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Observer Reactions to Workplace Mistreatment: It's a Matter of Perspective

Tara C. Reich[1], M. Sandy Hershcovis[2], Zhanna Lyubykh[2], Karen Niven[3], Sharon K. Parker[4],

and Chris B. Stride[5]

[1] Department of Management, London School of Economics and Political Science

[2] Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary

[3] Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

[4] Curtin Business School, Curtin University

[5] Management School, University of Sheffield

Author Note

Abstract

Workplace mistreatment regularly occurs in the presence of others (i.e., observers). The reactions of observers toward those involved in the mistreatment episode have wide-reaching implications. In the current set of studies, we draw on theories of perspective-taking to consider how this form of interpersonal sensemaking influences observer reactions toward those involved in a witnessed incident of workplace mistreatment. We find that observers' blame attributions and empathic concern for the individual whose perspective is taken explain the positive effects of perspective-taking on observer attitudes toward and performance evaluations of both the target and instigator of a witnessed incident of mistreatment. We also find that the effect of perspective-taking on observer reactions is stronger when the witnessed mistreatment is more severe. Finally, we find that although observer perspective-taking in the context of mistreatment can be encouraged, the effect seems to benefit instigators' performance evaluations rather than targets'. Implications for targets, instigators, and organizations are discussed.

Observer Reactions to Workplace Mistreatment: It's a Matter of Perspective

Witnessing workplace mistreatment is a negative experience (e.g., Porath & Erez, 2009), so much that it adversely affects observers' subsequent social interactions (Woolum et al., 2017) and motivates people to intervene even when they have nothing directly to gain (e.g., Turillo et al., 2002). An incident of mistreatment is often theorized as a moral transgression that violates socially accepted norms of appropriate behavior (Folger, 2001) and evokes emotions in observers that are congruent with targets' emotions (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). As a result, much research on observers' reactions centres around the idea that observers who witness mistreatment tend to "side" with the target, thus reacting negatively to the instigator and positively to the target (e.g., Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017; Lotz et al., 2011; Umphress et al., 2013). However, observer reactions are not always aligned with targets (e.g., Li et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015), and although the idea that an observer might "side" with an instigator of mistreatment seems counterintuitive, recent research has found that observers sometimes respond negatively to targets (Xu et al., 2020).

Both viewpoints implicitly assume that observers "side" *either* with the target or instigator. In the current set of studies, we nuance this idea by arguing that observers' subjective perceptions of the mistreatment incident have implications for their reactions toward *both* the target and instigator. Drawing of theories of perspective-taking (Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008), we posit that observers do not necessarily choose a "side", but rather can react positively (or negatively) toward both the target and instigator. More specifically, we consider the role of active perspective-taking, a form of interpersonal sensemaking (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), in shaping observer reactions toward those involved in an incident of workplace mistreatment.

Our research contributes to the workplace mistreatment literature in several important ways. First, we highlight the importance of interpersonal sensemaking processes in shaping

observers' reactions to witnessed mistreatment. Existing research tends to focus on instigator-punishing or target-supporting reactions in response to witnessed mistreatment (e.g., Lotz et al., 2011; Turillo et al., 2002; see also O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). However, not all observers condemn mistreatment and act to restore justice (e.g., Li et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015). By examining observer perspective-taking during an incident of mistreatment, we consider how observers' reactions to a given incident of mistreatment differ depending on how they make sense of the situation. Importantly, this approach adds complexity to the view that observer reactions depend on attributes of the event (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011) or the observer (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015) to highlight the key role of interpersonal processes between the observer and both the target and instigator.

Second, we examine *how* perspective-taking influences observer reactions toward the target and instigator. Much theorizing and empirical investigation of observers' reaction to mistreatment have focused on either affective (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015) or cognitive (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2017) mechanisms. Drawing from state-based conceptualizations of perspective-taking (e.g., Parker & Axtell, 2001), we suggest that observers' perspective-taking activates both cognitive and affective mechanisms. More specifically, we argue that observers will be less likely to blame and more likely to feel empathic concern for those whose perspective they take, regardless of their role in the mistreatment event. We expect these mechanisms to influence observer reactions, such that they will be more likely to positively evaluate the performance of and develop positive attitudes towards those whose perspective they take. Thus, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of observers' sensemaking processes by demonstrating that both affective and cognitive routes are important for observers' reactions toward the target and instigator.

Third, we contribute to the debate about similarities and differences of mistreatment constructs by examining how mistreatment severity influences the strength of the effect of

perspective-taking on observers' reactions. Some scholars suggest that mistreatment-related constructs are distinct (e.g., Ferris et al., 2016), whereas others argue that they are more similar than different. The latter argument is supported by meta-analytic evidence that shows that different types of mistreatment are associated with similar target outcomes (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Hershcovis, 2011). However, even if targets do not differentiate among mistreatment types, the additional effort required to make sense of more severe acts of mistreatment is likely to have implications for the effects of observer perspective-taking. For example, rather than simply getting "angrier" (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), we suggest— based on frameworks of perspective-taking—that more severe acts of mistreatment will elicit a stronger tendency for observers to support those whose perspective they take. By examining the effect of perspective-taking in the context of different types of mistreatment in Study 2, we help clarify an important difference between high and low severity constructs and add further complexity to existing models of observer reactions.

Finally, we make a practical contribution by exploring whether perspective-taking can be encouraged in the context of an incident of mistreatment. Researchers have argued that people have a strong tendency to take the perspective of a person in distress (e.g., Batson et al., 1987). However, if observers are capable of taking the perspective of an instigator of mistreatment, it may lead them to engage in harmful behaviors that exacerbate mistreatment outcomes. In Study 3, we consider whether perspective-taking can be manipulated, and if so, how it affects observer evaluations of the target and instigator's performance. Findings from this study can help inform future interventions aimed at addressing workplace mistreatment.

Theoretical Background

Some models of observer reactions to the mistreatment of others implicitly assume that observers side with the target (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skarlicki & Rupp, 2010), while others suggest that observers may side with the instigator (e.g., Li et al., 2019).

However, before siding with anyone, observers need to make sense of the witnessed event. Some forms of workplace mistreatment are decidedly ambiguous. For example, workplace incivility is defined as a violation of workplace norms of civility that is low in intensity and ambiguous in terms of the instigator's intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Building upon theories of perspective-taking (Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008), we suggest that observer perspective-taking in the context of an incident of workplace mistreatment is likely to shape observers' cognitive and affective reactions to those involved in the incident. While this interpersonal sensemaking process may lead some observers to support the target, it may lead others to supporting the instigator of mistreatment. Further, taking the perspective of one person (e.g., the target) does not preclude perspective-taking of another (e.g., the instigator). Thus, consistent with recent theorizing on the effects of perspective-taking (Ku et al., 2015), we suggest a multi-foci approach such that perspective-taking elicits affective and cognitive mechanisms aimed at multiple actors which has implications for observer reactions toward both the target and instigator of an incident of workplace mistreatment.

Observer Perspective-Taking in the Context of Workplace Mistreatment

Perspective-taking is a form of interpersonal sensemaking that helps individuals "make sense" of witnessed events (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). The conceptualization of perspective-taking has undergone an evolution in which early definitions tended to confound perspective-taking with empathy; whereas later research has differentiated these constructs (see Longmire & Harrison, 2018 for a meta-analytic review). For example, early conceptualizations of perspective-taking introduced it as a sub-dimension of a trait empathy, which also included empathetic concern as a sub-dimension (Davis, 1983). Thus, this work conceived of empathy and perspective-taking as intertwined. However, subsequent theory (e.g., Parker et al., 2008) and research (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky, Maddux et al., 2008; Ng et al., 2019) distinguish these two constructs, and often view empathic concern as

an outcome of perspective-taking. Consistent with this latter perspective, Parker et al. (2008) conceptualized perspective-taking as a process of trying to understand or imagine the world from another's point of view (Galinsky et al., 2005), and defined active perspective-taking as an effortful, goal-directed process in which an individual attempts to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of another person. Although individuals differ in their natural inclination to adopt the perspective of others (e.g., Davis, 1983), *active* perspective-taking is a behavior that individuals can choose (or be encouraged) to engage in. Following more recent definitions and evidence, we distinguish perspective-taking and empathic concern, and theorize that empathic concern is an affective reaction to perspective-taking.

Traditionally research on perspective-taking has focused on a single target of this sensemaking process and highlighted its positive interpersonal effects (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky & Ku, 2004). However, more recent theorizing argues that this assumption is oversimplified: given that organizational interactions involve multiple actors, employees can engage in perspective-taking of more than one individual at a time (Ku et al., 2015). This argument reflects a multi-foci approach to perspective-taking. Moreover, the *outcome* of perspective-taking depends, at least to some extent, on the individual (or individuals) whose perspective is taken. That is, because perspective-taking encourages a perception that the self is more like the other (e.g., Galinsky, Wang et al., 2008), taking the perspective of someone who engages in "bad" behavior—such as mistreating a colleague—may lead observers to endorse the negative behavior. In other words, rather than exclusively promoting social bonds, Ku et al.'s (2015) theorizing acknowledges that perspective-taking is a strategy for navigating complex social interactions among multiple parties.

The effect of perspective-taking on interpersonal outcomes is explained by two categories of mechanisms: cognitive and affective (see Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008). That is, the act of trying to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives of another

influences both the attributions perspective-takers make (i.e., cognitive mechanism) as well

as their sense of empathetic concern (i.e., affective mechanism) for the other. In turn, these

mechanisms have important interpersonal consequences (e.g., Vescio et al., 2003). In the

sections that follow, we draw on this model to develop our hypotheses about how observer

perspective-taking in the context of workplace mistreatment is likely to influence observer

performance evaluations of and attitudes toward both the target and the instigator, via the

theorized mechanisms of blame attributions and empathetic concern.

Perspective-taking and Observer Blame Attributions

According to perspective-taking theory, perspective-takers must expend cognitive

effort to understand the world from another's point of view (Galinsky et al., 2005; Ku et al.,

2015; Parker et al., 2008). The act of perspective-taking encourages perspective-takers to

"step outside their usual mental routines and default processing tendencies to engage in more

active and cognitively-demanding information processing" (Ku et al., 2015, p. 86). This

cognitive process influences the attributions perspective-takers make, including the extent to

which they attribute blame for negative behaviors and outcomes (e.g., Gravelin et al., 2019).

Attributions are inferences about the cause of an event or outcome. Attribution theory

(Weiner, 1985) identifies three key dimensions: locus of control, stability, and controllability.

Locus of control refers to whether the cause of an event is perceived to be internal (e.g.,

personality) or external (contextual) to the individual in question. Stability reflects a

judgment about the variability or permanence of the cause of an event. Finally, controllability

refers to the extent to which the cause is perceived to be under the individual's control. These

three factors are inter-related and together determine perceptions of accountability or *blame*

(Osborne & Weiner, 2015). For instance, to the extent that a mistreatment event is perceived

to be caused by some aspect that is internal to a focal person, stable, and within the focal

person's control, observers should tend to attribute more blame for the mistreatment to that

person. Although existing models of observer reactions to the mistreatment of others typically assume that observers attribute blame to the instigator to a greater or lesser extent (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011), observers can attribute blame to targets as well (Lerner, 1980). Therefore, we consider that perspective-taking is likely to shape observer attributions of blame to both the instigator and target. That is, the multi-foci nature of perspective-taking means that observes can assign more or less blame to multiple actors simultaneously.

Perspective-taking influences attributions about a focal person's behavior (Parker et al., 2008), including lower levels of blame attributions (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998). The act of trying to "get in the head" of another person encourages perspective-takers to overcome perceptual biases that would normally lead them to make internal attributions for the behavior of others (i.e., the actor-observer bias; Jones & Nisbett, 1971), and instead make attributions for that other that are similar to those they would make for themselves (i.e., the self-serving bias; Bernstein et al., 1979; see also Regan & Totten, 1975). Whereas Parker et al. (2008) focused on *positive* attributions, we argue that blame attributions function in a similar way. When a person takes another's perspective such that they imagine themselves in their shoes (Galinsky et al., 2005), they will be less likely to blame that individual for the same reasons that they would be more likely to make positive attributions for them. When observers actively see a situation from someone else's perspective, they do the cognitive work required to understand why they find themselves in that situation (Parker et al., 2008). In the context of a witnessed incident of workplace mistreatment, observers should therefore be less likely to attribute blame to those whose perspective they take.

The extent to which observers attribute blame to each of the target and instigator is important because these attributions should influence observer reactions toward each actor. Blame attributions help explain individuals' reactions to their own mistreatment (Martinko et al., 2006), and are theorized to influence observers' reactions to the mistreatment of others

(O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Models of observer reactions tend to focus on two categories of outcomes: intervention decisions and retributive or restorative reactions (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). These outcomes represent means for observers to address the injustice caused by (i.e., blamed on) the instigator. However, because we consider observer reactions through the lens of perspective-taking, we make room for the possibility that observers can attribute more or less blame for the mistreatment to each of the instigator and target. We suggest that observers who take the perspective of the instigator will respond positively toward the instigator. Extending Fiori et al.'s (2016) findings that third-parties who make external attributions for the instigator of extreme forms of counterproductive work behavior (i.e., shooting a colleague and intoxication at work) are less likely to endorse punishment, we examine observer attributions and reactions toward *both* targets and instigators.

In the current research, we examine the effect of perspective-taking on observer evaluations of the target and instigator's performance (Study 1, 2 and 3) as well as their general interpersonal attitude toward each (Study 1 and 2). These outcomes are consistent with the retributive and restorative responses explored in previous research and—unlike intervention decisions, which imply that observers "side" with the target to a greater or lesser extent (O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011)—afford observers the opportunity to punish *or* support *both* the target and the instigator. Both are also likely to be influenced by observer blame attributions (as well as empathic concern, the affective mechanism of perspective-taking discussed below). Although performance evaluations may be intended to provide employees with "fair" feedback or outcomes, research in the field of employee performance assessment indicates that subjective forms of performance evaluations are influenced by factors other than objective task performance (e.g., Bellé et al., 2017; Bommer et al., 1995), including generalized perceptions from unrelated domains (Kahneman, 2011). As such, the extent to which an observer attributes blame to the target and instigator of an incident of mistreatment

is likely to contribute to their evaluation of each actor's performance. Exploring the effect of perspective-taking in the context of witnessed mistreatment on observer performance evaluations helps clarify the extent of the impact of this interpersonal sensemaking process on the instrumental outcomes of those involved in the mistreatment event.

Attributions of blame (shaped by observer perspective-taking) should also influence observers' general interpersonal attitudes (i.e., liking and respect; Wojciszke et al., 2009) toward the target and instigator. As explained above, the act of perspective-taking leads individuals to make attributions for others that are similar to the attributions made for oneself (Regan & Totten, 1975). Given that people tend to make positive attributions for themselves (i.e., attributing failures or undesirable behavior/outcomes to external causes while taking credit for successes and desirable behavior/outcomes) to maintain a positive self-image (Bernstein et al., 1979), observers' tendency to attribute less blame to an actor whose perspective they take to a greater degree should result in more positive interpersonal attitudes for that actor as well.

Understanding the effects of perspective-taking via attributions of blame (and empathic concern) on observer performance evaluations of and interpersonal attitudes toward both the target and instigator of mistreatment is also important because both outcomes have implications for the health and well-being of each actor. For example, peer-based performance evaluations are commonly used in organizational appraisals and can have profound positive or negative effects on employees' instrumental (e.g., bonus, take-home pay, advancement opportunities) outcomes. Observer performance evaluations and attitudes are also likely to influence the social dimension of employee well-being (Grant et al., 2007), especially in terms of the target's and instigator's sense of social contribution (via observer evaluation of their performance) and social acceptance (via observer interpersonal attitudes; Keyes, 1998). Indeed, given the negative effect of mistreatment on target health and well-

being (e.g., Schilpzand et al., 2016), understanding whether (and why) observers contribute to supporting target well-being is especially important.

Based on the arguments outlined above, we expect that blame attributions will mediate the effect of observer perspective-taking on their performance evaluations of and interpersonal attitudes toward both the target and instigator of an incident of mistreatment:

> *H1: Attributions of blame to the target will mediate the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the target on observers' performance evaluation of (H1a) and interpersonal attitudes (H1b) toward the target. Observers who take the perspective of the target to a greater degree will be less likely to blame the target and therefore more likely to evaluate the target's performance positively and to develop positive interpersonal attitudes toward the target.*

> *H2: Attributions of blame to the instigator will mediate the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the instigator on observers' performance evaluation of (H2a) and interpersonal attitudes (H2b) toward the instigator. Observers who take the perspective of the instigator to a greater degree will be less likely to blame the instigator and therefore more likely to evaluate the instigator's performance positively and to develop positive interpersonal attitudes toward the instigator.*

Perspective-taking and Observer Empathetic Concern

The process of perspective-taking also involves trying to understand how another person is *feeling* (Enright & Lapsley, 1980). For example, an observer who engages in perspective-taking of the target (instigator) means they will try to imagine what the incident feels like for the target (instigator). As a result of trying to understand the emotional experiences of another person, the perspective-taker experiences higher levels of empathetic arousal (Oswald, 1996). Empathy represents a vicarious emotional response to the emotional experiences of others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). This positive affective response involves feelings of concern and compassion for the other (Batson, 1991; Betancourt, 1990) and consequently motivates action intended to improve the other's welfare (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Perspective-taking elicits empathic responses because perspective-takers consider not only the thoughts and motives of the other (evoking the cognitive mechanism), but also why they *feel* the way they do (evoking the affective mechanism). The act of perspective-taking

generates concern that might otherwise be absent (Parker et al., 2008), and enables the perspective-taker to gain a better understanding of the other's emotions.

According to Batson et al. (2007, p. 65), perspective-taking is "the most plausible and prominent answer to the question of what leads us to feel more or less empathy for a person in need." Empathy represents a psychological process of experiencing a vicarious emotion that is congruent with the emotion of the other person (Batson, 1991), which makes it particularly relevant for predicting observer reactions to targets of mistreatment. However, empathetic arousal goes beyond an affective reaction to others' sufferings (Krebs, 1975), as individuals can experience empathy in response to a corrected injustice or someone else's joy (e.g., Hoffman, 2000). Broadly defined, empathy is an emotion that individuals experience on behalf of others (Stocks et al., 2011). Although previous work has considered empathy as a trait (e.g., Davis, 1983), we use the term empathic concern to refer to the affective state elicited via the act of perspective-taking (Parker et al., 2008). Therefore, the act of "getting inside the head" of another is likely to lead to greater empathic concern for that individual suggesting that observers can also experience empathic concern for the instigator of mistreatment. In other words, observers should experience empathic concern for those whose perspective they take, regardless of whether that individual was the target or the instigator.

Although previous studies have considered blame attributions as the key mechanism of perspective-taking in the context of observer reactions (e.g., Fiori et al., 2016), consistent with perspective-taking frameworks (Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008) we theorize that empathic concern represents a parallel affective route that helps explain why perspective-taking influences observer reactions toward each of the target and instigator. Empathic feelings of concern and compassion prompt a desire to reduce the distress or need of the other (Batson, 1991; Betancourt, 1990; Eisenberg et al., 2010), and motivate prosocial behaviors (Batson, 1991), such as interpersonal helping and positive social attitudes (Lebowitz &

Dovidio, 2015). Indeed, Henkel et al. (2017) found that witnessed incivility elicited feelings

of warmth toward a frontline employee, which in turn related to prosocial feelings and

emotional support (provided observers did not attribute blame to the employee). This desire

to help is due to a backwards inference process in which individuals infer from their feelings

of concern that they value that individual's welfare (Batson et al., 2007).

Observer empathic concern for the target and instigator should influence their

performance evaluations of and general interpersonal attitudes toward each actor.

Performance evaluations provide observers with a legitimate opportunity to instrumentally

support the actor. While the disruption caused by an incident of mistreatment may impair a

target's ability to perform, an observer who experiences empathic concern for the target can

help the target by offsetting this with a positive subjective evaluation of the target's

performance (Hershcovis & Bhatnagar, 2017). Similarly, an observer who experiences

empathic concern for the instigator could choose to help the instigator by providing a positive

evaluation of the instigator's performance. Observers can also influence the social outcomes

of targets and instigators. The experience of empathic concern is likely to incline observers to

make consistent interpersonal judgments such that they will be more likely to express more

positive interpersonal attitudes toward that actor.

> *H3: Empathic concern for the target will mediate the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the target on observers' performance evaluation of (H3a) and interpersonal attitudes (H3b) toward the target. Observers who take the perspective of the target to a greater degree will experience greater empathic concern for the target and will therefore be more likely to evaluate the target's performance positively and to develop positive interpersonal attitudes toward the target.*

> *H4: Empathic concern for the instigator will mediate the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the instigator on observers' performance evaluation of (H4a) and interpersonal attitudes (H4b) toward the instigator. Observers who take the perspective of the instigator to a greater degree will experience greater empathic concern for the instigator and will therefore be more likely to evaluate the instigator's performance positively and to develop positive interpersonal attitudes toward the instigator.*

Study 1

In Study 1, we focus on the relationship between observer perspective-taking and observer reactions (i.e., performance evaluations and interpersonal attitudes) toward the target and instigator of an incident of mistreatment via blame attributions and empathic concern. To test these relationships, we used a video vignette approach and asked participants to assume the role of another employee (i.e., an observer) while watching the video.

Method

Participants

We invited working adults in North America to participate in our study using Mechanical Turk, Amazon.com's online participant recruitment service. We encouraged participation by offering participants $1.00 USD for completing the 15-minute online survey. Of the 346 people who responded to the posting, 281 completed the survey. We embedded four attention checks in the survey; 84%, 85%, 83%, and 84% passed the first, second, third, and fourth attention check, respectively. For the purposes of data analysis, we retained only those participants who passed all four attention checks. Thus, the final sample included 267 participants (123 women, 143 men, 1 did not report their gender, $M_{age} = 35.0$, $SD = 10.7$, age range: 19-71 years). Most participants self-identified as Caucasian (78.3%).

Procedure and Measures

We asked participants to watch a 3-minute video of two people (hired actors) interacting in a workplace setting. In the video, one actor ('Alex') behaved in a negative interpersonal manner toward the other ('Taylor'); Alex addressed Taylor in unprofessional terms, ignored Taylor, and insulted Taylor (Cortina et al., 2001; Duffy et al., 2002). We simplified our design by matching the gender of the actors in the video (i.e., we created two versions of the video: female target and female instigator; male target and male instigator). All four actors were matched on key demographic variables (i.e., same age, ethnicity), and both versions of the video followed the same script (see Appendix A). We randomly assigned

participants to watch either the male or female actor video. After watching the video,

participants answered questions about each of the target (Taylor) and the instigator (Alex).

Except for observer performance evaluations, all items were assessed on a 5-point scale (1 =

strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). We used mean scores of each variable in our analyses.

Perspective-taking. To measure perspective-taking, we adapted Axtell et al.'s (2007)

scale (i.e., "I tried to imagine what this person was thinking or feeling"; "I tried to understand

this person's point of view"; and "I tried to put myself in this person's shoes").

Blame attributions. We measured blame attributions using Aquino et al.'s (2001)

scale. Items asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the

statements: "I blame Taylor [Alex]," "Taylor [Alex] wronged Alex [Taylor]," "Alex [Taylor]

was victimized," and "Taylor [Alex] is guilty." Higher scores indicated greater blame

attributed to the focal actor.

Empathic concern. We measured empathic concern for the target and instigator with

three items based on Davis' (1980) dispositional empathic concern scale, adapted as a state

measure. We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they felt empathy for, concern

for, and protective toward Taylor [Alex].

Performance evaluation. We assessed participants' performance evaluation of the

target and instigator using the three-item individual task proficiency subscale from Griffin et

al.'s (2007) measure of work performance. We asked participants to imagine that they had

been asked to complete a performance review for Taylor and Alex and to rate each in terms

of the extent to which they "Carried out the core parts of the job well," "Completed core tasks

well using the standard procedures," and "Ensured tasks were completed properly." Items

were assessed on a 7-point response scale (1 = far below average, 7 = far above average).

Interpersonal Attitudes. We assessed participants' interpersonal attitude toward

each of the target and instigator using the three-item respect subscale of Wojciszke et al.'s

(2009) interpersonal attitudes measure (i.e., "I respect Taylor [Alex]"; "Taylor [Alex] deserves admiration"; and "Taylor [Alex] could serve as an example to others").

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined the factor structure of our study variables by means of a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in Mplus version 7.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2013). We compared our 10-factor theoretical model (CFA Model 1) to three eight-factor alternatives in which we loaded (a) performance evaluation and interpersonal attitudes toward a given actor (CFA Model 2), (b) empathic concern and interpersonal attitudes toward a given actor (CFA Model 2), and (c) blame attributions and interpersonal attitudes toward a given actor (CFA Model 4) onto a single factor. To account for potential common method bias, we also compared these to a one-factor model (CFA Model 5). Finally, to check the distinctiveness of the perspective-taking, blame attributions and empathic concern variables, we also considered a six-factor model in which we loaded all three directed toward a given actor on a single factor (CFA Model 6) as well as two eight-factor models in which we loaded (a) perspective-taking and empathic concern for a given actor (CFA Model 7) and (b) perspective-taking and blame attributions for a given actor (CFA Model 8) onto a single factor. Model fit statistics are included in Table 1. The theorized 10-factor CFA Model 1 was a good fit to the data overall and a better fit compared to each of the alternative models, with each item loading significantly, and in the expected direction, onto its respective latent factor. As such, we proceeded with fitting our structural equation mediation model ($\chi2$ (425) = 1114.37, p < .001, RMSEA = .08, CFI = .91, TLI = .89, SRMR = .09) using Mplus version 7.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2013). Mediation effects were tested using the product-of-coefficients approach and their significance was scrutinized by means of 10,000 bootstrap samples to generate 95% Confidence Intervals (95% CI; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We tested all effects simultaneously. We included observer gender as a covariate in our preliminary

analyses to account for potential effects of (mis)match with the actors in the video. However, we found no difference in the pattern or significance of the findings. Therefore, following Becker et al.'s (2016) recommendations, we report the effects below without controlling for observer gender. Estimates for standardized direct and indirect paths from the saturated model and their respective confidence intervals, are given in Table 2.

Insert Tables 1, 2 and 3 about here

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas of each variable, as well as intercorrelations among the study variables are presented in Table 3.

Consistent with *H1a, H1b, H3a,* and *H3b,* the positive effect of perspective-taking of the target on participants' performance evaluation of and interpersonal attitudes toward the target was mediated by their attributions of blame to ($B = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p = .011$, 95% CI [.04, .24] and $B = .14$, $SE = .05$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.06, .25], respectively) as well as their empathic concern for ($B = .23$, $SE = .08$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.09, .39] and $B = .41$, $SE = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.25, .65], respectively) the target. Consistent with *H2a* and *H2b*, the effect of perspective-taking of the instigator on participants' performance evaluation of and interpersonal attitudes toward the instigator was mediated by their attributions of blame to the instigator ($B = .10$, $SE = .04$, $p = .016$, 95% CI [.03, .20] and $B = .14$, $SE = .05$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.06, .24], respectively). We also found support for *H4b*, but not *H4a*, as empathic concern for the instigator mediated the effect of perspective-taking of the instigator on participants' interpersonal attitudes toward ($B = .17$, $SE = .05$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [.09, .29]), but not their performance evaluation of ($B = .06$, $SE = .04$, $p = .127$, 95% CI [-.02, .14]), the instigator.

Discussion

Results from Study 1 provide initial support for the expected effects of observer perspective-taking in the context of a witnessed incident of mistreatment. To the extent that observers took the perspective of the target, they attributed less blame to and experienced greater empathic concern for the target, which were in turn associated with more positive performance evaluations of and interpersonal attitudes toward the target. Similarly, observers who took the perspective of the instigator to a greater degree attributed less blame to and experienced greater empathic concern for the instigator, and thus reacted more positively toward the instigator. Overall, these findings support our argument that observer reactions to a witnessed incident of mistreatment are shaped by the way observers make sense of the event. To the extent that observers made sense of the mistreatment incident from the perspective of the target, they provided higher performance evaluations of and showed better interpersonal attitudes toward the target; similarly, those who took the perspective of the instigator to a greater extent reacted more positively toward the *instigator*.

Study 1 offered preliminary evidence that perspective-taking relates to observer reactions toward both the target and instigator of mistreatment. Although the effect of perspective-taking on observer performance evaluations via empathic concern was only significant for their evaluations of the target's performance, perspective-taking had a positive effect on observer evaluations of both the target and the instigator's performance via their attributions of blame. Moreover, observers developed more positive interpersonal attitudes toward those whose perspective they took, even when that individual was an instigator of mistreatment. This pattern is consistent with frameworks of perspective-taking (e.g., Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008), which theorize that it is the sensemaking process that affects individuals' reactions rather than objective attributes of the event itself. However, because all participants in Study 1 were exposed to the same incident, we were unable to determine

whether attributes of the mistreatment (i.e., mistreatment type) might influence this process as well. To address this concern, we conducted Study 2.

Study 2

A number of constructs fall under the broad umbrella of workplace mistreatment (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Barling et al., 2009). Although there is clear overlap among the scales used to measure them (Hershcovis, 2011), there are also important conceptual differences (Tepper & Henle, 2011). For example, workplace incivility is defined in terms of its low-intensity and ambiguous intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), whereas definitions of workplace aggression and bullying reflect more severe acts that are higher intensity and assume an intent to harm (e.g., Schat & Kelloway, 2005). As the severity of mistreatment increases, it is likely to become less ambiguous from the observer's perspective. Therefore, even if mistreatment type doesn't influence target outcomes (Hershcovis, 2011), it is likely to have implications for how observers make sense of the witnessed mistreatment incident.

As we outlined above, we contend that observers use perspective-taking to make sense of witnessed incidents of mistreatment. Although we expect this interpersonal sensemaking process to be relevant in the context of any act of mistreatment, the effect of perspective-taking on observer reactions (via attributions of blame and empathic concern) is likely to be stronger for more severe incidents. Ambiguous acts of mistreatment (i.e., incivility) are easily dismissed, and as such, observers may be less likely to spend time trying to understand these incidents. For instance, when someone dismisses the idea of a co-worker in a meeting, an observer is likely to consider why the instigator behaved that way, or how the target did or did not contribute. However, these types of events are easy to dismiss using an array of explanations (e.g., the instigator is having a bad day; the target's idea was trivial). In other words, the process of perspective-taking becomes less effortful in the case of low

severity workplace mistreatment. In contrast, more severe forms of mistreatment that represent a clear violation of social norms are likely to increase the effort required to make sense of them. Shouting someone down in a meeting, for example, is much harder to explain away than an ambiguous rude remark. Thus, observers are likely to devote more effort to the perspective-taking of both targets and instigators under conditions of higher severity of mistreatment. Importantly, we are not arguing that perspective-taking is more likely as severity increases, but rather, that the act of perspective-taking is likely to be more effortful.

As mistreatment severity increases, inducing more effortful perspective-taking from observers, the corresponding attributional and empathetic responses of observers should also increase. First, with respect to blame attributions, as noted earlier, efforts to understand another person's perspective promote biased cognitive processes, which encourage perspective-takers to extend the self-serving bias to those whose perspective they take. The more effortful the perspective-taking process, the more likely observers will be to absolve of blame, and thus react positively toward the individuals whose perspective they take by providing better performance evaluations and showing more positive interpersonal attitudes . Second, with respect to empathic concern, perspective-taking induces empathic arousal as observers try to understand the emotional experience of another person (Oswald, 1996). As severity increases, and perspective-taking becomes more effortful, the concern for both targets and instigators is likely to become more pronounced. As mistreatment severity increases, the perceived emotional toll of mistreatment is likely to increase for both targets and instigators. Although observers may readily perceive distress on the part of a target of mistreatment, taken from the perspective of one who enacts it, an act of mistreatment could be interpreted as an outward manifestation of an instigator's distress. For instance, as mistreatment severity and observers' effort to understand the instigator's viewpoint increases, observers may perceive the emotion (e.g., frustration or anger) that gave rise to the

instigator's behavior, resulting in greater empathic concern. As argued earlier, observer

empathic concern for the individual whose perspective they take should, in turn, encourage

observers to perceive that they value that individual's welfare (Batson et al., 2007), and

therefore to react more positively toward the individual whose perspective they take:

> *H5: Mistreatment type will moderate the indirect effect of target perspective-taking on observers' performance evaluation of (H5a) and interpersonal attitudes (H5b) toward the target via attributions of blame to the target, such that the indirect effect will be stronger for observers of workplace aggression compared to observers of workplace incivility or a neutral interaction.*

> *H6: Mistreatment type will moderate the indirect effect of instigator perspective-taking on observers' performance evaluation of (H6a) and interpersonal attitudes (H6b) toward the instigator via attributions of blame to the instigator, such that the indirect effect will be stronger for observers of workplace aggression compared to observers of workplace incivility or a neutral interaction.*

> *H7: Mistreatment type will moderate the indirect effect of target perspective-taking on observers' performance evaluation of (H7a) and interpersonal attitudes (H7b) toward the target via empathic concern for the target, such that the indirect effect will be stronger for observers of workplace aggression compared to observers of workplace incivility or a neutral interaction.*

> *H8: Mistreatment type will moderate the indirect effect of instigator perspective-taking on observers' performance evaluation of (H8a) and interpersonal attitudes (H8b) toward the instigator via empathic concern for the instigator, such that the indirect effect will be stronger for observers of workplace aggression compared to observers of workplace incivility or a neutral interaction.*

Method

Participants

We recruited employees via CloudResearch panel provider. Panel members were

eligible to participate if they were aged 18 years or older and employed full- or part-time. Of

the 267 people who responded to the posting, 253 agreed to participate after reading the

consent form. We embedded three attention check in the survey; 86%, 83%, and 88% passed

the first, second, and third attention check, respectively. For the purposes of data analysis, we

retained only those participants who passed all three attention checks. Thus, the final sample

consisted of 191 employees (126 women, 65 men, M_{age} = 41.1, SD = 13.1, age range: 18-73

years). Participants worked an average of 37 hours per week (*SD* = 10.29) and represented a range of industries including education (15%), healthcare (14%), banking/finance (11%), retail (7%), communications (7%), and manufacturing (6%). One-third (31%) had a university degree, and a similar proportion (31%) had a professional or post-graduate degree.

Procedure and Measures

We asked participants to imagine themselves in the role of a team member participating in a meeting. We randomly assigned participants to one of three scenarios: control (i.e., neutral work interaction), incivility, or aggression. Each scenario presented a dialogue between two employees, and participants were asked to imagine themselves observing the interaction. We used gender-neutral names ('Pat' for the target; 'Alex' for the instigator) to refer to these fictional employees. We manipulated mistreatment type by changing Alex's (instigator) part of the dialogue. A full description of the scenario and mistreatment manipulations are presented in Appendix B. Except for perspective-taking and performance evaluations (discussed below), we measured all variables using the same items included in Study 1, assessed on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). We used mean scores of each variable in our analyses.

Perspective-taking. We measured perspective-taking using a slightly different version of Axtell et al.'s (2007) adapted scale. We included the same items used in Study 1, with the addition of "I tried to imagine how things looked from Pat's [Alex's] perspective."[1]

Performance evaluation. To account for observers' limited insight into actor performance based on a written vignette, we measured performance with a single item: "Based on what you read, please rate Pat's [Alex's] overall performance during the meeting." Response options were on a 7-point scale (1 = far below average, 7 = far above average).

Results

Manipulation Check

We checked our manipulation by asking participants to rate the severity of the

mistreatment described in the scenario (1 = not at all severe, 6 = extremely severe). We found

that mistreatment severity varied by condition $F(2, 188) = 107.02$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .53$,

such that participants in the aggression condition ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.10$) rated the severity

significantly higher compared to those in the incivility ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.16$; $p < .001$) and

control ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.87$; $p < .001$) conditions. Participants in the incivility condition

also rated the severity of the incident significantly higher compared to those in the control

condition ($p < .001$). We concluded that our mistreatment type manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis Testing

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined the factor structure of our study variables

using a series of CFAs. As in Study 1, we compared our hypothesized 10-factor model (CFA

Model 1) to seven alternative models. Model fit statistics are included in Table 4. The

theorized 10-factor CFA Model 1 provided the best fit to the data, with each item loading

significantly, and in the expected direction, onto its respective latent factor. As such, we

proceeded with testing our hypotheses with the 10-factor model.[2]

Insert Tables 4, 5, and 6 about here

Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas of each variable, as well as

intercorrelations among the study variables are presented in Table 5.

To examine the conditional indirect effects of perspective-taking on observer

reactions toward the target and instigator (*H5-H8*), we used Hayes' macro Model 7 (2017) for

models with multicategorical moderators. We used the indicator coding approach and coded

the moderator variable into two dummy variables (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The control

condition served as the reference group, whereas the W_1 interaction represented a comparison

between the control and incivility conditions (control = 0, incivility = 1, aggression = 0), and the W_2 interaction compared the control and aggression conditions (control = 0, incivility = 0, aggression = 1). We calculated 95% confidence intervals based on bias-corrected bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples. Results are presented in Table 6.

The indirect effect of perspective-taking was moderated by mistreatment type. In support of *H5a*, *H5b*, *H7a*, and *H7b*, the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the target on their performance evaluations of and attitudes toward the target via attributions of blame (B = .12, *SE* = .09, 95% CI [.01, .36] and B = .07, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.004, .22], respectively) and empathic concern (B = .20, *SE* = .09, 95% CI [.05, .40] and B = .23, *SE* = .09, 95% CI [.07 .43], respectively) was only significant in the aggression condition.

We found support for *H6a* and *H6b*, as the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the instigator on observer performance evaluations of and attitudes toward the instigator via attributions of blame (B = .09, *SE* = .04, 95% CI [.02, .18]) and B = .07, *SE* = .03, 95% CI [.01, .15] respectively) was also only significant in the aggression condition. We found partial support for *H8a* and *H8b*, as the indirect effect of observer perspective-taking of the instigator on observer performance evaluations of and attitudes toward the instigator via empathic concern was significant in *both* the aggression (B = .26, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.15, .37] and B = .24, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.13, .36], respectively) and incivility (B = .26, *SE* = .07, 95% CI [.13, .40] and B = .24, *SE* = .06, 95% CI [.12, .37], respectively) conditions.

Discussion

Study 2 provides additional evidence of the importance of perspective-taking on observer reactions toward both the target and instigator of an incident of mistreatment, replicating the findings from Study 1 when mistreatment severity was high. Indeed, Study 2 highlights the importance of mistreatment type for the effects of observer perspective-taking. With one exception, we found that the indirect effects of perspective-taking via blame

attributions and empathic concern were only significant when the mistreatment was severe (i.e., workplace aggression). This is consistent with our argument that perspective-taking in the context of a more severe act of mistreatment requires more cognitive and emotional "work." However, it is also interesting to note that empathic concern for the instigator also mediated the effect of instigator perspective-taking on observer reactions toward the instigator when the mistreatment was ambiguous (i.e., workplace incivility), suggesting that observers who take the perspective of the instigator may interpret even ambiguous forms of mistreatment as an expression of the instigator's distress. Taken together, these results emphasize the importance of the sensemaking process for observer reactions, especially when the mistreatment is more severe.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 provide support for our hypotheses regarding the effects of perspective-taking in the context of (more severe forms of) workplace mistreatment. However, in both studies, we measured observer perspective-taking behavior as it naturally occurred. As such, we are unable to determine whether perspective-taking can be encouraged in the context of a witnessed incident of mistreatment. Given that perspective-taking is often touted as potential means for improving intragroup attitudes (Beelmann & Heinemann, 2014), a key question that remains is whether perspective-taking, and the resulting positive effects, can (and should) be encouraged in the context of witnessed mistreatment.

To address this question, we conducted a third study in which we instructed participants to adopt the perspective of the target or the instigator of, or to remain objective during, an incident of mistreatment. Following the theoretical arguments outlined above, we expected that observers would provide higher performance evaluations of the actor whose perspective they were instructed to take.

H9a: Observers instructed to take the perspective of the target will evaluate the target's performance more positively compared to those instructed to take the perspective of the instigator or those asked to be objective.

H9b: Observers instructed to take the perspective of the instigator will evaluate the instigator's performance more positively compared to those instructed to take the perspective of the target or those asked to be objective.

Method

Participants

We recruited 193 participants (117 women and 73 men, 3 did not report their gender; M_{age} = 24.28, SD = 5.95, age range: 18-54 years) to complete this study in the behavioral lab of a medium sized university in the United Kingdom. We offered participants £5.00 ($7.50 USD) for completing a 30-minute lab-based computer-mediated study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: target perspective (n = 65), instigator perspective (n = 63), or control (n = 65). Most participants self-identified as Caucasian (27.5%) or Chinese (37.3%); 23.3% indicated that they were employed.

Procedure and Measures

We adapted our procedure from Reich and Hershcovis (2015; Study 1). We told participants that they would be engaged in a computer-mediated brainstorming task with other participants in the same session; one participant would be asked to record the ideas of the other group members while the others were asked to generate ideas to solve an organizational problem. The idea recorder was told they would also be asked to evaluate the quality of each idea.

In actuality, all participants completed the study alone, but thought they were in a group of three. They were always assigned to be the idea recorder and the brainstorming task was in fact comprised of computer-generated ideas that were identical in all conditions and pretested to ensure that each ostensible group member suggested ideas that were roughly equal in quality. All participants witnessed the same interaction, in which one of their

ostensible group members mistreated the other, using a condescending tone toward, doubting the judgment and insulting the ideas of the other (Cortina et al., 2001; Duffy et al., 2002).

Before the brainstorming task, participants were randomly assigned to a perspective-taking condition. We adapted our perspective-taking instructions from Davis et al. (1996, pp. 715-716). Participants randomly assigned to take the perspective of the "target" or "instigator" received the following instructions:

> "Throughout the idea generation exercise, please try to take this person's perspective, imagining how he or she is feeling about what is happening. While you read the ideas that are being proposed, picture how this person feels. Concentrate on him or her in the experience. Think about his or her reactions. Visualize clearly and vividly how this person feels in this situation. Try not to concern yourself with attending to all the information presented. Just imagine how this person feels in this situation."

Those randomly assigned to the control group were instructed to try to be objective during the brainstorming task:

> "As you read and evaluate the ideas proposed by the IDEA GENERATORS, please pay close attention to what each individual says. Make careful observations of all their ideas. Concentrate your observations on each individual's spelling and choice of words. Notice exactly what they say, whatever it is. Try to take a neutral perspective, being as objective as possible about the situation. Do not concern yourself with either individual's feelings or views. Do not let yourself get caught up in imagining what either individual has been through and how they feel as a result. Just try to concentrate on the ideas objectively."

We randomized the gender of the ostensible target and instigator across participants and included these as fixed effects. We used mean scores of each variable in our analyses.

Performance Evaluation. We took the mean score of participants' evaluations of all of the pretested ideas proposed by each of the target and instigator (1 = very low quality, 20 = very high quality).

Perspective-taking. To check the effectiveness of our manipulation, we asked participants to complete the same three-item scale used in Study 1. Cronbach's alphas = .76 and .81 for perspective-taking of the target and instigator, respectively.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations are included in Table 7.

Insert Table 7 about here

Manipulation Check

We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to examine the effect of perspective-taking condition (instigator perspective = 1, target perspective = 2, control = 3), as well as the gender (male = 1, female = 2) of the ostensible target and instigator on observer perspective-taking of each. There were no main or interactive effects of target or instigator gender. However, we found a significant main effect of perspective-taking condition on participants' self-reported perspective-taking of both the target and the instigator; $F(2, 180) = 30.25$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .25$, and $F(2, 180) = 23.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .21$, respectively. Consistent with our manipulation, participants instructed to take the perspective of the target reported taking the target's perspective to a greater extent ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.44$) compared to those asked to be objective ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.70$; $p < .001$) and those instructed to take the perspective of the instigator ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.65$; $p < .001$). There was no difference in perspective-taking of the target between the control and instigator perspective conditions ($p = .055$). Similarly, participants instructed to take the perspective of the instigator reported greater perspective-taking of the instigator ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.58$)

compared to those asked to be objective ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.80$; $p < .001$) and those instructed to take the perspective of the target ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.84$; $p < .001$). There was no difference in perspective-taking of the instigator between the control and target perspective conditions ($p = .433$). We concluded that our perspective-taking manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis Testing

We conducted a MANOVA to examine the effect of perspective-taking, and target and instigator gender, on participants' evaluation of the performance of each of their ostensible group members. Again, there were no main or interactive effects of target or instigator gender. We found a significant main effect of perspective-taking condition on participants' evaluation of the instigator's ideas, $F(2, 181) = 5.39$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Consistent with *H9b*, participants instructed to take the instigator's perspective evaluated the instigator's ideas more positively ($M = 11.90$, $SD = 2.86$) compared to those asked to be objective ($M = 10.34$, $SD = 2.89$; $p = .004$) and those asked to take the target's perspective ($M = 10.36$, $SD = 3.09$; $p = .006$). There was no difference between the evaluations of the instigator's ideas for those asked to take the target's perspective and those asked to be objective ($p = .841$).

Although the effect of perspective-taking condition on participants' evaluation of the target's ideas was in the predicted direction, it did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 181) = 2.67$, $p = .072$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Post hoc pairwise comparisons indicated that participants instructed to take the target's perspective evaluated the target's ideas more positively ($M = 11.61$, $SD = 3.15$) compared to those asked to be objective ($M = 10.71$, $SD = 2.61$; $p = .044$). However, there was no difference in their evaluation of the target's ideas compared to those instructed to take the instigator's perspective ($M = 11.68$, $SD = 2.51$; $p = .985$). Rather, paralleling our findings for participants instructed to take the target's perspective, those

instructed to take the instigator's perspective also evaluated the target's ideas more positively compared to those asked to be objective ($p = .050$). As such, *H9a* was not supported.

Discussion

Results from Study 3 indicate that the benefits of manipulated perspective-taking seem to accrue for the instigator of the mistreatment rather than the target. Those instructed to take the perspective of the instigator evaluated the instigator's performance more positively compared to those instructed to take the perspective of the target or to remain objective; however, perspective-taking instructions did not significantly influence observers' evaluation of the target's performance. As such, although we found that perspective-taking can indeed be encouraged in the context of witnessed mistreatment (and the significant effect of perspective-taking instructions on evaluations of the instigator's performance lends support to the causal direction of the effects found in Studies 1 and 2), the lack of benefit perspective-taking instructions had for target outcomes likely undermines the potential for perspective-taking training to offer an appropriate means of intervention in workplace mistreatment.

General Discussion

Across three studies, we examined the role of perspective-taking in observer reactions toward a target and instigator of an incident of workplace mistreatment. Although existing theory (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011) has helped us understand third-party justice-based reactions to mistreatment, with few exceptions (e.g., Li et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015), the underlying assumption is that when observers take action, they do so in support of the target. Our research helps clarify why and when observers may react positively toward both the target and instigator.

Our findings indicate that perspective-taking influences observer reactions toward targets and instigators of workplace mistreatment. Observers provided more positive performance evaluations of and reported more positive interpersonal attitudes toward actors

whose perspective they took, regardless of whether that actor was a target or an instigator of mistreatment. Further, perspective-taking of each actor seem to be independent processes, as—with the exception of Study 3 wherein perspective-taking was directly encouraged—the relationship between perspective-taking of each actor were weakly (Study 1) or non-significantly (Study 2) associated. That is, taking the perspective of one actor (e.g., the target) did not preclude observers from taking perspective of another (e.g., the instigator) involved in the mistreatment. We also found that observer blame attributions and empathic concern explained the relationship between perspective-taking and our focal outcomes (Study 1 and 2), and that these processes were more important in terms of shaping observer reactions when mistreatment was more severe (Study 2). Finally, we found that perspective-taking can be encouraged in the context of witnessed mistreatment; however, the effects seem to result in more positive evaluations of the instigator's performance only, as they had no significant effect on observers' evaluation of the target's performance (Study 3).

Theoretical Implications

Our findings have important implications for existing theoretical models of observer reactions to workplace mistreatment. Specifically, interpersonal processes—such as the extent to which observers engage in perspective-taking of the target and instigator—shape observers' reactions toward those involved in mistreatment, and observers can and do make sense of witnessed mistreatment from the perspectives of both the target and instigator. This is important because existing models of observer reactions (e.g., O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Skarlicki et al., 2015) generally assume that observer reactions depend on attributes of the event or the observer. Our findings add complexity to these arguments by highlighting the central role of observer sensemaking processes (i.e., perspective-taking). Across three studies, we also demonstrate that observers' interpretation of the event may have far-reaching consequences for those involved in the mistreatment incident. Perspective-taking results in

higher performance evaluations of and better interpersonal attitudes toward the individual(s) whose perspective was taken.

Second, by recognising that observers can take the perspective of both the target and the instigator of mistreatment, our research contributes to the literature by emphasizing that— rather than "siding" with the target or instigator—observers can support *both*. Previous theorizing and research have largely adopted an "either/or" approach to observer reactions (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011). Drawing on perspective-taking theories, we make a theoretical contribution by proposing a multi-foci approach to observers' reactions. This approach makes room for the possibility that perspective-taking and subsequent reactions can be aimed at several actors. That is, "siding" with one person (e.g., the target) does not necessarily mean that observers react negatively toward another person (e.g., the instigator), but rather observers' reactions toward each represent parallel processes. In light of these findings, we suggest that theories of observer reactions to witnessed mistreatment would benefit from considering a wider range of observer responses (i.e., including those that are supportive of the instigator) to more fully capture how observers make sense of and respond to these incidents. These theories would also benefit from some consideration of the interpersonal processes that shape observer reactions to the mistreatment of others. In each of our studies, observers of the same incident made sense of and therefore reacted to it in different ways, suggesting that observer reactions may depend less on specific instigator behaviors and more on how observers make sense of those behaviors.

By investigating the underlying mechanisms that explain how perspective-taking influences observers' performance evaluations of and interpersonal attitudes toward the target and instigator, our findings offer a more refined understanding of the role of observers' sensemaking. We found support for the theorized cognitive (i.e., blame attributions) and affective (i.e., empathic concern) mechanisms of perspective-taking on interpersonal

outcomes (Ku et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2008). The mediating role of empathic concern in response to the perspective-taking process is especially notable given that empathic concern is typically conceptualized as a response to another in need (e.g., Batson et al., 2007). However, we found that the act of "getting inside the head" of another promotes greater empathic concern for that individual, even when that individual is an instigator of mistreatment. We suggest that observers who adopt the perspective of the instigator as a means to make sense of an incident of mistreatment may interpret the instigator's behavior as an outward manifestation of the *instigator's* distress.

Finally, our findings highlight the importance of mistreatment severity in the observer sensemaking process. Although meta-analytic evidence suggests that both less and more severe types of mistreatment may have similar effects on targets (e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; see Ferris et al., 2016 for an alternative argument), our results show that the positive effect of perspective-taking on observers' reactions toward both the target and the instigator is stronger when the mistreatment is more severe. These results may suggest that perspective-taking of certain types of mistreatment may require more effortful processing.

Managerial Implications

Our findings also have important implications for managers. First, our results highlight the difficulty managers may face evaluating incidents of mistreatment among their employees, as well as a potential concern that some individuals may be more likely to receive support than others. For example, despite having only minimal information about the objective performance of each actor in Studies 1 and 2, observer perspective-taking had a significant effect on observer evaluations of both actors. In other words, it seems that—in the absence of "objective" performance information (i.e., like that provided in Study 3)— observer performance evaluations of both actors were significantly impacted by their perspective-taking. This is consistent with research indicating that performance evaluations

are inherently subjective are influenced by factors other than actual performance (e.g., Bommer et al., 1995; see also Bellé et al., 2017). Given that subjective forms of performance evaluation are pervasive in organizations (e.g., Griffin et al., 2007), this may signal a concern for how perspective-taking in the context of witnessed mistreatment may shape the ultimate outcome of both targets and instigators.

We also recommend caution before using perspective-taking instructions or training as a means of intervention in workplace mistreatment, which we sought to investigate in Study 3. Although perspective-taking instructions did not seem to influence observer evaluations of the target's performance, those instructed to take the perspective of the instigator provided more positive evaluations of the instigator's performance compared to those asked to take the perspective of the target and those asked to remain objective. We suggest future research investigate boundary conditions that can alter effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of perspective-taking interventions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our approach of having participants report their reactions to a witnessed incident of mistreatment in situ avoids some of the common pitfalls of workplace mistreatment research, such as retrospective reporting (Hershcovis & Reich, 2013); however, our studies have some limitations. For example, although our vignette and lab-based designs gave us control over the interaction participants witnessed, both can suffer from limited ecological validity. Also, although our focus on observers of mistreatment made self-reports of our study variables necessary, self-report scales can suffer from common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Though common method variance does not hinder analyses to the extent previously thought (Conway & Lance, 2010), we found that a single-factor model was a poor fit to the data in Studies 1 and 2, and our main findings were replicated across multiple studies with

different samples and methodological approaches, future research would benefit from using alternative and complementary designs, such as dairy or critical incident studies.

Future research should also consider factors likely to influence observer perspective-taking. For example, existing research suggests that individuals are more likely to take the perspective of high compared to low power actors (Galinsky et al., 2006). Individuals also seem to be more inclined to take the perspective of similar others (Parker et al., 2008). Taken together, this suggests that powerful observers (e.g., managers) may be more inclined to take the perspective of powerful members of dominant groups, which may serve to further disadvantage low power and minority group members in the workplace.

Additional research is also needed to better understand the effects of observer perspective-taking on observers' own outcomes, including their well-being (Pouwelse et al., 2018). Understanding the full range of consequences of observer reactions will be important to ensure that managers promote those reactions that are most effective. Although our findings suggest that observer perspective-taking might benefit those involved in the mistreatment, we suggest future research investigate the cost of perspective-taking for the observers. Indeed, some studies show that perspective-taking may have negative health-related consequences for the perspective-taker, including higher levels of distress and negative affect (Batson, 2009). Given the negative effects of vicarious mistreatment (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019), engaging in perspective-taking of the target may come at especially high cost to observers' own psychological safety, health, and well-being. In addition, to the extent observers engage in perspective-taking of the instigator, they may experience cognitive strain (as they are trying to understand why the instigator engaged in behaviors that generally violate socially accepted norms).

Finally, in Study 2, we argued that perspective-taking for more severe forms of mistreatment requires more effort. Future research should directly test this theoretical

proposition to determine whether, indeed, more effortful processing accounts for the moderating effects of perspective-taking on our focal mechanisms and outcomes.

Conclusion

Understanding the role of interpersonal sensemaking in observer reactions to the mistreatment of others is important. Observers can make sense of the same incident in different ways depending on their perspective-taking of each actor. Moreover, contrary to the "either/or" perspective prevalent in the mistreatment literature, the present set of studies demonstrates that observers engage in multi-foci perspective-taking. In turn, perspective-taking of each actor influences observer reactions (i.e., performance evaluations and interpersonal attitudes) via cognitive (i.e., blame attributions) and affective (i.e., empathetic concern) mechanisms. Thus, observer perspective-taking can have far-reaching implications for both targets and instigators.

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Footnotes

[1] Analyses using the three-item version of Axtell et al.'s (2007) perspective-taking scale revealed no differences to the pattern or significance of the effects using the four-item version. The four-item measure was highly correlated with the three-item measure ($r = .974$, $p < .001$).

[2] To account for the potential effect of observers' own experience of mistreatment on their reactions toward the target and instigator, we meased experienced incivility with Cortina et al.'s (2001) Workplace Incivility Scale and ran our analyses with experienced incivility as a covariate. Including this measure as a covariate resulted in no change to the significance of the interaction effect, but the direct effect of the W_2 condition (aggression *vs.* neutral) on target empathic concern becoming non-significant. However, because we cannot interpret direct effects in the presence of a significant interaction, and we found no other differences in the pattern or significance of the moderated mediation effects, we followed Becker et al.'s (2016) recommendations and report the results without controlling for observers' own experience of mistreatment.

Table 1

Study 1: Model fit statistics of the hypothesized and alternative models

CFA Model	χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
1: 10-factor hypothesized model	914.37 (419)	.07	.93	92	.05
2: Eight-factor alternative model (performance evaluation and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	2,006.37 (436)	.12	79	.76	.09
3: Eight-factor alternative model (empathic concern and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,261.90 (436)	.08	.89	.88	.06
4: Eight-factor alternative model (blame attributions and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,730.99 (436)	.11	.83	.81	.10
5: One-factor alternative model	4,789.16 (464)	.19	.43	.39	.14
6. Six-factor alternative model (perspective-taking, empathic concern for and blame attributions to the target [instigator] on a single factor)	2,580.15 (449)	.13	.72	.69	.11
7. Eight-factor alternative model (perspective-taking and empathic concern for the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,734.55 (436)	.11	.83	.80	.14
8. Eight-factor alternative model (perspective-taking and blame attributions to the target [instigator] on a single factor)	2,190.59 (436)	.12	.77	.74	.19

Table 2

Study 1: Standardized estimates (B) and their 95% Confidence Intervals (95% CI) for the Structural Equation Mediation Model

Direct effects	Attribution of blame to the target		Empathic concern for the target		Attributions of blame to the instigator		Empathic concern for the instigator	
	B	95% CI	B	95% CI		95% CI	B	95% CI
Perspective-taking of the target	-.543**	(-.694, -.402)	.672**	(.509, .818)	.606**	(.472, .753)	-.415**	(-.598, -.264)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	.260**	(.140, .376)	-.241**	(-.360, -.120)	-.368**	(-.493, -.241)	.427**	(.316, .534)

Direct effects	Performance evaluation of the target		Attitude toward the target		Performance evaluation of the instigator		Attitude toward the instigator	
Perspective-taking of the target	.081	(-.146, .323)	-.177	(-.424, .028)	.311*	(.057, .604)	.089	(-.081, .356)
Attributions of blame to the target	-.245**	(-.409, -.069)	-.266**	(-.411, -.108)	.030	(-.147, .221)	.386**	(.201, .556)
Empathic concern for the target	.338**	(.131, .526)	.616**	(.413, .850)	-.349**	(-.540, -.153)	-.066	(-.289, .094)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	-.079	(-.234, .069)	.075	(-.061, .225)	.054	(-.118, .211)	-.021	(-.151, .065)
Attributions of blame to the instigator	.149	(-.052, .359)	.324**	(.116, .527)	-.279**	(-.488, -.102)	-.390**	(-.602, -.181)
Empathic concern for the instigator	.193	(.011, .406)	.224**	(.064, .394)	.144	(-.040, .325)	.402**	(.220, .637)
Indirect effects via attributions of blame to the target								
Perspective-taking of the target	.133**	(.037, .241)	.144**	(.055, .254)	-.016	(-.129, .064)	-.210**	(-.323, -.102)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	-.064*	(-.129, -.014)	-.069*	(-.127, -.023)	.008	(-.039, .060)	-.100**	(.040, .169)
Indirect effects via empathic concern for the target								
Perspective-taking of the target	.227**	(.087, .385)	.414**	(.254, .651)	-.235**	(-.405, -.099)	-.044	(-.218, .060)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	-.081*	(-.153, -.025)	-.148**	(-.264, -.066)	.084*	(.029, .158)	.016	(-.022, .080)
Indirect effects via attributions of blame to the instigator								
Perspective-taking of the target	.090	(-.032, .234)	.197**	(.069, .348)	-.169*	(-.406, -.059)	-.236**	(-.396, -.106)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	-.055	(-.145, .019)	-.119**	(-.211, -.041)	.103*	(.034, .201)	.144**	(.063, .244)
Indirect effects via empathic concern for the instigator								
Perspective-taking of the target	-.080	(-.215, -.004)	-.093*	(-.203, -.023)	-.060	(-.162, .017)	-.167*	(-.336, -.069)
Perspective-taking of the instigator	.082*	(.004, .183)	.096*	(.026, .178)	.061	(-.017, .142)	.171**	(.085, .291)

Note. $N = 267$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$.

Table 3

Study 1: Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and Cronbach's alphas of study variables

Variable name	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perspective-taking of the target	4.14	.71	(.90)									
2. Perspective-taking of the Instigator	3.13	1.10	.15*	(.92)								
3. Attributions of blame to the target	1.57	.87	-.39***	.12	(.91)							
4. Attributions of blame to the instigator	4.11	.90	.42***	-.22***	-.55***	(.89)						
5. Empathic concern for the target	5.37	1.40	.55***	-.10	-.42***	.57***	(.84)					
6. Empathic concern for the instigator	1.97	1.33	-.23***	.32***	.61***	-.54***	-.23***	(.86)				
7. Performance evaluation of the target	5.03	1.21	.37***	-.10	-.38***	.41***	.49***	-.19**	(.94)			
8. Performance evaluation of the instigator	3.96	1.52	-.07	.26***	.26***	-.39***	-.33***	.30***	-.25***	(.95)		
9. Attitude toward the target	3.77	.96	.37***	-.06	-.43***	.53***	.64***	-.20**	.62***	-.28***	(.90)	
10. Attitude toward the Instigator	1.76	.99	-.36***	.23***	.71***	-.69***	-.43***	.69***	-.31***	.41***	-.35***	(.92)

Note. $N = 267$. Cronbach alphas appear along the diagonal.*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 4

Study 2: Model fit statistics of the hypothesized and alternative models

CFA Model	χ^2 (df)	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
1: 10-factor hypothesized model	581.99 (362)	.06	.95	.94	.05
2: Eight-factor alternative model (performance evaluation and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	663.41 (377)	.06	.94	.93	.06
3: Eight-factor alternative model (empathic concern and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,088.71 (379)	.10	.85	.83	.09
4: Eight-factor alternative model (blame attributions and attitudes toward the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,320.50 (379)	.11	.80	.77	.12
5: One-factor alternative model	3,234.88 (405)	.19	.40	.36	.17
6. Six-factor alternative model (perspective-taking, empathic concern for and blame attributions to the target [instigator] on a single factor)	2,378.41 (392)	.16	.58	.54	.18
7. Eight-factor alternative model (perspective-taking and empathic concern for the target [instigator] on a single factor)	888.65 (377)	.08	.89	.88	.10
8. Eight-factor alternative model (perspective-taking and blame attributions to the target [instigator] on a single factor)	1,556.68 (379)	.13	.75	.72	.13

Table 5

Study 2: Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and Cronbach's alphas of study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Perspective-taking of the target	5.76	.98	(.85)									
2. Perspective-taking of the instigator	4.49	1.69	.07	(.94)								
3. Blame attributions to the target	2.35	1.39	-.23***	.42***	(.92)							
4. Blame attributions to the instigator	4.45	1.74	.14	-.41***	-.05	(.94)						
5. Empathic concern for the target	5.03	1.51	.22**	-.36***	-.16*	.66***	(.89)					
6. Empathic concern for the instigator	3.20	1.45	-.10	.42***	.64***	-.17*	-.08	(.81)				
7. Performance evaluation of the target	5.19	1.37	.33***	-.28***	-.40***	.28***	.37***	-.26***	-			
8. Performance evaluation of the instigator	3.12	1.89	-.08	.54***	.44***	-.66***	-.51***	.56***	-.27***	-		
9. Attitudes toward the target	5.17	1.15	.35***	-.13	-.33***	.37***	.47***	-.19**	.69***	-.27***	(.85)	
10. Attitudes toward the instigator	3.36	1.79	-.11	.53***	.43***	-.59***	-.48***	.55***	-.34***	.78**	-.19**	(.92)

Note. *N* = 191. Cronbach alphas appear along the diagonal.
* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001

Table 6

Study 2: Standardized estimates and 95% Confidence Intervals for direct and indirect effects

	Target		Instigator	
	Empathic concern *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Blame attributions** *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Empathic concern** *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Blame attributions** *B(SE)* 95% CI
Perspective-taking	-.11(.15) [-.41; .19]	-.26 (.17) [-.59; .07]	-.03(.15) [-.32; .26]	-.24(.14) [-.52; .04]
W_1	.40(1.22) [-2.01; 2.8]	.47(1.35) [-2.20; 3.14]	-2.41(.97) [-4.32; -.49]	.75(.95) [-1.12; 2.62]
W_2	-3.14 (1.33) [-5.76; -.52]	.68(1.48) [-2.23; 3.59]	-2.15(.85) [-3.84; -.47]	2.25(.83) [.60; 3.90]
Perspective-taking x W_1	.17(.21) [-.24; .60]	.004(.24) [-.46; .47]	.52(.18) [.16; .89]	.14(.18) [-.21; .50]
Perspective-taking x W_2	.88(.23) [.43; 1.32]	-.15(.25) [-.64; .35]	.51(.17) [.18; .84]	.09(.16) [-.24; .41]
Conditional direct effects of perspective-taking on empathic concern and blame attributions				
Control condition	-.11(.15) [-.41; .19]	-.26(.17) [-.59; .07]	-.03(.15) [-.32; .26]	-.24(.14) [-.52; .04]
Incivility condition	.07(.15) [-.23; .37]	-.26(.17) [.59; .08]	.49(.11) [.27; .72]	-.10(.11) [-.31; .12]
Aggression condition	.77(.17) [.44; 1.10]	-.40(.19) [-.77; -.04]	.48(.09) [.31; .65]	-.15(.08) [-.32; .01]
	Performance *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Attitudes** *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Performance** *B(SE)* 95% CI	**Attitudes** *B(SE)* 95% CI
Empathic concern	.27 (.09) [.10; .45]	.30(.05) [.20; .39]	.53(.06) [.41; .65]	.49(.06) [.36; .62]
Attributions of blame	-.31(.06) [-.43; -.18]	-.18(.05) [-.28; -.08]	-.57(.05) [-.67; -.47]	-.46(.05) [-.57; -.36]
Perspective-taking	.26(.06) [.14; .37]	.25(.07) [.10; .39]	.17(.06) [.06; .29]	.19(.06) [.07; .30]
Conditional indirect effect via empathic concern				
Control condition	-.03(.04) [-.12; .06]	-.03(.05) [-.13; .08]	-.02(.07) [-.16; .14]	-.01(.07) [-.15; .13]
Incivility condition	.02(.05) [-.11; .11]	.02 (.06) [-.12; .12]	.26(.07) [.13; .40]	.24(.06) [.12; .37]
Aggression condition	.20(.09) [.05; .40]	.23 (.09) [.07; .43]	.26(.06) [.15; .37]	.24(.06) [.13; .36]
Conditional indirect effect via blame attributions				
Control condition	.08(.05) [-.01; .20]	.05(.03) [-.004; .12]	.14(.10) [-.04; .37]	.11(.09) [-.03; .30]
Incivility condition	.08(.07) [-.07; .20]	.05(.04) [-.05; .11]	.06(.06) [-.07; .19]	.04(.05) [-.06; .15]
Aggression condition	.12(.09) [.01; .36]	.07 (.06) [.004; .22]	.09(.04) [.02; .18]	.07(.03) [.01; .15]

Note. $N = 191$. CI = confidence intervals. W_1 = control condition *vs.* incivility condition; W_2 = control condition *vs.* aggression condition.

Table 7

Study 3: Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of study variables

Variable name	M	SD	1
1. Performance evaluation of the target	11.33	2.79	-
2. Performance evaluation of the instigator	10.86	3.02	.51***

Note. N = 193.

***p < .001

Appendix A

Description of Study 1 video vignette

In the video Alex and Taylor were shown working on separate laptop computers at a common work table set in an executive office. Thirty seconds into the scene, Taylor asked Alex if Alex would help Taylor with a project they are supposed to be doing together. Alex dismissed Taylor's request civilly, stating that he/she had too much work and didn't have time to help. When Taylor persisted in his/her request, Alex cut Taylor off, irritably stating "I am not going to do your work for you; I am busy with something else and I think you should be able to work through whatever it is on your own. Do you need me to hold your hand? … Idiot [under his/her breath]" One minute later, Alex's phone rang, and Alex answered the phone and dealt with the caller's issue in a civil manner. One minute later, Taylor's phone rang and Taylor answered the phone in a civil manner. The caller's request prompted Taylor to look with confusion at a form and then to Alex. Taylor told the caller he/she would have to check something with his/her partner (Alex) before being able to address the caller's issue and would call back with the requested information right away. Taylor hung up the phone, apologized for interrupting Alex again, and requested clarification on an entry Alex had made on the form that was unclear. Alex ignored Taylor's request, focusing instead on his/her work. After 30 seconds, Taylor repeated his/her request. Alex, looking irritated, grabbed the form from Taylor and put it beside him/her, but continued with his/her own work. Thirty seconds later, while Taylor watched out of the corner of his/her eye, Alex looked at the form, clarified the entry, and shoved the form back to Taylor without making eye contact.

Appendix B

Description of Study 2 scenario

Pat, Alex, and you are members of a work team responsible for developing a new social media strategy for your company. Pat and Alex have never worked on a team together, but both have performed well on all prior projects. Both are highly educated and hard-working. During one of your meetings, you observed the following interaction between your two co-workers:

Pat: "What did you think about my idea for our new social media strategy that I sent out earlier?"

Alex: [Control: "I think your idea is a possibility."; Incivility: I think your idea um…interesting."; Aggression: "I think your idea completely sucks!!"]

Pat: "Perhaps we could discuss it?"

Alex: [Control: "Sure. It's helpful that you understand social media. This is a constructive use of our time."; Incivility: "Maybe later. I'm not sure you have a good understanding of social media. This is taking unnecessary time."; Aggression: "No! You have ZERO understanding of social media. This is a COMPLETE WASTE of everyone's time!!!!!"]

Pat: "I have been thinking about this idea for a while, and I have a good understanding of social media. I successfully ran the social media on the SDC project."

Alex: [Control: "I agree. I think we should spend time considering the idea. We have several ideas to discuss in our team meeting." Incivility: "I disagree. I don't think we should consider this idea. We have stronger ideas to discuss in our team meeting."; Aggression: "I don't give a shit what you think. I don't want to waste time considering terrible ideas from an idiot. We have GOOD ideas to discuss in our team meeting!"]