incivility directed at members of their own gender, including feelings of anger, fear, and anxiety for both men and women, and demoralization for women (Miner & Eischeid, 2012). Awareness of ambient racial harassment is associated with negative job attitudes and psychological strain for both White and Black employees; however, individuals are less likely to be aware of the mistreatment of out-group members (Chrobot-Mason, Ragins, & Linnehan, 2013). This asymmetrical perception of the world results in Black employees being impacted more by ambient racial harassment than White employees, because Black employees are more likely to perceive it. This body of findings regarding the experience of third parties suggests that when a
third party appears to be ‘doing nothing,’ they are experiencing cognitions that will impact both their attitudes and behavior.

Though the literature reviewed above has provided an initial understanding of the direct effects of observing mistreatment, there is an absence of theoretical work examining the ways in which observing mistreatment has a lasting impact on how third parties think. There has also been limited work connecting the experiences of third parties to indirect outcomes, such as organizational-level variables like inequality and the perpetuation of mistreatment (Schilpzand, Pater, & Erez, 2016). In the following theoretical model, I attempt to address these gaps by providing a closer examination of the cyclical processes through which third parties come to think differently about the mistreatment of others, and how this leads to mistreatment becoming accepted and perpetuated in organizations. I then explore the implications of mistreatment perpetuated through justification, including how these micro-level mechanisms lead to macro-level underrepresentation of marginalized groups in high-status positions. Specifically, I explore how the acceptance of subtle sex- and race-based mistreatment provides continuous reinforcement of an implicit message regarding the roles of women and minorities in the workplace.

THE CURRENT MODEL

Third-Party Cognitions

Self-reported willingness to intervene when observing mistreatment far exceeds actual intervention (Baumert, Halmburger, & Schmitt 2013; Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005; Fischer et al., 2006; Ryan & Wessel, 2012; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). This discrepancy between intentions and actual behavior suggests that observing mistreatment has the potential to cause conflict between third parties’ values (desired behavior) and actions (actual behavior)
when they fail to intervene. Incongruence between one’s cognitions and behaviors results in cognitive dissonance, which can be addressed by either changing one’s beliefs or behaviors, justifying one’s behavior or beliefs by changing the conflicting belief or adding new beliefs to resolve the conflict, or by dismissing information that conflicts with one’s beliefs (Festinger, 1962). In their effort to resolve this dissonance, third parties are also motivated to maintain a consistent and positive self-concept (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). Additionally, observing mistreatment can create cognitive dissonance by challenging the third party’s perception of a just world in which people get what they deserve, resulting in the perception of injustice, and causing a psychological contract breach when employers are perceive as failing to prevent mistreatment of their employees (Lerner, 1980; Parzefall & Salin, 2010; Zhu, Martens, & Aquino, 2012). For cognitive dissonance to occur, I assume that the third party is aware that some form of mistreatment is taking place, either because of direct observation or exposure to second-hand accounts. Additionally, my model does not explain the behavior of third parties who are indifferent to or enjoy observing mistreatment (e.g., third parties high in trait psychopathy), or situations in which the third party views the victim negatively and believes the victim deserves a negative outcome prior to observing their mistreatment (e.g. a widely disliked abusive boss “getting what they deserve”), in which case no conflicting beliefs would emerge.

**Third-Party Rationalization**

Continuing to work in an environment perceived as unfair or potentially dangerous is psychologically taxing, and to avoid accepting that their perception of a just world has been violated, the third party may rationalize the mistreatment of others or otherwise view it as non-problematic. These strategies include specific moral disengagement mechanisms, including disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences of mistreatment, such that the third party
comes to believe that little or no real harm is being caused by the mistreatment (Moore, 2008; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Alternatively, or in conjunction, the third party may also think in ways that derogate the victim, such as imagining a way in which the victim deserves their fate, despite not believing that the victim deserved to be punished prior to witnessing the victim’s mistreatment (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Skarlicki & Turner, 2014). In other words, the presence of ‘punishment’ (mistreatment) motivates third parties to seek or imagine a transgression on the victim’s part that might justify such an outcome, and doing so frees the third party from having to cope with the discomfort of observing senseless mistreatment. This rationalization is likely to remain unchallenged by the third party because disconfirmation of this belief would challenge their worldview and cause unpleasant emotions, and avoiding challenging information allows the third party to protect their already made decision to not intervene (Woolley & Risen, 2018).

By applying these strategies, a third party might reason that the victim was not truly harmed by the mistreatment, and that if they seemed to be, they are overreacting. The third party might rationalize that the victim behaved in a way that provoked their mistreatment, imagining that the instigator was justified in their behavior because of some unseen transgression by the victim, even if there is no evidence to support this belief. These beliefs may be reinforced by victim passivity, allowing third parties to reason that if the mistreatment were truly serious or undeserved, then the victim would actively resist it (Diekmann, Walker, Galinsky, & Tenbrunsel, 2013). This type of reasoning allows the third party to maintain a positive self-image and a belief that the world (or the workplace) is fair, while also avoiding the potential discomfort or danger associated with intervening in response to perceived mistreatment.
Proposition 1: Third party non-intervention in response to mistreatment is associated 
with rationalization, such that the third party adopts the belief that the mistreatment was 
not harmful and/or the mistreatment was justified.

Third-Party Behavior and its Impact on Victims of Mistreatment

Next, I propose that rationalizations experienced by third parties may influence the third 
party’s interactions with others. According to social information processing theory, which posits 
that an individual’s immediate social environment influences that individual’s construction and 
interpretation of events, a victim’s attitude about his or her own mistreatment may be particularly 
vulnerable to influence by overt statements and judgments made by third parties for two reasons 
(Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). First, ambiguous situations involving negative events leave victims 
uncertain regarding how to react, and evaluations made by third parties can provide guidance. 
Indeed, victims of mistreatment might be motivated to seek out the sensemaking of third parties 
in order to reduce uncertainty. Second, the victim may be motivated to agree with third parties’ 
interpretations in order to achieve social acceptance. That is, repeated social expression of 
agreement may allow the victim to convince herself or himself of the validity of the external 
evaluation (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), while also temporarily alleviating feelings of isolation 
provoked by the mistreatment. By interacting with third parties who have rationalized the 
mistreatment they witnessed, the victim may adopt the belief that they somehow deserve their 
own mistreatment, that the mistreatment they experienced was not substantially harmful, and/or 
that the situation does not call for outside intervention. Because the victim has accepted their 
mistreatment as deserved or relatively innocuous, they will be unlikely to take measures that 
might end it, thereby perpetuating their own mistreatment and potentially that of others because 
this has allowed the instigator to bypass both formal and social regulatory mechanisms.
The term *gaslighting* refers to a type of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter attempts to convince a victim that their reactions and perceptions are groundless, using phrases such as “Don’t be so sensitive,” “You’re imagining things,” or “Are you sure that’s what happened?” (Abramson 2014: 1). As an example, behavior labeled by a victim as bullying is often explained away by HR professionals as being an acceptable part of performance management practices (Harrington, Warren, & Rayner, 2015), which speaks to how deeply ingrained gaslighting practices are within organizations. Like non-intervention, behaviors associated with gaslighting can serve a prosocial purpose. After all, it is possible for a person to overreact to the way they were treated, and a coworker may wish to help that person see the situation more accurately and rationally, thereby preserving harmony and preventing damage to relationships among coworkers. However, this well-intended ‘reality check’ can serve the same function as gaslighting when the third party’s perception of the situation is skewed by rationalization, resulting in the third party persuading the victim that their mistreatment is either nonproblematic or appropriate.

I suggest that third parties are motivated to challenge a victim’s perception of mistreatment because the third party can maintain their belief in a just world by delegitimizing the source of information that challenges their belief (Eliezer & Major, 2012). Moreover, I propose that the victim’s beliefs about their mistreatment may be altered by interacting with third parties who have reframed the victim’s mistreatment as inconsequential or rationalized it as justified. This is to the non-intervening third party’s advantage; if the victim of mistreatment can be made to agree that there is not a problem, or to entertain the notion that they might be overreacting to or misinterpreting events, the third party’s prior just-world beliefs are affirmed. This does not imply that the third party is consciously motivated to delegitimize the victim;
rather, this dysfunctional influence may result from the third party’s desire to smooth things over, and that pacifying the victim may help to maintain harmony by avoiding unnecessary conflict.

Proposition 2: Interaction between victims of mistreatment and non-intervening third-party observers is associated with victims’ rationalization of their own mistreatment, which results in reinforcement of the rationalization maintained by third party observers.

Moderators of Third-Party Responses to Observing Mistreatment

Victim and Instigator Status

Low organizational and/or social status of the victim, particularly when coupled with high organizational and/or social status of the instigator, introduces additional incentives and pressures for third parties to rationalize the victim’s mistreatment (Magee & Galinsky, 2009). Because one’s hierarchical position influences a variety of desirable outcomes, people are generally motivated to advance their own status, often through ingratiation with high-status individuals, including agreement with their opinions or affirmation of their actions (Lund et al., 2007; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Given the desire to advance one’s career by developing relationships with high-status individuals, third parties may be motivated to rationalize mistreatment perpetrated by high-status individuals in order to comfortably avoid taking action that would threaten their own status (Pfeffer & Fong, 2005). Members of low-status groups often maintain system-justifying beliefs that conflict with their own group’s interests and bolster the interests of high-status groups (McCoy et al., 2013), in part to invite favorable evaluations from high-status out-group members (Owuamalam, Rubin, & Issmer, 2016). To put it plainly, people want to associate with those who are seen as ‘winners’ and disassociate from those who are seen as ‘losers,’ and if a ‘winner’ is mistreating a ‘loser’, then there is a motive to tell oneself that the
‘winner’ had sufficient justification for their behavior, and/or that the ‘loser’ deserved it. In this line of thought, ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ are distinguished not only by formal status, but by informal status based on implicit hierarchy and social identity stereotypes that influence perceptions of power.

People are often motivated to support hierarchy even if they do not stand to gain tangible benefits (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Third parties may be further motivated to rationalize mistreatment by the belief that status differences are legitimate, and that people generally get what they deserve in life (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Working class voters often support policies that violate their personal interests, and unjust social arrangements persist in part because of support from the groups they directly disadvantage (Jost & Hunyany, 2005). This apparent inconsistency between material needs and political actions can be explained by psychological and existential needs related to meaning and assurance; indeed, one’s ideology and beliefs about the world can sometimes motivate behavior to a greater degree than the rational self-interest of oneself or one’s group (Jost, 2006). In the case of HR professionals who become aware of mistreatment through a report by the victim, managerial bias may cause the mistreatment claim to be interpreted as mere complaining on the part of an underperforming employee, with the manager’s behavior rationalized as being in service of the organization (Harrington, Warren, & Rayner, 2015). Destructive leaders, who contribute toward negative outcomes for both the organization and its employees, may attract followers with negative core self-evaluations and/or beliefs that are congruent with the leader, resulting in followership in pursuit of a psychological sense of safety or ideological fulfillment rather than the pursuit of material self-interest (Padilla, Hogan & Kaiser, 2007). While third parties may seek status enhancement through gaining favor with a higher-status out-group instigator of mistreatment, third parties may also excuse such a
person’s behavior for the purpose of protecting the worldview maintained by the third party. As such, I propose that when a victim is a member of a marginalized or low-status group, and the instigator is a member of a higher-status group relative to the victim, third parties are particularly motivated to rationalize the mistreatment of the victim.

*Proposition 3: Non-intervening third parties are more likely to rationalize mistreatment when there is a status difference between the victim and the instigator, such that the instigator holds higher formal and/or informal status than the victim.*

**Configuration of Victim, Instigator, and Third-Party Social Identity**

Social identity comprises the aspects of an individual’s self-image that are derived from the social categories in which he or she holds membership (Tafjel, 1979). Individuals identify with larger human aggregates, such as an ethnic group, nationality, or gender, and see their fates as being somehow intertwined with that of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). One might expect that, given the more frequent mistreatment of those in marginalized social groups (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2011), third parties who share a marginalized social identity with the victim might be particularly likely to intervene upon witnessing their mistreatment. Certainly, third parties are more likely to have *intentions* to intervene during episodes of mistreatment on behalf of in-group members (Levine, Cassidy, Brazier, & Reicher, 2002). Though I generally respond to in-group members – those who share some important aspect of our social identity – more favorably than to out-group members (Brewer 1979; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992), research has revealed that members of low-status groups often exhibit out-group favoritism (Boldry & Kashy, 1999; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; von Hippel, 2006).
Moreover, even when third parties acknowledge the presence of unfavorable behavior on the part of the instigator of mistreatment, the victim is still inherently associated with an unfavorable outcome – one that the third party surely wishes to avoid. In the event that both instigator and victim are perceived unfavorably, the ‘black sheep’ effect predicts that individuals will be more likely to distance themselves from an unfavorable in-group member relative to an unfavorable out-group member (Braun & Gollwitzer, 2012; Lei & Vesely, 2010; Luksyte, Avery, & Yeo, 2015; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988; Matthews & Dietz-Uhler 1998; Mendoza, Lane, & Amodio, 2014), particularly if the victim claims discrimination (Garcia et al., 2005).

Some have posited that the black sheep effect is ultimately indicative of in-group favoritism, since ostracizing the ‘black sheep’ could protect the identity of the group (Marques & Paez, 1994), whereas others have proposed that it is the means through which individuals protect their own identities and distance themselves from unfavorable group members (Eidelman & Biernat, 2003).

Previous research suggests that members of marginalized groups (e.g., women) are more likely than members of dominant groups (e.g., men) to exhibit in-group distancing when observing an unfavorable in-group member (Breakwell, Vignoles, & Robertson, 2003; Khan & Lambert, 1998; Popan, Kenworthy, Barden, & Griffiths, 2010). This might be because those in marginalized groups have relatively less status compared to dominant groups, and therefore might be particularly eager to distance themselves from in-group members who further threaten their own status by association. Relatedly, women and minorities are more likely than individuals in dominant groups to engage in self-stereotyping and in-group stereotyping (Cadinu & Galdi, 2012; Simon & Hamilton, 1994), and to internalize negative stereotypes about their own group in what is known as ‘false consciousness’ (Jost & Banaji, 1994). Taken together, this
suggests that in-group distancing behavior, wherein one elevates oneself up and away from in-group members in order to avoid being associated with negative stereotypes, is more likely to occur in marginalized groups (Sheppard & Aquino, 2017). Expanding my arguments regarding the role of status in shaping third party perceptions, I propose that when third parties share membership in a marginalized or otherwise low-status group with the victim, and the instigator is a member of a higher-status out-group, third-party post-hoc rationalization of non-intervention and its resultant gaslighting behaviors will be strengthened.

**Proposition 4: Third party rationalization of mistreatment and gaslighting of victims is more likely to occur when the victim and third party share membership in a marginalized social identity group, and the instigator is a high-status out-group member.**

**Organizational Outcomes of Third-Party Rationalization**

In this section, I connect non-intervening third parties’ reactions to mistreatment to organizational-level outcomes. I examine third-party rationalization of mistreatment at the collective level, and the ways in which third-party rationalization contributes to the continuation of discrimination and the perpetuation of inequality.

**General outcomes**

Not all third parties react the same way to mistreatment, in part because third parties differ in the extent to which they believe that the victim deserved the mistreatment they received, and whether mistreatment occurred at all (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Chrobot-Mason, Ragins, & Linnehan, 2013). I expand this argument by proposing that organizations differ in their perceived tolerance of mistreatment, which influences the implicit beliefs maintained by their members regarding the deservingness of victims of mistreatment. As remarked by Gruber (1998: 317), “the message of sexual harassment policies and procedures may be as important as
the content." That is, if the formal systems developed for addressing mistreatment are treated as ineffectual, the implicit message conveyed to employees may be that the organization considers mistreatment to be of such limited harm that it is not a serious problem. This would allow third parties to more easily rationalize mistreatment as having negligible consequences (Moore, 2008), thereby reinforcing cognitive rationalization and non-intervention throughout the organization.

Expanding on this argument further, I suggest that the message conveyed by inaction following an act of mistreatment can have an important impact on the organization’s culture in ways that extend beyond the employees directly involved in the event. Analogous to an incivility spiral, in which incivility increases over time as the result of an escalating pattern of behavior within groups (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), I suggest that abusive workplaces emerge not only from an escalating pattern of behavior, but from patterns of rationalization by third parties, victims, and instigators. Even if rationalization initially occurs among a relatively small group of employees, this could instigate an incivility spiral through unpunished actions, conveying a message that influences participation in and rationalization of mistreatment throughout the organization (Gallus, Bunk, Matthews, Barnes-Farrell, & Magley, 2014). This is supported by research suggesting that the tendency toward misbehavior at work is influenced and shaped by social context, rather than being a strictly individual-level phenomenon (Robinson & O’Leary-Kelly, 1998).

The foundation of this rationalization may reflect legitimate concern regarding overreaction, or even respect for the victim’s ability to take care of oneself. However, the existence of a legitimate context for non-intervention sets a precedent that enables greater ease of rationalization for non-intervention in contexts where the necessity of intervention is ambiguous. Over time, I suggest that collective rationalization reduces third-party intervention by restricting
both the range of behaviors that are considered mistreatment and the number of situations in which a victim is seen as truly undeserving. In other words, non-intervention becomes the clear reaction to situations in which the need for intervention was once ambiguous, and the need for intervention becomes ambiguous in situations that would have once clearly warranted intervention.

Proposition 5: Over time, third party rationalization of mistreatment informs organization-level norms, such that non-intervention becomes more likely over time, and in the context of more severe forms of mistreatment.

Rationalization of Hierarchy

System justification theory suggests that hierarchy is maintained through rationalization and support of the status quo (Jost & Banaji 1994; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Those with more status in the hierarchy are perceived as being more competent or deserving of privileged treatment than others, and individuals in positions of power are motivated to think in ways that legitimize their own status and that of others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Furthermore, as I discussed earlier, lower-status members of the hierarchy are likely to engage in similar rationalization, despite obvious conflicts with self and group interests, in part to maintain peace of mind (Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

I argue that similar justification is likely to emerge when informal hierarchy among social identity groups in an organization is highlighted by when members of marginalized groups are disproportionately targeted by subtle incivility (e.g., that which is not explicitly related to gender or race) (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2013; Jones et al., 2017). This situation results in ‘modern discrimination’ in which systematic discrimination continues under the guise of incivility, which prevents specific instances of mistreatment from being labeled as
discriminatory while still having a discriminatory effect over time (Cortina et al., 2013). This form of discrimination can be particularly insidious because people adjust to subtle mistreatment more easily than overt mistreatment, allowing it to gain greater acceptance (Jones et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016). For third parties, subtle mistreatment may simultaneously make mistreatment easier to rationalize because of its ambiguity, make discrimination more likely to be dismissed because of its appearance as being unrelated to gender or race, and make intervention less likely because of uncertainty regarding the need for intervention (Jones et al., 2017). Even in the case that a third party sees something that they construe as mistreatment, and believe intervention would be beneficial to the situation, they may refrain because of the social costs of claiming that a behavior constitutes discrimination on behalf of someone else (Eliezer & Major, 2012), resulting in an internal conflict that motivates justification.

Because marginalized groups are disproportionately targeted by subtle mistreatment (Jones et al., 2017), perception of between-group differences is reinforced through repeated observation of unequal treatment. Such rationalization may take the form of a belief that members of the mistreated group have somehow done something to deserve their mistreatment (e.g. members of the mistreated group are underperformers; if they worked harder, they would be treated like everyone else). This rationalization is motivated both by the need to resolve conflict between one’s values and behaviors, and the motivation to maintain a positive group image (Chrobot-Mason, Ragins, & Linnehan, 2013; Jost & Banaji, 1994).

**Proposition 6:** Because non-intervening third parties are more likely to rationalize subtle mistreatment, and members of marginalized groups are disproportionately likely to be the target of subtle mistreatment, third parties rationalize the mistreatment of members of marginalized groups disproportionately frequently.
This rationalization may be more easily accomplished in work environments that are clearly dominated by one majority group, in which the existence of a smaller minority group is more salient, and mistreatment can be more easily rationalized based on some other perceived difference (e.g. incompetence, weak work ethic) specific to the minority group. Partial support for this observation can be drawn from the finding that women are more likely to be targeted by sexual and gender harassment in male-dominated workplaces (Gruber, 1998). Perceptions regarding the extent to which a group has dominant status may also become inflated over time through the suppression of social identity expression motivated by the desire to disassociate from a targeted group or to avoid becoming the target of mistreatment. For example, peripheral exposure to homophobic language or humor at work can prevent LGBTQ workers from expressing those parts of their social identity, and sometimes drives them toward behaviors that conceal their social identity, thereby reinforcing workplace heteronormativity and the continued mistreatment of their group (Willis, 2012).

Rationalization of mistreatment is likely to increase future likelihood of third-party non-intervention, even leading third parties to directly participate in mistreatment in the future. Indeed, the behavior of other men influences gender harassment behavior among men, and while it has been suggested that an explanation for this behavior may draw from either a social dominance account or an in-group bonding explanation (Hunt & Gonsalkorale, 2014), I propose that system justification theory may offer a way to integrate these two explanations. The distinction between dominant and marginalized groups is further emphasized through unequal distribution of mistreatment, a situation that is reinforced through justification of the emergent hierarchy. This occurs at the level of the organization, as behaviors such as non-intervention are driven by environmental factors while at the same time contribute to an environment that
facilitates further non-intervention and tolerance of mistreatment. As third parties in both the minority and dominant groups rationalize the mistreatment of members in a minority group, the third parties may become more likely to become instigators to conform to group norms and to reaffirm or create a connection with the dominant group. This process may not take place as a deliberate attempt to build status, but instead through subtle social influence processes that generate a cumulative effect over time.

*Proposition 7: The context of work environments with a clear dominant social identity group is positively associated with third party rationalization of mistreatment directed at the subordinate group, reinforcing informal hierarchy and facilitating the intensification of mistreatment.*

**DISCUSSION**

Mistreatment, abusive supervision, and related constructs have received extensive attention from management researchers, with considerable focus on the effects of mistreatment on victims, and the personal and situational characteristics that enhance the likelihood that third parties will intervene (Samnani & Singh, 2012). However, there has been an absence of attention paid to outlining the cognitive and behavioral reactions of third parties who opt to not intervene. It is well-established that the harm of mistreatment extends beyond the direct victims, yet there has been no theoretical framework that considers how third parties become complicit in a system that perpetuates mistreatment and maintains inequality. I suggest that dysfunctional cognitive adaptations arise through episodic exposure to organizational mistreatment, resulting in normalization of mistreatment and behaviors toward others that encourage normalization.

In the current work, I proposed that third parties contribute to the creation of an abusive workplace in ways previously unconsidered. Even if a third party never becomes a direct
instigator of mistreatment, inaction may change the third party over time in ways that facilitate mistreatment. A third party who has not intervened on behalf of others is motivated to think of the world in a way that justifies his or her behavior by rationalizing the mistreatment of others and downplaying the harm of mistreatment, resulting in social interactions that influence others to respond to mistreatment similarly. Even if not all third parties respond to mistreatment similarly, I suggest that the proportion of third parties engaging in rationalization will be sufficient to substantially impact others in the organization, and that this pattern of behavior will become increasingly likely as mistreatment becomes normalized and the scope of what constitutes mistreatment is constricted.

In addition to perpetuating mistreatment through inaction, third parties may directly harm victims of mistreatment by persuading the victim that his or her perception of reality is inaccurate, or by ostracizing the victim (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015). The implicit message conveyed by third-party non-intervention may contribute to the sense of isolation a victim is likely to feel following mistreatment. The indifference of coworkers will suggest that intervention is unlikely to follow future episodes of mistreatment, and that coworkers either do not care about the act of mistreatment or view it as acceptable. The resulting sense of isolation may impact job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007). Furthermore, I suggest that the reactions of victims are shaped through interaction with third parties who rationalize mistreatment or question the victim’s perception of mistreatment. This may cause victims to be more likely to downplay future episodes of mistreatment, which is likely to influence third party perceptions (Chui & Dietz, 2014), thus perpetuating a cycle in which third party rationalization is reinforced and continues to facilitate mistreatment.
It is important to note here that there are many ‘good’, or at least understandable, reasons for non-intervention. After all, a workplace in which third parties openly accuse others of abuse based on the slightest perceived offense is unlikely to be desirable to most. As illustrated by incidents of mass online public shaming, third parties are capable of inappropriate overreaction, sometimes doing more harm than good through intervention (Ronson, 2016). As in the case of *the boy who cried wolf*, frequent claims without substance could reduce the likelihood of legitimate cases of mistreatment being taken seriously and could cause some employees to worry that even constructively criticizing a colleague will be labeled mistreatment. Therefore, I do not make the claim that more third-party intervention is always better, or that third parties who do not intervene despite misgivings about a situation are necessarily doing something wrong. Rather, our model focuses on ways in which non-intervention can motivate rationalization of one’s inaction, and how this rationalization can contribute to a cycle that facilitates mistreatment and inequality.

**Implications for Future Research**

By presenting a new perspective on the experience of non-intervening third parties who observe mistreatment, this model stimulates several ideas that might provide the foundation for new streams of research on the topic of mistreatment in organizations. Future research should consider the ways in which third parties are impacted by and respond to mistreatment, both cognitively and behaviorally, and the impact that this has on victims, instigators, and organizational culture. There are promising avenues for research related to the ways in which social interactions shape how people think about their own mistreatment and that of others, particularly regarding the interactions between non-intervening third parties and victims. Examining how these interactions shape the ways in which victims make sense of their own
experiences could provide valuable insight regarding why victims frequently do not report their own mistreatment, and how sensemaking processes may often function to shield instigators of mistreatment from consequences for their behavior.

There are also opportunities to connect mistreatment with its associated outcomes at various organizational levels, including investigation of how individual acts of mistreatment contribute to a more generally hostile organizational climate. I also suggest that there are opportunities to examine how the social messages conveyed by mistreatment spread through an organization, and how the likelihood of such a spread might be reduced. Revealing the connections between individual responses to mistreatment and organizational-level hostility can provide a useful understanding of the mechanisms through which mistreatment becomes commonplace in an organization.

**Practical Implications**

This new perspective on the harm of mistreatment has practical implications for how managers should address mistreatment. Supporting the direct victims of mistreatment is a necessary but insufficient step toward repairing the organization after mistreatment. Organizations should consider practices that convey an unambiguous message to employees that mistreatment is not tolerated, and that even relatively subtle behaviors have the potential for substantial harm. There are opportunities for future research to identify practical interventions that can contribute toward changing how the message conveyed by mistreatment is interpreted, and what organizations can do to change how third parties cognitively adapt in response to observing mistreatment.

It may be useful to develop interventions specifically designed to help third parties avoid dysfunctional cognitive responses to observing mistreatment. For example, a sexual harassment
training program that only considers the importance of third-party intervention may threaten the self-image of third parties who have failed to intervene in the past, causing them to cognitively rationalize their past inaction to maintain a positive self-image. However, if they are educated on the ways in which good people are susceptible to patterns of thinking that unintentionally perpetuate mistreatment, these third parties may become better equipped to think about their experiences in a way that no longer requires self-rationalization. By introducing third parties to a way of thinking that allows mistreatment to be acknowledged without self-condemnation over the failure to intervene, third parties may be more willing to accept that what they witnessed in the past constituted mistreatment, decreasing the likelihood of rationalization. I encourage future research regarding the efficacy of such approaches to training.

Training should also focus on the importance of high-status individuals intervening in episodes of mistreatment, given that they will incur fewer penalties for doing so than individuals with less power. Individuals in privileged positions might be particularly likely to view the non-intervention of lower-status third parties in the mistreatment of a likewise socially disadvantaged victim as evidence that no discriminatory treatment is occurring. As such, it is important that they remain vigilant and avoid becoming complacent in situations in which they are uniquely empowered to ally themselves with victims. Practically speaking, this might be conveyed to high-status individuals with training that highlights the paralyzing effects of powerlessness, and that offers techniques through which to successfully solicit upward feedback that could alert them to incidences of mistreatment. Providing support training to supervisors leads to a lasting increase in reports of supervisor support and decrease in reports of abusive supervision among employees (Gonzalez-Morales, Kernan, Becker, & Eisenberger, 2016). Further developing such training programs by considering the biases that supervisors are susceptible to and discussing the
ways in which mistreatment among employees can persist undetected may be an effective way to reduce organizational mistreatment. To ensure effective measures against organizational mistreatment, traditional bystander training is insufficient; leaders must take responsibility to ensure substantive change and should use their status within the organization to help convey an unambiguous message that mistreatment is unacceptable.

CONCLUSION

In a departure from most literature on workplace mistreatment, I suggest that it is most important to understand the experience of third parties when considering the effects, sources, and perpetuation of mistreatment. By connecting micro-level cognitive adaptations to organizational-level outcomes, I provide an account for how mistreatment spreads and becomes normalized in an organization. In this model, I illuminate how people who are otherwise good contribute, often unintentionally, to the institutionalization of mistreatment through rationalization intended to protect one’s self-image and perception of the world, along with social harmony among coworkers. What might appear as relatively small and subtle steps, taken repeatedly by many different members of the organization over time, will culminate in an environment in which bad behavior thrives. While these effects may be subtle, they are not trivial, and can result in substantial damage while undermining the social mechanisms that normally discourage mistreatment. By understanding the consequences of non-intervention, the scope of how mistreatment impacts an organization can be more fully understood, and its peripheral effects can be accounted for.
REFERENCES


Glomb, T. M., Richman, W. L., Hulin, C. L., Drasgow, F., Schneider, K. T., & Fitzgerald, L. F.


supervision of coworkers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(4), 1040.


CHAPTER THREE
ESSAY TWO

OFF-DUTY DEVIANCE IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: IMPLICATIONS OF MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

ABSTRACT

Drawing from moral foundations theory, I show that differences in sensitivity to distinct moral norms help explain differences in the perceived (un)fairness of punishing employees for off-duty deviance. An initial study validates realistic examples of non-criminal behavior as reflecting violations of either purity or care norms. Participants in the main study evaluated scenarios in which coworkers were fired for those behaviors, which took place outside of work but were revealed via social media. They were more likely to judge the firing as fair, and less likely to express intent to take retributive action against the responsible manager, to the extent that they valued the norm violated by the coworker. This effect was moderated by the presence of a pre-existing organizational policy regarding off-duty conduct, which uniformly decreased negative reactions to the firing. Because social media now makes the revelation of an employee’s off-duty behavior to a broad audience increasingly likely, my results suggest the importance of developing an approach for responding to employee off-duty deviance while highlighting the relevance of moral pluralism to the study of third-party reactions.

Keywords: Moral foundations theory, social media, organizational justice, employee discipline.
INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen numerous cases of employees fired for behavior they engaged in outside of work which was revealed to their employers via social media. In one such case, the chief financial officer of a medical equipment company was fired for posting a YouTube video of himself confronting a Chick-fil-A cashier over the fast food chain chairman’s opposition to same-sex marriage (Isidore, 2015). In another case, a National Football League cheerleader was fired after posting a picture of herself on Instagram, which team officials claimed violated a policy against posing for revealing photographs (Belson, 2018). While both of these examples concern an employee fired for off-duty behavior that employers only learned of from social media, many observers might approve of the firing in one case but not the other. In this study I examine both how individual differences in moral sensitivities and situational factors under organizational control shape third-party responses to the punishment of off-duty deviance. In doing so, I extend moral foundations theory to an increasingly common and complex managerial challenge that, to date, has received little scholarly attention.

Off-duty deviance is defined as employee behaviors committed “outside the workplace or off-duty that are deviant by organizational and/or societal standards, jeopardize the employee’s status within the organization and threaten the interests and well-being of the organization and its stakeholders” (Lyons et al. 2016, p. 416). While some types of off-duty deviance (e.g., illegal activity) may raise legitimate work-related concerns, the job relevance of other behaviors is contentious (Nagele-Piazza, 2017). For example, excessive alcohol use at a weekend party or the use of profanity on a personal Twitter account may be considered deviant by some observers’ standards and not others. Research on social media screening for selecting new employees indicates a wide range of opinion on whether these sorts of behaviors are relevant to hiring.
decisions (Landers & Schmidt, 2016; Van Iddekinge et al. 2016). Thus coworkers, customers, and other third parties may well disagree about what, if any, managerial action is warranted when current employees’ off-duty deviance is revealed via social media.

Moral foundations theory explains why people judge “deviant” behavior differently; people differ in their perception of deviance, or the wrongness of an act, based on their sensitivity to a plurality of underlying types of moral norms (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt and Joseph, 2011; Haidt, 2007). Here I extend this theory to propose that a third party is more likely to see punishment for a deviant behavior as justified if it violates the norms associated with a moral foundation to which the third party is particularly sensitive. Because research on moral foundations has demonstrated that people vary substantially in their relative sensitivity to specific moral foundations (Graham et al. 2011; Clifford et al. 2015), punishment for the violation of associated norms can be controversial. Moral pluralism poses a challenge for managers because punishment for some types of off-duty deviance may be praised (or even demanded) by some third parties yet condemned by others.

The purpose of this study is to examine how differences in idiosyncratic sensitivity to moral norms predict reactions to the firing of a coworker for off-duty deviance made visible through social media. I also experimentally test whether the nature of the justification offered for the firing influences third-party judgments. The results demonstrate the practical applicability of moral foundation theory and procedural justice theory to a consequential managerial dilemma.

**Off-duty deviance, social media, and third-party reactions**

Historically, managers were unlikely to learn about employee deviance that took place outside of the workplace. Even if off-duty behavior sparked workplace gossip, the lack of video evidence or other documentation would typically preclude definitive proof. The rise of social
media means that off-duty deviant behavior is now much more likely to become known among coworkers, managers, and even the broader public (Van Iddekinge et al. 2016). A survey of employed undergraduates found that 86% of respondents were connected with a friend from work on social media (O’Connor et al. 2016). This implies that evidence of an employee’s off-duty conduct posted on social media can easily spread across an organization. Moreover, instances of deviant behavior can go ‘viral’ and spread to the general public, a consequence that is largely unpredictable and which can result in wildly disproportionate negative consequences (Goldman, 2015), not only for the individuals involved but for their organizations and even entire professions (Greysen et al. 2010).

Some evidence of employee deviance may be revealed via “doxxing,” i.e. other people publicly share online the employee’s personal identifying information (including their employer) along with video or text-based evidence of their offending behavior. Many social media users, however, willingly share content that suggests suboptimal levels of impression management. Despite concerns over how an employer might interpret inappropriate or questionable content (Miller et al. 2010), many social media users derive value from posting such material because it will be received favorably by friends and because it may constitute a valuable aspect of identity exploration (Ridout et al. 2012).

To date, most scholarly research on social media’s implications for human resource management has focused on its growing use in hiring decisions (Roth et al. 2016). Many managers have developed their own anecdotal rationales for believing that social media provides useful signals about job applicants (Van Iddekinge et al. 2016). Although there may be valid reasons why organizations would wish to avoid employing a person based on their lifestyle, managers may also discriminate based on their idiosyncratic preferences and biases (Sugarman,
2003). In surveys of hiring managers, the most commonly cited reasons for rejecting a job candidate due to social media content typically involve deviant behaviors such as discriminatory remarks, indications of drug and alcohol use, and badmouthing a former employer (Grasz, 2014).

But job applicants are unlikely to discover that they have been rejected due to their social media activity. In the United States, there is no legal requirement to inform applicants that they have been subjected to social media screening unless the firm pays an external agency to conduct the screening, nor are most applicants ever given a concrete reason for why they did not receive a job offer (Weber, 2013). Although organizations should be concerned about the validity of their selection process, managers are not usually required to justify their decision to reject an applicant based on social media content, either to the applicant or to other employees.

If an organization punishes a current employee for behavior revealed on social media, however, the potential for negative repercussions is much greater. If employees are terminated or suspended due to their Twitter remarks or viral videos, other employees are likely to learn of it, and the broader public sometimes does as well (Ronson, 2016). The reactions of third-party observers therefore become a matter of significant organizational concern (Skarlicki et al. 2015). While perceptions of organizational justice are often conceptualized and discussed as an individual-level phenomenon, employees base their perceptions not only on how they personally are treated but also on how their coworkers are treated (Cugueró-Escofet et al. 2014). Employees may take action against supervisors who behave abusively toward innocent coworkers (Mitchell et al. 2015). Employees who observe their peers being subjected to interactional injustice view the responsible supervisor as unethical, and they are more likely to engage in deviant workplace behavior and less likely to engage in organizational citizenship behavior (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Suárez-Acosta, 2014).
Negative repercussions associated with third-party perceptions of injustice are likely to be especially severe in the case of termination decisions. Dismissal from employment often has a drastic effect on individual livelihood and well-being (Eliaison and Storrie, 2009). While some countries require that terminations be justified on the basis of performance, misconduct, or redundancy, the prevalence of at-will employment in the United States means that employees can legally be fired for off-duty behavior in most instances (Harcourt et al. 2013). Many American workers, however, are unaware of this and mistakenly believe they have more legal rights than they do (Eastman, 1997). Terminating an employee without “good cause” is widely viewed as a major violation of a psychological contract belief (Roehling and Boswell, 2004). While employees may sometimes disagree about the ethics of termination decisions resulting from workplace deviance, the scope for controversy associated with firings due to non-work behavior is likely to be considerably greater.

A few studies have reported variation in attitudes about the ethicality of employment-related consequences for social media activity (Roth et al. 2016; Valentine et al. 2010). In a survey of young undergraduate students at a Midwestern university, 33% agreed that a teacher should lose her job because of a social media post revealing lewd behavior at a bachelor(ette) party, whereas 39% disagreed and 28% remained neutral (Drouin et al. 2015). But to date there has been little research on the underlying reasons for this apparent lack of consensus. Here I consider a variety of off-duty deviant behaviors and test a theory-based explanation for why people disagree about the (in)appropriateness of termination decisions for these behaviors.
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Moral Foundations Theory

Moral foundations theory is a pluralistic theory of morality that proposes the existence of multiple basic foundations of moral reasoning (Graham et al. 2013), based on four foundational assumptions. First, there is an innate ‘first draft’ of moral knowledge, guided by the need to address commonly recurring adaptive social challenges. Second, this draft is ‘edited’ during development based on one’s experiences within a culture. Third, moral judgment is heavily driven by fast moral intuition, which precedes moral reasoning. Fourth, there are multiple moral foundations because of the variety of recurring challenges that shape the innate ‘first draft’ (Graham et al. 2013). Here I propose that idiosyncratic differences in sensitivity to moral foundations predict how people respond when others are punished for violating those foundations; differences in moral intuitions therefore lead to divergent responses when a person suffers work-related consequences for off-duty deviance.

While the number of foundations and their specific labels remain the subject of debate and development, the six most widely applied and studied foundations are care/harm, purity/degradation, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and liberty/oppression (Graham et al. 2011; Iyer et al. 2012). Two of these foundations—care/harm and purity/degradation—may be particularly applicable to deviant behavior revealed on social media. The care/harm foundation addresses the adaptive challenge of ensuring the well-being of children, and norms related to this foundation are violated by cruel or kind acts toward others, especially those who are vulnerable, such as children or animals (Graham et al. 2011; Graham et al. 2013). The purity/degradation foundation addresses the adaptive challenge of avoiding communicable diseases, and norms related to this foundation are violated by behaviors that are
considered ‘unclean,’ including signs of sexual promiscuity or excessive use of drugs or alcohol (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt and Hersh, 2001; Oaten et al. 2009). Apparent cruelty toward disadvantaged individuals or groups shared via social media can fuel widespread condemnation and result in firings (Ronson, 2016), and the most commonly cited reasons for rejecting job applicants due to social media are content that is provocative and content that reveals drug or alcohol use (Grasz, 2014).

Moral foundations theory has proven to be empirically useful in understanding both individual level and group level differences. Although political orientation is associated with attitudes toward a wide variety of ethically-charged issues, moral foundations theory aims to go “beyond liberal and conservative” to offer a more nuanced and multi-faceted view of moral pluralism (Haidt et al, 2009; Koleva et al., 2012). In the United States political conservatism is associated with greater sensitivity to norms related to purity, authority, and loyalty, whereas political liberalism is associated with greater sensitivity to care and fairness (Graham et al. 2009). Andersen et al. (2015) recently advocated for the utility of moral foundations theory in business ethics education, suggesting that it is useful for business students to be aware that different sets of moral norms inform moral decision making, and that moral decisions are often first reached intuitively before being rationalized post-hoc. Moral foundations theory has also been applied in the study of leadership; Fehr et al. (2015) theorize that the moralization of a leader’s behavior depends on followers’ sensitivities to moral foundations (Fehr et al. 2015).

Moral foundations theory has also been the subject of substantial criticism (Graham et al. 2013; Sinn and Hayes, 2017). An alternative perspective on morality suggests that general morality may be monist, and that different approaches to moral decision-making reflect different manifestations of the care/harm dyad rather than a range of distinct moral foundations (Schein
and Gray, 2015). For the purposes of the current study, however, what matters is that both perspectives acknowledge diversity in how behaviors are judged. The key insight from moral foundations theory used here is that there are systematic, measurable differences in how people make moral judgments based on the nature of the moral norm being violated (Graham et al. 2011).

According to the precepts of moral foundations theory, people vary in their ‘sensitivity’ to specific moral foundations because they have different types of life experiences within cultures that emphasize different types of values (Graham et al. 2013). Sensitivity to a moral foundation refers to the extent to which a person endorses, values, and uses a given foundation in moral decision making (Graham et al. 2011). People vary in the extent to which they consider virtues associated with a given moral foundation as desirable, and the extent to which they consider deviance that violates the norms of a given moral foundation as wrong (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al. 2011).

I therefore predict that differences in sensitivity to moral foundations influence the way that third parties perceive and react to the punishment of people who have violated the norms associated with a given foundation. The more sensitive an observer is to a moral foundation, the more likely he or she is to respond favorably when someone who has violated associated norms is punished. Conversely, an observer who does not place a great deal of value on that moral foundation would be more likely to disapprove. Observers who do not perceive a termination decision as having a “good cause” view it as an unfair violation of the psychological contract governing employment and are more likely to take retributive action against the decision maker (Roehling and Boswell, 2004). In the case of off-duty deviance revealed on social media, I
propose that observers’ sensitivity to moral foundations will shape which types of deviance they perceive as constituting a ‘good cause’ for termination.

Hypothesis 1: Third-party observers who are sensitive to a moral foundation are more likely to view termination of employment for off-duty behaviors violating that foundation as fair and are less likely to take retributive actions against the manager responsible for the firing.

Organizational Justice and Organizational Policies

While organizations have little control over their employees’ sensitivity to different moral foundations, they can control how termination decisions are justified. Some organizations have begun to incorporate statements regarding off-duty deviance in their company codes of conduct (Stohl et al. 2017). A recent content analysis of Fortune 500 firms’ organizational codes of conduct found that 13% included an explicit statement regarding off-duty deviance (typically criminal) on their company website, and almost one out of five of these statements addressed social media usage (Lyons et al. 2016). As an example, the code provided to employees of General Motors (GM) states “you are the face of the Company, and what you publish reflects on GM and our brands. GM’s Social Media Policy sets forth requirements you must follow, whether you are interacting personally or as an authorized GM spokesperson” (as quoted in Lyons et al. 2016, pg. 18). Another global study of large firms found that almost twenty percent of social media policies explicitly applied to situations outside of work, and a similar percentage of these threatened termination as a consequence for employee content in violation of the policy (Stohl et al. 2017).

Based on procedural justice theory (Lind and Tyler, 1988), I hypothesize that the presence of an off-duty conduct policy mitigates backlash if an employee is fired for off-duty
deviance. While the primary intention of these policies may be to deter off-duty deviance, they may also increase the likelihood that punishment of violators will be viewed as resulting from a fair process. If people are not sure whether an outcome is fair or not, they use the perceived fairness of the process as a heuristic (Van den Bos et al. 1997). In one field study, seasonal student employees who were given advance notice of video camera monitoring gave more favorable justice judgments and were more likely to return in comparison to those who were not warned in advance (Hovorka-Mead et al. 2002). By the same logic, third-party observers who are informed that an organization had an off-duty conduct policy should be more likely to accept the punishment of those who violated the policy, even if the observers do not personally believe the behavior was a moral transgression.

**Hypothesis 2: The existence of an organizational policy regarding off-duty conduct increases the perceived fairness of terminations for off-duty deviance and lowers intentions to take retributive action against the manager responsible for the decision.**

**RESEARCH OVERVIEW**

I present results from two empirical studies. The purpose of Study 1 is to validate realistic examples of off-duty deviance that violate norms associated with a single moral foundation. In Study 2 I formally test the two hypotheses with a separate sample of participants, who are asked to evaluate scenarios where a coworker was fired for the identified exemplars of off-duty deviance. Both studies rely on samples recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) labor platform, restricted to people located in the United States. Compared to student samples and other traditional convenience samples, MTurk workers are more demographically diverse and produce data that are at least as valid (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Thomas and Clifford, 2017). In particular, MTurk samples provide a wider age range than that used in previous research (e.g.,
Drouin et al. 2015). I used multiple attention check questions similar to the items of interest in order to safeguard data quality (Thomas and Clifford, 2017). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants.

**Study 1**

My intent in the first study was to identify multiple realistic examples of off-duty deviance that third-party observers generally agreed constituted a violation of a single moral foundation. Moreover, I sought to identify behaviors that would pose managerial challenges in that not all observers would agree on whether punishment was merited. Thus, I am not interested in examples of off-duty deviance that would be widely dismissed as trivial, nor those that would be widely condemned as monstrous, but rather those of “moderate” severity.

In order to do so, I adapted a procedure used by Clifford et al. (2015), who developed and validated a set of moral foundations vignettes of behaviors that violate a particular moral foundation but not others. Some of their vignettes are work-related (e.g. “you see an intern disobeying an order to dress professionally,” which violates norms of respecting authority) and others involve extreme and bizarre behaviors (e.g., necrophilia). Accordingly, I generated a new set of vignettes describing non-work related, non-criminal behaviors that have been revealed on social media.

Because of the nature of my research question, my retention criteria were also different from that used by Clifford et al. (2015). I wished to create realistic scenarios where punishment would be subject to debate, and so I wanted to retain only those deviant acts for which there was reasonable variation regarding its degree of wrongness. For behaviors that met this criterion, I next considered whether those who felt it to be wrong generally agreed on which specific moral foundation was violated.
Method

Sample. One hundred and nineteen adults (45 women, 74 men) located in the United States were recruited through MTurk. Their average age was thirty-four years old, with a range from nineteen to seventy. One additional response was excluded for failing an attention check. Participants were paid $1.40 for completing this task, which took approximately twelve minutes.

Procedure and materials. I reviewed media reports of social media shaming cases where people had been fired, or observers had called for them to be fired, for off-duty behavior revealed on social media, and generated twenty vignettes briefly describing these “deviant” behaviors. All participants viewed each of the 20 vignettes individually in random order. Participants rated the moral wrongness of each action on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all wrong to 5 = extremely wrong). Following the method developed by Clifford et al. (2015), participants were then asked which of seven statements best described the behavior:

- It violates norms of harm or care (e.g., unkindness, causing pain to another)
- It violates norms of fairness or justice (e.g., cheating or reducing equality)
- It violates norms of loyalty (e.g., betrayal of a group)
- It violates norms of respecting authority (e.g., subversion, lack of respect for tradition)
- It violates norms of purity (e.g., degrading or disgusting acts)
- It violates norms of freedom (e.g., bullying, dominating)
- It is not morally wrong and does not apply to any of the provided choices

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics for responses to the twenty vignettes are presented in Appendix A, which lists them in descending order of average perceived wrongness. One vignette (involving throwing a kitten as part of a joke) was eliminated because it was widely perceived as extremely
egregious behavior (m = 4.5 on the wrongness scale), and one (making fun of one’s own political party) was eliminated because subjects rated its wrongness as relatively low (m = 1.7).

The other eighteen vignettes had mean ratings between 2 and 4 on the 5-point scale. Of these, however, thirteen showed substantial disagreement regarding which specific foundation was most violated. For many situations, it is not surprising that several moral foundations may be considered relevant (Fehr et al. 2015). There were five vignettes, however, on which more than 60% of participants (of those who judged it to be wrong) agreed on which moral foundation had been violated. Three of these were perceived as most clearly violating norms of purity (listed in bold in Appendix A), and for two vignettes most people felt the behavior violated norms of care (italicized in Appendix A).

Thus this process resulted in a final set of five examples of deviant behavior that met my desired criteria; these were behaviors that most (but not all) observers felt were at least somewhat wrong but not horrific, and if so they generally agreed on which specific moral foundation norm had been violated.

Note that these five behaviors are among those typically cited as reasons for rejecting job applicants based on social media screening (see Grasz, 2014), e.g. indications of drug/alcohol use, provocative content, and badmouthing others. This suggests that the purity and care moral foundations may be the most realistic and broadly relevant when considering work-related consequences for behavior revealed on social media. It may also be the case that other forms of deviance revealed on social media are more ambiguous in terms of which moral foundations they are perceived to have violated.
Study 2

I developed termination scenarios based on the five behaviors validated in Study 1 and used them in Study 2 to formally test both hypotheses. Specifically, I hypothesize (H1) that the degree to which observers are sensitive to the moral foundation of purity will be positively associated with favorable responses to co-worker firings resulting from the three identified purity violations, and sensitivity to the care/harm foundation will positively predict favorable responses to firings resulting from the behaviors described in the two care scenarios. Because I use more than one operationalization of a violation of each moral foundation, I reduce the possibility that any observed effects would be due to the characteristics of a single specific violation (e.g., promiscuity) rather than reflective of reactions to the intended general construct (purity), thus enhancing generalizability (Highhouse, 2009).

My second hypothesis (H2) proposed that the presence of a pre-existing off-duty conduct policy mitigates negative responses to firings for deviance revealed on social media. In order to test this, it is not enough to simply compare the presence of a policy to the absence of one. In some contexts, providing any explanation at all (even if it is not informative) has been shown to increase acceptance of an action, i.e. the well-known placebo information effect (Langer et al. 1978). In this study, I therefore experimentally manipulate whether terminations are explained as due to organizational off-duty conduct policy or due to the manager’s personal reaction, in comparison to no explanation at all. I expect that the policy-based explanation will be much more effective in mitigating negative responses to terminations due to off-duty deviance.

Sample. One hundred and sixty-eight adults (90 women, 76 men, 2 other) located in the U.S. were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk for a survey on workplace decisions; none had participated in Study 1. Their average age was thirty-four, with a range from nineteen
to sixty-six. Seventy-two percent were currently employed part-time or full-time, and twenty-four percent supervised at least one employee. An additional twelve respondents were omitted due to their failure to pass one or more attention checks. Participants were paid $1.60 for completing this task, which took approximately 15 minutes.

**Design.** All participants evaluated each of five scenarios in which a coworker (Pat) had been fired for an off-duty behavior that became known through social media, with presentation order randomized. These scenarios were based on the three purity-violating behaviors and two care-violating behaviors identified in Study 1 and highlighted in Appendix A. Participants were asked to imagine that the scenarios took place in their current or most recent workplace and affected a coworker they did not personally know well.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which the explanation given for the coworker’s termination was manipulated, such that each participant saw the same information for all five scenarios: 1) no explanation, 2) a statement that “later, Pat’s supervisor explains that they fired Pat because the organization’s conduct policy prohibits off-duty conduct that could damage the organization’s reputation” or 3) a statement that “later, Pat’s supervisor explains that they fired Pat because Pat’s behavior was disgusting.” (I chose “disgusting” to operationalize the personal reaction explanation as it would be a plausible potential reaction to all five behaviors.) Each scenario took the following form:

“*You learn that Pat, a coworker whom you do not know well, [one of the five behaviors highlighted in Appendix A inserted here, omitting the word “someone” and written in the past tense]. A few days after this news started being shared around your workplace, you learn that Pat’s supervisor decided to fire Pat because of this, which is legal in your state.* [In the two explanation conditions, explanation inserted here].”
Dependent variables. After reading each scenario, participants were asked to indicate their reaction using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). To assess intention to take retributive actions, participants rated their agreement with four items (α = .92) derived from “status-leveling” punishment tendencies (Skarlicki and Rupp, 2010): “I would be likely to write a letter to lodge a complaint about Pat’s treatment,” “I would warn my coworkers that this supervisor is unfair,” “Pat’s supervisor should be reprimanded for the way they treated Pat,” and “I would be willing to sign a letter stating that Pat’s supervisor did the wrong thing and should be more careful in the future.”

To assess perceived fairness, I used a three-item measure (α = .97): “the decision to fire Pat was fair,” “Pat’s firing upheld ethical and moral standards” and “Pat’s firing was justified, given Pat’s actions” (adapted from Colquitt, 2001).

Individual difference predictor variables. The Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) measures sensitivities to moral foundations; it presents six questions related to each of five basic moral foundations (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, purity) plus two attention check items (Graham et al. 2011). The first part of the MFQ consists of statements related to the explicit endorsement of the moral foundations, for example “compassion for those who are suffering is the most important moral virtue” (care/harm). Agreement with these statements is rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The second part of the MFQ asks participants to rate how important specific criteria are when making moral decisions on a 6-point scale (1 = not at all relevant to 6 = extremely relevant). “Whether or not someone was cruel” is an example of an item used to assess sensitivity to the care/harm moral foundation.

The factor structure of the MFQ has been independently verified across multiple studies (Graham et al. 2011; Davies et al. 2014; Andersen, Zuber, & Hill, 2015). Participants responded
to the entire MFQ, but only two dimensions are of interest for this study: sensitivity to purity ($\alpha = .86$) and sensitivity to care ($\alpha = .57$).

Political orientation was assessed and included as a control variable because prior research has found that liberals and conservatives differ in their sensitivity to moral foundations, and that political orientation can predict reactions to moral vignettes (Graham et al. 2009; Haidt and Graham, 2007). I asked participants to “select the category that most closely describes [their] political identity” ($1 = $strongly liberal$ to 7 = $strongly conservative$). A similar measure has been used in prior moral foundations research (Graham et al. 2013) and single item left-right political scales are broadly applied as reliable indicators of U.S. political orientation in political science research (Kroh, 2007).

Results and discussion

*Individual difference variables.* The average sensitivity to care norms was 4.79 (SD = .66) and the average sensitivity to purity norms was 3.17 (SD = 1.25). More participants tended to describe themselves on the liberal end of the scale than the conservative (M = 3.07, SD = 1.64). As predicted by moral foundation theorists (Graham et al. 2009), greater political conservatism was positively related to sensitivity to purity norms ($r = .49$, $p < .001$) and negatively related to sensitivity to care norms ($r = -.17$, $p < .01$), although sensitivities to these two foundations were not significantly correlated with one another ($r = .13$, *ns*).

*Responses to termination scenarios.* Table 1 displays the mean responses across scenarios and experimental conditions; the first panel presents results for perceived fairness and the second panel shows those for retributive intentions. On average, firing someone for bragging about sexual exploits was perceived as least fair, and as most likely to engender retributive action, whereas firing due to online bullying behavior was perceived most favorably (although the mean
response was only slightly above neutral). But punishments for care violations were not uniformly viewed as more justified than firings for purity violations, and there was substantial variation across individual participants and across the five scenarios.
Table 3.1: Study 2. Mean responses to termination scenarios by experimental condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Purity violations</th>
<th>Care violations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making out&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Racy selfie&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation (n = 55)</td>
<td>2.79 (1.27)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgust explanation (n = 54)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.37)</td>
<td>4.01 (1.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy explanation (n = 59)</td>
<td>3.18 (1.67)</td>
<td>4.76 (1.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 168)</td>
<td>2.86 (1.46)</td>
<td>4.36 (1.85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Purity violations</th>
<th>Care violations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making out&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Racy selfie&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No explanation (n = 55)</td>
<td>4.03 (1.52)</td>
<td>3.10 (1.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgust explanation (n = 54)</td>
<td>4.46 (1.60)</td>
<td>3.24 (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy explanation (n = 59)</td>
<td>3.85 (1.59)</td>
<td>2.46 (1.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 168)</td>
<td>4.10 (1.58)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard deviations in parentheses. Superscript letters indicate associated vignette listed in Appendix A.
Because of the hierarchical structure of the data, I used multilevel modeling to analyze responses, which also accounts for the lack of independence among responses from the same subject, unlike ordinary least-squares (Nezlek, 2008). Models were specified with respondent-specific random intercept parameters. Each subject responded to each of the five scenarios. The specific scenario and the type of moral foundation violation (care or purity) were included as within-subjects (i.e., level one) explanatory variables, and the reason given for the firing (policy-based or disgust-based or none) was a between-subjects (i.e., level two) explanatory variable. The two moral sensitivity measures and political orientation were included as individual difference explanatory variables. Table 2 presents the results of this analysis for each of the two dependent variables, perceived fairness (ICC = 0.40) and retributive intentions (ICC = 0.43).
Table 3.2: Study 2. Multi-level analyses of responses to terminations for off-duty deviance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Perceived Fairness</th>
<th>Retributive Intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β (SE)</td>
<td>β (SE)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effects of individual differences</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminations resulting from violation of <strong>purity</strong> norms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to purity</td>
<td>.59 (.09) ***</td>
<td>-.53 (.08) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to care</td>
<td>.11 (.14)</td>
<td>-.01 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political orientation</td>
<td>-.06 (.06)</td>
<td>.06 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminations resulting from violation of <strong>care</strong> norms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to purity</td>
<td>.20 (.09) *</td>
<td>-.16 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to care</td>
<td>.52 (.15) ***</td>
<td>-.43 (.14) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political orientation</td>
<td>-.16 (.07) *</td>
<td>.19 (.07) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effects of justification manipulation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy explanation compared to No explanation</td>
<td>.51 (.20) **</td>
<td>-.50 (.20) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy explanation compared to Disgust explanation</td>
<td>.46 (.21) *</td>
<td>-.52 (.20) **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Hypothesis 1 was supported. Participants who were especially sensitive to the moral foundation of purity were much more likely to perceive the firing of a co-worker for off-duty behaviors violating purity norms as fair ($\beta = .59$, $p < .001$), and were less likely to endorse retributive actions directed at the responsible manager ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .001$). Purity sensitivity was also significantly related to the perceived fairness of firings due to care violations ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$), but not to retributive intent for care-violation scenarios ($\beta = -.16$, $ns$).

Sensitivity to the moral foundation of care was strongly predictive of the perceived fairness of firings for violations of care norms ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) and with retributive intent for those scenarios ($\beta = -.43$, $p < .01$). Care sensitivity was not significantly associated with reactions to firings resulting from violations of purity norms. Political conservatism was associated with more negative reactions to terminations for behaviors violating care norms, but political orientation was not significantly associated with responses to purity violation scenarios.

In sum, these results show it is not sufficient to ask whether people approve of firings for off-duty deviance or not; their judgment depends in part on whether the behavior in question violates a norm to which they are sensitive.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported. As shown in Table 2, justifying termination decisions by referring to a pre-existing off-duty conduct policy increased the perceived fairness of the decision (compared to no explanation: $\beta = .51$, $p < .01$ or the personal reaction explanation: $\beta = .46$, $p < .05$), and reduced intentions to take retributive actions (compared to no explanation, $\beta = -.50$, $p < .01$ or the personal reaction explanation: $\beta = -.52$, $p < .01$). Justifying termination decisions as resulting from the manager’s personal reaction to the deviant behavior did not change responses compared to providing no explanation. Other types of explanations or personal
reactions other than “disgust,” however, could conceivably alter perceptions of termination decisions.

The finding that the policy manipulation broadly mitigated responses to termination decisions for off-duty deviance provides evidence for the practical import of off-duty conduct policies. But it is also important to note that the average fairness rating in the policy condition (M = 4.03; see Table 1) was at the midpoint of the scale; the existence of the policy did not necessarily make observers approve of the firings, but rather made them less likely to strongly disapprove.

**DISCUSSION**

Whether to discipline employees for their social media behavior is a question of growing concern to managers and HR practitioners. There are many types of off-duty behavior that people reveal on social media which may be objectionable, but the managerial challenges become especially complex when many third-parties, including coworkers as well as other stakeholders, are likely to learn about any punishment (or lack thereof) and they disagree about its appropriateness.

Results from the first study reveal that people often disagree about how wrong such behaviors are, and, to varying degrees, why they are wrong, as shown in the results displayed in Appendix A. But I was able to identify several realistic and relevant behaviors that could be meaningfully distinguished as violating one of two basic moral foundations (Haidt, 2007): purity and care.

Using scenarios based on these behaviors, the second study’s results support a theory-based explanation underlying differences in how third parties respond to terminations for off-duty deviance. People who are sensitive to a moral foundation perceive firings due to violating
associated norms as acceptable, whereas those who are less sensitive to that moral foundation are more likely to condemn the firing and to endorse retribution against the responsible manager. Unlike past research on observers’ perceptions of discipline decisions for workplace deviance such as absenteeism (Klaas and Wheeler, 1990; Martocchio and Judge, 1995), this study breaks new ground by showing that individual sensitivities to moral norms interact with the nature of the off-duty deviance to shape reactions to punishment. My results show that whether an observer condemns or approves of firing an employee based on social media content depends (in part) on whether the content appears to violate a moral foundation the observer cares about.

This research supports the importance of examining the ‘moral alignment’ between the moral foundations of organizational leaders and those of their followers. Fehr et al. (2015, p. 200) theorized that the “benefits of being a moral manager may hinge on the alignment between a leader’s actions and the moral foundations of the leader’s followers.” If moral foundations are likely to sometimes collide, particularly in large organizations, leaders cannot simply rely on one best set of ethical leadership principles (Fehr et al. 2015). My results provide empirical support for this contention. I show that individual differences in sensitivity to moral foundations lead to divergent perspectives among employees regarding discipline for off-duty conduct, and so managers seeking to be perceived as fair face complex challenges in setting and communicating policy in a way that recognizes the (likely) moral diversity within their organization.

Crucially, however, my results also demonstrate that the presence of an off-duty conduct policy will tend to broadly improve third-party reactions to terminations. This effect was consistent across multiple types of off-duty deviance. Establishing and publicizing an off-duty conduct policy that covers social media, as some large organizations have now done (Lyons et al. 2016; Stohl et al. 2017), may well reduce post-punishment backlash from employees who might
otherwise object to actions taken against their coworkers, regardless of the nature of the off-duty conduct. A long-held principle of employee discipline is that employees should be forewarned of prohibited workplace behaviors and their associated consequences; the findings presented here show that this principle also applies to prohibited off-duty behavior.

**Limitations and research needs**

In this research I identified and tested reactions to examples of off-duty deviance that related to either the purity or care moral foundations. In the first study I presented a variety of behaviors that people have been criticized for revealing on social media, but none were perceived by the majority of participants as violating primarily loyalty, authority, or fairness norms. But it is not surprising that observers would disagree about which moral foundation is most relevant for many situations (see Fehr et al. 2015). Future research addressing violations of these other moral foundations would be useful, although violations of purity and care norms may be the most common types of behavior revealed on social media that would cause applicants to be denied jobs (Grasz, 2014) or cause employees to suffer workplace consequences.

In Study 2, I used a gender-neutral name to describe the fired coworker, but it is possible that third-party perceptions of termination decisions are influenced by the gender, or other characteristics, of an employee who violated care or purity norms. I examined only termination decisions, but many organizations might impose less draconian punishments for off-duty deviance, such as unpaid suspensions. Finally, the nature of a vignette study limits other factors that could influence real-world employee reactions to termination decisions, such as gossip regarding the decision, prior beliefs about the coworker or manager, and the specific details of the incident.
An important question for future research is whether managers’ moral foundation sensitivity influences their decisions about discipline for off-duty deviance. While “cyber-vetting” studies have analyzed the validity of social media as cues about applicant personality and abilities (Roth et al. 2016), an extension of the current research would be to test how individual differences in the moral foundation sensitivity of recruiters and hiring managers affect their judgments of applicants’ social media content. If organizations differ in terms of their moral foundations, as suggested by Fehr et al. (2015), then hiring managers may employ a process of ‘morality matching’ by either explicitly or implicitly considering whether a candidate’s values appear to align with those of the organization, similar to the way they evaluate ‘cultural match’ (Rivera, 2012).

Future research should also examine whether third parties react negatively to a situation in which no discipline whatsoever is imposed for off-duty deviance. Failing to punish deviance could generate moral misalignment between a manager’s decision and the values of many third-party observers. I recommend that future research examine the potential drawbacks of managerial non-response to off-duty deviance, and research testing the reactions of other types of third parties (e.g., customers) is also merited.

I encourage further work examining the process by which certain managerial decisions become moralized. Through the process of moralization, preferences become values; behaviors that in the past did not contain a moral component, such as cigarette smoking, can take on moral significance over time (Rozin, 1999; Rozin and Singh, 1999). However, which preferences and behaviors are likely to take on a moral component may depend on both individual sensitivity to moral foundations and group-level tendencies in sensitivity to moral foundations (Fehr et al. 2015). The current work provides evidence that individual differences in moral foundation
sensitivity produce differences in the extent to which employees moralize acts of off-duty deviance, and perhaps the extent to which they moralize the act of punishing off-duty deviance. Adopting the lens of moral pluralism is likely to be useful in future research seeking to understand moral reactions within organizations, both in terms of why employees diverge in their perceptions to the same event, and how the moral foundations emphasized within an organization may shape employee perceptions (Fehr et al. 2015). There can be considerable disagreement regarding which behaviors have a moral component. Properly understanding moral behavior and perceptions within organizations requires recognition that morality means different things to different people.

**Practical implications**

There are many cases where organizations may be ethically and/or pragmatically justified in punishing employees for their off-duty behavior. But in the age of social media, employers need to consider how a punishment might be viewed by third party stakeholders, including employees, consumers, and business partners. The classic ethics test of imagining one’s behavior being reported on the front page of tomorrow’s newspaper may be especially appropriate here, and managers would be well-advised to proactively consider how firing an employee for off-duty deviance would be perceived by observers with different moral foundation sensitivities.

The question that employers must address, and develop organizational policy to support, is: *under what circumstances, if any, is it right to discipline an employee because of non-work related social media information?* While some organizations have adopted policies that reinforce their right to fire employees for off-duty behavior, other firms might want to support employees by assuring them they will only be judged for their behavior as it relates to their job. The latter approach would also help prevent problems caused by managers’ idiosyncratic beliefs or biases.
In some cases, however, there may be some ambiguity in defining whether social media content is “work-related.” For example, it may be unreasonable, or unethical, to expect employees to work in teams with coworkers who have expressed racist views on social media, and retaining someone in a managerial role once their views become known might well expose the firm to legal liability.

I encourage organizations to establish an approach to responding to off-duty deviance and, if appropriate, to develop and communicate a social media policy to employees. While organizations are increasingly implementing social media policies, employees are often unaware of what does and does not violate their employer’s social media policy and are frequently left without practical advice regarding how to adhere to the social media policy (O’Connor et al. 2016). I recommend that if a company chooses to implement a social media policy, it should be clearly communicated to employees, ideally through a training program, with unambiguous language detailing the types of online behavior that are or are not permitted (O’Connor et al. 2016). While no policy is likely to address all types of behavior that could conflict with organizational interests, the vignettes I tested in Study 1 represent a broad sample of behaviors that organizations have chosen to punish in the past, and could provide a useful foundation for organizational decision-makers to determine what types of behavior should or should not be included in a social media conduct policy. Efforts to develop and communicate a detailed social media policy may not only deter social media deviance, but as shown in the results presented here, mitigate backlash from decisions to punish violators.

On the other hand, social media policies might make organizations less attractive to prospective employees (Stoughton et al. 2015) or foster negative attitudes among current employees. For example, the New York Times recently announced a policy that their journalists
must not promote political views or “make offensive comments” in their social media posts, which has been widely mocked by journalistic experts (Ingram, 2017). The decision over whether and how to develop a policy regarding employee social media use is complex, and while the current work provides evidence that should allow managers to make a more informed decision when setting policy, the appropriate course of action is likely to vary by industry and organization.

More broadly, organizations may wish to consider training for managers that discourages them from connecting to their subordinates on social media, or that provides guidelines on how to responsibly interact with employees on social media. I suggest that social media connections among coworkers can be viewed as a double-edged sword. Recent research suggests that coworker connections on public platforms such as Twitter and Facebook may benefit work attitudes and even performance (Huang and Liu, 2017; Schmidt et al. 2016). Yet these connections also make it more likely that coworkers and managers will discover things about their fellow employees they disapprove of, or that they may view innocuous social media behavior out of context and misinterpret it as deviance (Nissenbaum, 2009). Because of idiosyncratic differences in moral foundation sensitivity, I recommend that a diverse group of organizational members have input in disciplinary decisions regarding employee off-duty deviance. Such decisions should be based primarily on whether the behavior poses a legitimate threat to organizational interests, and consequences such as suspensions or mandated training may often be more appropriate than termination.

**CONCLUSION**

The advent of social media means that managers, coworkers, and other stakeholders are increasingly likely to become aware of employees’ off-duty behavior. Numerous widely
publicized instances of employees who were terminated for behavior revealed on social media that was neither illegal nor obviously work-related have sparked a great deal of controversy (Ronson, 2016). To date, however, researchers have paid much more attention to the use of social media in pre-employment screening than to its use in informing disciplinary decisions about current employees. This work represents a valuable step toward understanding how moral pluralism and organizational policy shape reactions to these decisions. There remains much to be understood about the ways in which greater access to information about employees’ personal lives complicates workplace relations, and I encourage scholars to consider the research opportunities presented by the increasing erosion of barriers between work and personal lives.
REFERENCES


CareerBuilder. (2018). More than half of employers have found content on social media that caused them not to hire a candidate, according to recent CareerBuilder survey. *CareerBuilder.com*.


Grasz, J. (2014). Number of employers passing on applicants due to social media posts continues to rise, according to new CareerBuilder survey. *CareerBuilder.com*.


Miller, R., Parsons, K., & Lifer, D. (2010). Students and social networking sites: the posting


Appendix A. Study 1. Ratings and classifications of vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette (starts with: someone…)</th>
<th>Wrongness (SD)</th>
<th>Not Wrong</th>
<th>Care</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
<th>Authority</th>
<th>Purity</th>
<th>Liberty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…throws a kitten as part of a joke, causing it to yelp on impact.</td>
<td>4.5 (.75)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…posts a picture of a person on Twitter without their knowledge, making fun of their weight. a</td>
<td>3.96 (.95)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…creates an account on a website intended to help people commit adultery without their spouse's knowledge.</td>
<td>3.84 (1.09)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…tells a dirty joke at a holocaust memorial.</td>
<td>3.72 (1.27)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes a post on Facebook about how people with disabilities are a drain on society.</td>
<td>3.61 (1.17)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…disposes of a small bag of garbage by throwing it into a nearby forest.</td>
<td>3.54 (.95)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes an obscene gesture in a cemetery for military veterans.</td>
<td>3.42 (1.15)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…yells at a server at a restaurant because their meal is late. b</td>
<td>3.35 (.99)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…posts online about a private conversation they overheard containing what they consider offensive humor, including a picture of those involved in the conversation.</td>
<td>3.31 (1.03)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes a joke about how members of a specific religious group are dumb.</td>
<td>3.09 (1.29)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…participates in a non-violent white nationalist rally.</td>
<td>2.86 (1.39)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes a post on Facebook about how worthless teachers are.</td>
<td>2.85 (1.23)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…who is a United States citizen burns an American flag at a protest.</td>
<td>2.73 (1.48)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…states that biological differences between men and women make men better suited to do certain types of work and women better suited to do other types of work.</td>
<td>2.71 (1.35)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes a post on Twitter making fun of police officers.</td>
<td>2.59 (1.23)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…posts pornographic self-photography online. b</td>
<td>2.25 (1.41)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…posts on social media bragging about making out with multiple strangers the night before. c</td>
<td>2.22 (1.27)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…brags on social media about drinking excessively to the point of vomiting. c</td>
<td>2.19 (1.24)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…refuses to stand for the pledge of allegiance at a public event.</td>
<td>2.13 (1.35)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…makes a public online post making fun of their political party, saying they will support the opposing party's candidate.</td>
<td>1.74 (1.01)</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 119. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole percent. Superscripts denote those used to develop Study 2 scenarios (see Table 1)
CHAPTER FOUR
ESSAY THREE

MAKING SENSE OF OTHERS’ MISTREATMENT: HOW OBSERVING INCIVILITY SHAPES THIRD PARTY PERCEPTIONS

ABSTRACT
Acts of workplace incivility are often committed in public, but research to date provides limited explanation regarding how the experience of observing incivility influences how third parties anticipate they will be treated in the future, and how victims of incivility are perceived. To better understand the ways in which observing incivility shapes third party perceptions, I conducted a vignette study in which subjects read about an incident involving two managers, in which one manager either targeted the other manager with multiple acts of incivility or did not. Subjects (320 MTurk workers) were then asked to estimate their own experience of interpersonal fairness in this workplace in the future, and to assess the status of the managers involved in the incident. My results suggest that observing incivility results in decreased perceived workplace status of the victim and decreased anticipated interpersonal justice for oneself. These results provide a foundation for future studies regarding how third parties are impacted by the experience of observing incivility.

Keywords: Incivility, status, social dominance orientation, gender, experimental.
INTRODUCTION

Workplace incivility, which includes behaviors that are rude or disrespectful to others, is widespread and has negative consequences for victims, third party observers, and organizational interests (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Miner & Eischeid, 2012; Porath & Erez, 2009; Estes & Wang, 2008; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). In the current work, I suggest that witnessing incivility between coworkers is a personally relevant source of information for third parties. Because incivility is often an organization-level phenomenon (Miner et al. 2018; Griffin, 2010), witnessing an episode of incivility could provide meaningful information about how the third party would likely be treated by others in this organization, particularly when the observer and victim share a salient social identity (e.g. gender). Furthermore, I examine whether witnessing incivility shape third party perceptions of the employees involved in the incident, including their status in the organization, and whether these perceptions will be informed by the observer’s endorsement of systems that perpetuate unequal distribution of negative outcomes based on social status (i.e. the observer’s social dominance orientation).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways in which observing incivility influences how third parties perceive their workplace. My results suggest previously unobserved ways in which the experience of observing incivility influences third party perceptions. Based on scenario-based experiment, I find that observing incivility leads to more pessimistic predictions by third parties regarding their own future treatment in the same workplace. I do not, however, find support for my prediction that this effect would be stronger when the observer and victim are the same gender, which is intended to test my predictions about social identity more generally.
I also find that victims of incivility are perceived as having less workplace status. However, I did not find support for my prediction that social dominance orientation would moderate this effect, nor did I find support for my predictions related to how observing incivility would influence desire to affiliate with the victim and instigator of incivility. These findings provide a promising new direction for future research regarding the effects of incivility and the ways in which third parties make sense of incivility.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

**Workplace incivility**

Workplace incivility refers to treating others “rudely or discourteously” in the workplace, violating norms related to respect and treatment of others (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 455). While initially conceptualized as involving ambiguous intent on the part of the instigator to harm the victim (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), more recent work on workplace incivility has suggested that ambiguity of intent to harm is not a necessary characteristic of incivility, and that involved parties may perceive the instigator’s intent differently (Miner et al., 2018). Incivility relates to minor interpersonal deviance, which includes social behavior that results in others being at a personal or political disadvantage, such as gossiping or blaming colleagues for mistakes (Robison & Bennett, 1995). Experiencing incivility as a victim is negatively associated with job satisfaction, and positively associated with job withdrawal, negative emotional reactions, and psychological distress (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Pearson & Porath, 2005). Most research on workplace incivility has focused on victims and instigators. However, third party observers of incivility also suffer undesirable consequences, including negative emotional responses, anxiety, and decreased citizenship behavior (Miner & Eischeid,
This suggests the impact of incivility is not constrained to parties directly involved, and that the costs of incivility may not be immediately apparent.

Workplace incivility is often an organizational-level phenomenon, with individual instances of incivility frequently being representative of a more widespread pattern of behavior throughout the organization (Miner et al., 2018; Griffin, 2010). Because of this, observing workplace incivility can provide meaningful information about organizational norms regarding how people treat each other, and not just information about how the directly involved parties treat each other. As suggested by social information processing theory, one’s social environment is an important source of information when developing attitudes, and perception of the characteristics of one’s workplace are constructed in part by observing the salient social behavior of others (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Across a variety of psychological phenomenon, negative information is generally more salient and processed more thoroughly than positive or neutral information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, 2001). Because of this, I suggest that even if incivility is uncommon relative to observed neutral or positive interactions, it is likely to meaningfully influence one’s perception of one’s workplace. More specifically, I suggest that observing workplace incivility provides personally relevant negative information about the extent to which one can expect to be treated politely, with respect, and without being exposed to inappropriate remarks, collectively referred to as interpersonal justice (Colquitt, 2001; Bies, 2001). In other words, observing incivility directed toward others causes the observer to anticipate incivility directed toward oneself in the same social environment in the future.

Hypothesis 1a: Someone who has observed workplace incivility is less likely to anticipate interpersonal fairness for his or herself, compared to someone who has not observed workplace incivility.
Social identity

Social identity theory suggests that people frequently identify with larger groups based on characteristics such as gender, race, nationality, and other attributes, such that a person perceives their fate to be associated with that of their group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Social identity self-categorization is useful to individuals in part because it helps reduce uncertainty regarding one’s place in social environments (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Because of this, observing undesirable experiences suffered by a member of one’s social identity category may be interpreted as information regarding one’s own susceptibility to such experiences in the same social environment. I propose that when a member of a given social identity group becomes the target of incivility, observers are likely to infer that members of that social identity group are susceptible to incivility in the given workplace. Therefore, observers are likely to feel increased susceptibility to workplace incivility when they share membership in a salient social identity group with the victim.

While my prediction applies to a variety of social identity categories, I have chosen to focus on gender for the purpose of this study, in part because gender can be reliably and subtly manipulated in vignette studies using gendered names (Van Fleet & Atwater, 1997), and because gender is a sufficiently salient social identity category to influence observer reactions in prior work on observation of incivility (Miner & Eischeid, 2012). Because women are disproportionately targeted by incivility compared to men (Cortina et al. 2013; Cortina, 2008), it is possible that observing incivility would cause women to make stronger negative adjustments to their forecasts of future treatment, especially when the target of incivility is a woman. That said, men and women who witness incivility directed toward a coworker of their own gender tend to experience greater negative emotional consequences than third parties who witness
incivility directed toward a coworker of a different gender, suggesting that the effect of shared
gender is not constrained to women in the context of observing incivility (Miner & Eischeid,
2012). Relatedly, the logic underlying my arguments related to shared social identity is exclusive
to neither women nor men. Therefore, I make no formal prediction regarding whether this effect
will be observed differently in women or men, despite there being some reason to believe it
might be stronger or only present among women.

_Hypothesis 1b: Observing incivility directed toward someone of the same gender will
have a greater negative impact on the observer's anticipated experience of interpersonal
fairness._

**Victim derogation and status loss**

When observing how others have suffered negative outcomes, people are often motivated
to engage in victim derogation, which refers to the tendency to rationalize that the disadvantaged
are somehow responsible for their own misfortune (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005). This is explained
in part by the motivation to maintain belief in a just world, such that people generally receive
what they deserve (Lerner, 1980). The tendency to rationalize the misfortune of others as being
deserved has been observed in a variety of experimental contexts (Hafer & Begue, 2005). Third
party motivation to see the world as a just place provides a partial explanation for why third
parties gave victims of unfair treatment lower job applicant ratings and performance ratings
(Skarlicki & Turner, 2014). Observers also frequently condemn passive victims of sexual
harassment, in part because observers anticipate that they would be more likely to confront the
harasser (Diekmann, Walker, Galinsky, & Tenbrunsel, 2013). The history of victim precipitation
theory, an archaic theory proposing that victims of crime (particularly sexual violence) often
share responsibility for their misfortune, serves as an example of explicit and elaborate victim
derogation (Cortina, Rabelo, & Holland, 2018). Together, these bodies of literature show that victims of undesirable treatment are often viewed more negatively in a variety of ways, and that victimhood is associated with the indirect cost of others viewing the victim more negatively.

Perceived loss of status has been proposed as one of the reasons for escalation of hostility among employees, such that victims of incivility often act defensively when their identity or status comes under threat (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). However, empirical research has not yet examined the ways in which incivility influences perceived status of the victim. Because third parties are often motivated to rationalize the misfortune of others and derogate victims, I propose that status loss is an indirect social cost associated with being the victim of incivility. Furthermore, I suggest that status loss will occur despite the observer’s awareness of the victim’s formal status in the organization, excluding the possibility that the victim will be presumed to be a lower-level employee.

_Hypothesis 2a: A victim of incivility is more likely to be seen by observers as having a lower level of status, compared to someone in the same position who has not been the victim of incivility._

**Social dominance orientation**

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a psychological difference that refers to the degree to which a person prefers inequality among social groups and endorses ideologies and systems that perpetuate such inequality (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Specifically, SDO is associated with preference for social systems in which dominant groups disproportionately receive ‘positive social outcomes,’ including political power and desirable resources, while subordinate groups disproportionately receive ‘negative social outcomes,’ such as stigmatization and substandard resources (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006: pp. 272). SDO is
also associated with the belief in a just world, a separate construct that along with SDO is considered a system-justifying belief (Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007), such that one tends to believe people generally receive the outcome they deserve (Bizer, Hart, & Jekogian, 2012). Because SDO is associated with both the tendency to believe that outcomes are typically deserved and the tendency to believe that negative outcomes tend to be justifiably distributed to low-status groups, I predict that SDO will be positively associated with the tendency to perceive a victim of workplace incivility as having lower workplace status.

*Hypothesis 2b: The effect described in Hypothesis 2a is positively moderated by the observer's social dominance orientation (SDO), such that a higher level of SDO is associated with a greater likelihood of perceiving a victim has having low status.*

People are generally motivated to socialize selectively, affiliating and ingratiating themselves with high status individuals in order to advance hierarchically and obtain better access to resources (Lund et al. 2007; Westphal & Stern, 2007). Drawing from my previous arguments regarding victims of incivility being seen as having less status, I suggest that the loss of status caused by incivility may make victims less desirable targets for affiliation. Relatedly, people are also often motivated to avoid affiliation with stigmatized individuals because of the possibility of reputational damage by association, including becoming the subject of negative gossip (Kulik, Bainbridge, & Cregan, 2008; Pryor, Reeder, & Monroe, 2012). Because incivility is likely to be disproportionately distributed to members of marginalized or stigmatized groups (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2012), I suggest that third parties may interpret incivility as a signal of the victim’s stigmatized or otherwise undesirable status. Therefore, to protect their own status and avoid stigmatization by association, I predict that observing incivility will cause third parties to be less likely to affiliate with the victim.
Hypothesis 3: Observers will be less likely to affiliate with a victim of incivility than someone of identical formal status who has not been the victim of incivility.

Social dominance orientation is associated with the desire for one’s ingroup to dominate outgroups, and for personal distance from outgroup members (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). SDO is also associated with the desire to rank superior to others and the tendency to believe that high status groups are also highly competent (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). If SDO is associated with the propensity to see the victim of workplace incivility as having relatively low status, it may also be associated with the propensity to see the instigator of incivility as having relatively high status. Because SDO is associated with the desire to belong to a socially dominant group, and because instigating incivility may be interpreted as a sign of having relatively high status, I predict that SDO is associated with an increased likelihood of choosing to associate with the instigator of incivility following observed incivility. Relatedly, I predict that SDO will be positively associated with perceived status of the instigator.

Hypothesis 4: Observer social dominance orientation is associated with a greater likelihood of affiliating with the instigator of incivility.

Hypothesis 5: Observer social dominance orientation is positively associated with perceived workplace status of the instigator.

METHODS

I tested these six hypotheses by using scenario-based experiment. Approximately two weeks prior to the experiment, subjects completed a pre-experiment survey containing a measure of SDO and questions related to demographic information. During the experiment itself, subjects read a vignette in which two managers interacted, and one manager either acted uncivil toward
the other or did not. The gender of each manager was manipulated so that I could observe how
the gender of both the instigator and victim of mistreatment influenced third party perceptions. I
captured subjects’ perception of the situation by measuring perceived status of both the instigator
and the victim, how the subject would anticipate being treated in the described workplace, and
the extent to which subjects would prefer to later interact with either the instigator, victim, or a
third party about whom the subject knew very little.

**Sample.** I recruited 320 adult United States citizens through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk
service (44% women, mean age: 37, SD: 11.05). Subjects were paid $.50 for their participation
in the first part of the study, which took approximately five minutes on average, and $1.00 for
their participation in the second part of the study, which took approximately seven minutes on
average. One-hundred and one additional responses were excluded because of incompletion
(including failure to complete both parts of the study), and four additional responses were
excluded because of two instances in which a user appeared to have completed the survey twice.
The quality of data collected through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk is comparable to other types of
convenience samples, and problems such as insufficient attention are not more pronounced on
Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Thomas & Clifford, 2017).

**Design.** Subjects were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions, all of which
involved reading a variation of a vignette that takes place during a job interview conducted by
two managers (the number of subjects placed in each condition is specified in Appendix B). The
vignettes used in this study are included in Appendix A. The vignettes varied by 1) whether one
manager was uncivil toward the other, 2) the gender of the first manager (the instigator of
incivility in the incivility condition), and 3) the gender of the second manager (the victim of
incivility in the incivility condition). In the incivility condition, I described three acts of incivility
committed by one manager against the other in addition to the neutral behaviors described across all conditions. I used clearly gender-specific names to manipulate the gender of both managers: Edward/Melissa for the first manager, and Richard/Rebecca for the second manager. These names are highly recognizable in the United States and are strongly associated with a specific gender (Van Fleet & Atwater, 1997), allowing them to be unambiguous manipulations of gender.

Dependent variable measures. In the pre-experiment survey, subjects completed a sixteen-item measure of social dominance orientation ($\alpha = .96$) (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). This measure involved subjects rating the extent to which they feel positively or negatively about each of sixteen statements and objects, such as “some people are just more worthy than others,” “it is important that I treat other countries as equals,” and “increased economic equality.” This measure used a 7-point scale (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive). In this survey, subjects were also asked to disclose general demographic information, including their age, gender, race, education, and employment status.

In the second part of the study, subjects completed a five-item measure of workplace status for both managers described in the vignette ($\alpha = .94$ when used to assess first manager, $\alpha = .97$ when used to assess second manager) (Djurdjevic et al., 2017). Examples of items featured in this scale include “[Name] possesses high status in this organization” and “[Name] possesses a position of prestige in this organization.” This measure used a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Because the managers were described as having the same formal status, I intended for this measure to capture subjective assessment of status based on the behaviors described in the vignette.

To measure likelihood of affiliating with the victim, subjects were presented with the following additional scenario:
After the interview, you are hired for the position you applied for. You receive an email asking you to select a person who will show you around the office on your first day and help you get settled.

You recognize two of the choices as being your interviewers: [Edward/Melissa] and [Richard/Rebecca], who are both managers. There is a third choice, Terry, who you have not met and works in the same department as [Edward/Melissa] and [Richard/Rebecca].

The two people you don’t choose won’t be informed of your decision, and won’t know that you could have chosen them.

Who would you choose?

Subjects were then asked to select either [Edward/Melissa], [Richard/Rebecca], or Terry (intended to be a gender-neutral, largely unknown third party).

Subjects also completed a four-item measure of anticipated interpersonal justice (α = .95), adapted from Colquitt (2001). My modifications to this scale included orienting the items to anticipate future treatment (instead of describing past treatment) and making the items refer to treatment in the workplace generally rather than treatment from a specific person or source. Examples of statements on this scale include “I will be treated with respect” and “others will refrain from improper remarks or comments toward me.” This measure used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

RESULTS

To test hypotheses 1a and 1b, I ran a two-way ANOVA (presence of incivility x whether gender of observer and victim matched). Hypothesis 1a predicts that observing incivility would be negatively associated with anticipated interpersonal justice for oneself. The ANOVA results
indicated a significant difference in anticipated interpersonal justice between subjects who observed incivility (n = 154, M = 4.20, SD = 1.30) and those who did not (n = 166, M = 5.78, SD = .75) [F(1, 316) = 180.17, p < .001], suggesting support for hypothesis 1a; t(240) = -13.23, p < .001.

Figure 4.1. Differences in anticipated interactional justice.

Hypothesis 1b predicts that the negative association between observing incivility and anticipated interpersonal justice would be stronger when the observer and victim are the same gender. However, the interaction between presence of mistreatment and whether the gender of the observer and victim matched (n = 77, M = 4.15, SD = 1.28) or did not match (n = 77, M = 4.26, SD = 1.32) was not significant [F(1, 316) = .067, p = .80], suggesting a lack of support for hypothesis 1b.
Table 4.1: Predicting the effect of incivility on victim status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Dominance Orientation*</td>
<td>-.3</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-1.60 - .003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of Incivility*</td>
<td>-2.35</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>-2.91 - 1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDO x Presence of Incivility*</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.061 - .45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ .05

Hypothesis 2a predicts that a victim of incivility is more likely to be seen as having less status, and hypothesis 2b predicts that this effect is positively moderated by the observer’s SDO. To test this, I performed a regression analysis using PROCESS model 1 in SPSS (Hayes, 2017). The overall model was significant \[F(3, 316) = 54.74, p < .001, R^2 = .34\]. As shown above in table 1, the presence of incivility is negatively predicted the victim’s perceived status, which suggests support for hypothesis 2a \[b = -2.35, t(316) = -8.3, p < .001\]. SDO predicted victim status, although narrowly \[b = -.3, t(316) = -1.99, p = .048\]. SDO moderates the relationship between incivility and victim status \[b = .26, t(316) = 2.59, p = .01\]. However, the moderation is such that incivility becomes a weaker predictor of victim status at high levels of SDO, as shown in table 4.2. This suggests a lack of support for hypothesis 2b.

Table 4.2: Conditional effects of incivility on victim status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SDO</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One SD below mean*</td>
<td>-2.06</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-2.49 - 1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the mean*</td>
<td>-1.71</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-1.98 - 1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One SD above mean*</td>
<td>-1.35</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-1.75 - .96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ .05
To test hypothesis 3, I performed a binary logistic regression to determine the effect of incivility on the likelihood that observers will choose to affiliate with the victim (compared to choosing to affiliate with either the instigator or neutral third party). Contrary to hypothesis 3, incivility was positively associated with affiliating with the victim of incivility (B = .62, SE = .24, p = .009, Exp (B) = 1.86), although the amount of variance in affiliation explained by incivility was small (Nagelkerke $R^2$ = .03).

Hypothesis 4 predicts that SDO will be positively related to the likelihood of affiliating with the instigator of mistreatment. To test this, I performed a binary logistic regression, the result of which was not significant (B = -.1, SE = .35, p = .42, Exp(B) = .905). To test hypothesis 5, which predicts that SDO will be positively associated with perceived status of the instigator, a simple linear regression was calculated to predict instigator’s perceived status based on SDO. No significant regression equation was found [$F(1, 152) = .46, p = .5, R^2 = .003$].

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study provide a useful foundation for future work related how incivility and other forms of mistreatment influence third party perceptions. I found support for my prediction that observing incivility directed toward others results in reduced anticipated interpersonal justice for oneself. While intuitive, this finding suggests that third parties experience negative reactions to observed incivility toward others not only because the experience is unpleasant, but also because of the implications for how the observer might be treated in the future. It also suggests that people form impressions of a workplace not only based on how they are treated personally, but also based on how others treat each other.

I also found support for my prediction that witnessing incivility results in reduced appraisal of the victim’s workplace status, regardless of the observer’s knowledge regarding the
victim’s formal status. This finding highlights a way in which victims of incivility suffer reputational consequences that may not be observable through victim self-report, suggesting that the perspective of third parties is important for understanding the scope of harm suffered by victims of incivility. This also provides partial support to speculation offered in prior literature regarding the possibility that victims of incivility respond with incivility in order to protect their status (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

I did not find support for my prediction that witnessing incivility directed toward a person of the same gender would result in a greater decrease anticipated interpersonal justice for oneself than observing incivility directed toward a person of a different gender. However, this null result is insufficient to conclude that gender does not influence social perception in the context of observing incivility. Because my experiment was a brief vignette study, with gender being manipulated using gendered names alone, it is possible that gender was not sufficiently salient to create an effect. It also likely that shared gender would influence social perception when observing other forms of mistreatment, such as sexual or gender harassment. Finally, because some of my arguments related to social identity are not exclusive to gender, I encourage future work to also examine how race and other social identity categories influence observer perceptions.

I also did not find support for my prediction that observers will be less likely to affiliate with victims of incivility. Instead, I found support for a weak effect in the opposite direction, although the amount of variance explained by this model suggests that the effect may not be of practical significance. Finally, I did not find support for my predictions that SDO would positively moderate the relationship between incivility and perceived status of the victim, or that SDO would be associated with greater likelihood of affiliating with instigators of incivility.
While surprising, this may suggest that the mechanism by which victims of incivility come to be seen as having low status may not be related to beliefs associated with SDO.

The results of this study offer several tentative theoretical contributions. First, I extend the literature on sensemaking and interpersonal justice by providing evidence that employees look to how others are treated when forecasting how they will be treated themselves, and that observing others’ experiences can shape employees’ anticipation of future interpersonal justice. Second, I provide support for a previously unrecognized way in which victim derogation occurs, showing that victims of incivility may suffer subtle reputational harm, such as status loss, when incivility is witnessed by third parties. Finally, by supporting prior speculation that victims of incivility may retaliate due to status loss, I provide a foundation for work that considers the ways in which incivility may cause retaliation because of status loss.

Limitations and Future Research

In experimental settings, observers of mistreatment sometimes react differently to scenario studies compared to more realistic live studies (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). While this difference has primarily been observed in the context of work on bystander intervention, field research would help test whether the relationships observed in this study are present in real workplaces. Relatedly, participants in this study were provided minimal information about the involved parties and workplace. I suspect that the effects observed in this study are likely to differ based on the observer’s prior knowledge of the victim’s status and the observer’s prior assumptions and attitudes about the workplace in which the incivility occurred. For example, victims with low formal status may suffer reduced status loss because they have less to lose. Status loss may also result from other types of mistreatment, such as sexual harassment or abusive supervision, and status loss may vary based on the severity of mistreatment.
current study has provided preliminary evidence of ways in which observing incivility influences perceptions of one’s workplace, additional work is needed in order to understand the conditions under which these effects hold.

In this study, I observed that an imagined victim of incivility is perceived to have less workplace status than an otherwise identical person who was not victimized. However, the reason for this loss of status is not clear and can be explained by multiple competing accounts. It may be that incivility directly causes the victim to lose status, such that incivility changes the way observers perceive the victim. This explanation aligns with research related to victim derogation and the proposal that victims of incivility sometimes retaliate in part to restore their own status (Skarlicki & Turner, 2014; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Alternatively, while my study held formal status of the victim constant, observers may interpret incivility as evidence of a victim’s low informal status because lower-status employees are more frequently victims of incivility. This explanation would align with social information processing theory (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), and would likely best explain my results if this effect cannot be replicated in situations where the observer has more substantial a priori knowledge of the victim’s informal status. Future research should test these competing explanations and potentially identify other mechanisms by which incivility can lead to reduced perceived status of victims.

Another promising direction for future research would be an examination of the relative effectiveness of different approaches victims might take to restore status. It has been speculated that victims of incivility might retaliate with incivility to restore their own status (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), but no empirical research to date has examined whether retaliation is an effective means of restoring one’s status in the eyes of third parties. Because retaliation can often have negative consequences, it would also be useful to examine less problematic approaches victims
of incivility might take to protect their status, such as voicing their displeasure with being
mistreated, or receiving an apology from the instigator. Similarly, research should identify ways
in which third parties, such as managers, can facilitate a restorative process so that victims can
regain status without having to retaliate. Such research could produce highly valuable practical
advice for responding to incivility in a way that does not escalate the conflict while still
obtaining the victim’s desired outcome of restoring status.

**Practical Implications**

Because the effects reported in this paper have thus far been observed only in a single
experimental study, I do not have actionable advice for managers at this time. However,
provided that these findings can be replicated, and this line of research extended, there are
several ways in which this area of study may inform the behavior of managers and employees.
First, managers should recognize that the process of repair following incivility ought to address
the ways in which third party perception of the workplace has been influenced. Observers of
incivility may benefit from reassurance that incident was isolated and that there is reason to
anticipate interpersonal fairness in the future. Second, because victims of incivility suffer loss of
perceived status, it may be beneficial to provide victims with a non-destructive means of
restoring status. Otherwise, victims may be motivated to restore status through retaliation, thus
perpetuating a cycle of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Finally, this research contributes
to the body of evidence suggesting that the harm of incivility extends beyond the parties directly
involved, and that incivility causes damage that is not immediately obvious. This should provide
managers with additional reason for taking incivility seriously and working to develop an
organizational climate in which people are expected to treat each other with respect and dignity.
CONCLUSION

By studying how third-party observers perceive episodes of incivility, it is possible to develop a more thorough understanding of the negative consequences of incivility. In this paper, I have provided experimental evidence suggesting that observing incivility causes the observer to anticipate less interpersonal fairness for oneself in the future. I also provide support for the idea that victims of incivility suffer negative reputational consequences, including being perceived as having less workplace status. These findings provide a useful foundation for future work regarding third party perceptions of incivility, the ways in which incivility harms both victims and observers, and how the psychological consequences of incivility can be addressed.
REFERENCES


discriminatory workplace. *Gender and the dysfunctional workplace*, 120-134.


Van Fleet, D. D., & Atwater, L. (1997). Gender neutral names: Don't be so sure!. *Sex roles, 37*(1-2), 111-123.


Appendix A: Study 1 Vignettes.

**Mistreatment conditions:**

Imagine that you are interviewing for a new job that is important to you. The interview is being conducted by a manager named *(Edward/Melissa)* and a manager named *(Richard/Rebecca)*. The two are managers from the same department. Below are some of the things you observe during this interview:

You shake hands with *(Edward/Melissa)* but when you try to shake hands with *(Richard/Rebecca)*, *(Edward/Melissa)* tells *(him/her)* to go sit down because the interview is starting.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* asks you a question about why you're interested in the position.

*(Edward/Melissa)* asks you a question about your future career goals.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* asks you a question about your experience at a job listed on your resume. Before you can answer, *(Edward/Melissa)* dismisses the question and says that *(Richard's/Rebecca’s)* question is not relevant here.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* takes notes using a blue pen and *(Edward/Melissa)* is wearing a black watch.

The interview concludes and *(Richard/Rebecca)* leaves because *(he/she)* has another meeting. As you shake *(Edward's/Melissa’s)* hand, *(Edward/Melissa)* says: “I apologize for *(Richard's/Rebecca’s)* inability to ask good interview questions, we’re working on it.”

**Non-mistreatment conditions:**

Imagine that you are interviewing for a new job that is important to you. The interview is being conducted by a manager named *(Edward/Melissa)* and a manager named *(Richard/Rebecca)*. The two are managers from the same department. Below are some of the things you observe during this interview:

You shake hands with *(Edward/Melissa)* and then with *(Richard/Rebecca)* before the interview starts.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* asks you a question about why you're interested in the position.

*(Edward/Melissa)* asks you a question about your future career goals.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* asks you a question about your experience at a job listed on your resume.

*(Richard/Rebecca)* takes notes using a blue pen and *(Edward/Melissa)* is wearing a black watch.

The interview concludes and *(Richard/Rebecca)* leaves because *(he/she)* has another meeting.
Appendix B: *Study 1. Sample size per condition, by participant gender.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender of manager 1 (instigator) / Gender of manager 2 (victim)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male/Male</td>
<td>Female/Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No incivility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 M</td>
<td>26 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 F</td>
<td>17 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 total</td>
<td>43 total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incivility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 M</td>
<td>27 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 F</td>
<td>18 F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 total</td>
<td>45 total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 320
CHAPTER FIVE

DISSERTATION SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary and Conclusion

The three essays presented in this dissertation contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which third parties are influenced by witnessing mistreatment and how individual differences predict third party reaction to mistreatment. These essays contribute original theory, empirical evidence, and recommendations for managers.

The first essay presents a theoretical foundation for research on the longitudinal and organizational effects of third-party non-intervention. By drawing from a range of literature in psychology, sociology, and management, I open the black box of ‘doing nothing’ and present arguments that challenge prior conceptions of how third parties are influenced by the experience of observing mistreatment. Given the widespread negative impact of workplace mistreatment, it is highly valuable to develop a more accurate understanding of the ways in which mistreatment becomes widespread in an organization. This paper suggests that third parties play a greater role in the perpetuation and intensification of mistreatment than previously recognized, offering new directions for future theoretical development that takes a more holistic perspective on the causes and consequences of workplace mistreatment. This work also provides direction for future research that may contribute to the development of more effective practical interventions against mistreatment. Specifically, I propose that interventions need to address the mechanisms by which third parties rationalize mistreatment in the past, given that these mechanisms are likely to be self-reinforcing and may have cumulative effects. While these propositions need to be followed
by empirical research, this work offers a new way of approaching the problem of workplace mistreatment.

The second essay contributes to the nascent literature regarding off-duty deviance, offers advice for managers seeking to develop an effective policy related to employee behavior outside of work, and suggests that moral foundations theory applies in the context of third-party evaluation of a manager’s decision to enact punishment for moral violations. To my knowledge, this paper is the first experimental work to examine variation in how third parties evaluate off-duty deviance directly and the punishment of off-duty deviance. By showing that third parties evaluate the justice of a firing differently based on moral foundation sensitivity, this paper reveals one of the individual differences that contributes to differences in perception over whether an action constitutes mistreatment (in this case, unjust firing). This research also demonstrates that moral foundations theory can predict third party reactions to others’ response to moral foundation violations, which extends moral foundations theory and provides promising new directions for research regarding evaluation of responses to moral violations in other contexts. Finally, this paper provides practical advice by showing that pre-existing policies regarding employee off-duty deviance can protect managers from backlash for punishment, while also discussing the ethical implications of punishing employees for off-duty behavior.

The third essay provides evidence regarding the ways in which third party perceptions are informed by observing workplace incivility. Extending previous work that has focused on negative emotional reactions and work-related outcomes experienced by third parties, this paper suggests that observing incivility may cause third parties to feel more personally vulnerable to incivility in the future. Additionally, this paper provides preliminary evidence that victims of incivility experience status loss, which may be a type of harm caused by incivility that has not
been acknowledged in prior research. This suggests that when incivility occurs, repair efforts may need to consider ways in which the victim can be given the opportunity to restore their status.

**Future Research**

There is much that we do not understand about the ways in which third parties are impacted by mistreatment, and why perception of mistreatment varies between individuals and across environments. Research on mistreatment should consider the ways in which mistreatment harms not only direct victims, but third parties and the organizational community, and how such widespread harm can be repaired. In future work, I would like to examine why some people consider a given action to constitute mistreatment while others do not. A major challenge related to this topic is developing interventions that increase the likelihood of harmful behaviors being accurately labeled by third parties as mistreatment while minimizing the number of innocuous behaviors that are incorrectly labeled as mistreatment. This challenge, however, is made more complex by the fact that people have contrasting perspectives on what qualifies as mistreatment.

The second essay in my dissertation, “Deviance in the Eye of the Beholder,” suggests ways in which moral foundations theory can be applied to better understand the ways in which employees moralize managerial behavior and respond differently to situations based on personal values. I would like to continue with work that examines ways in which differences in sensitivity to moral foundations shape responses in other workplace contexts, and how moral foundations theory causes people to maintain different conceptions of what mistreatment is. Recognizing the variety of ways in which people conceive of morality can provide the foundation for a more complete understanding of ethical behavior at work.
The third essay in my dissertation, “Making Sense of Others’ Mistreatment,” provides promising directions for subsequent work. While this study identifies an association between incivility and status loss for victims, the mechanism by which this occurs is unclear. It is plausible that incivility directly causes status loss for victims. Alternatively, it may be that because low-status individuals are disproportionately targeted by incivility, observers are likely to assume that a victim of incivility is low-status. I would like to launch a follow-up study that examines which of these mechanisms best explains the status loss effect. I would also like to examine how status difference between the instigator and victim influences third party appraisal of the victim’s status, and whether victims can take effective action to restore status.